"SAVING TALBOT!"

A Complete School Tale and Grand War Serial in this issue.

— Complete Stories for ALL and Every Story a GEM. —

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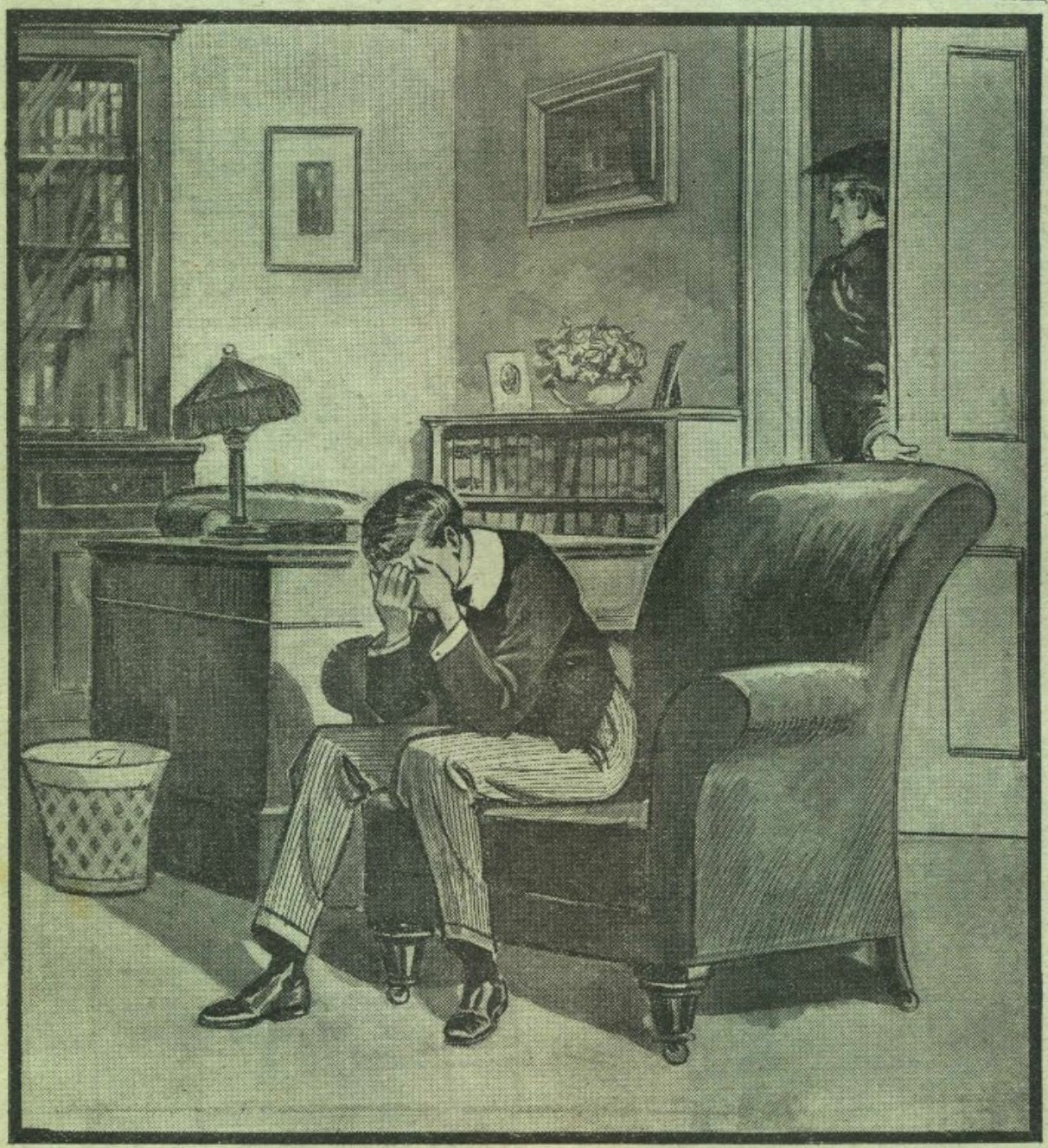
— No. 353. — Vol. 9. —



Talbot—Friendless and Suspect!

THIS WEEK'S CHAT.

The Editor's Personal Column.

For Next Wednesday—

"TOM MERRY'S WAR FUND"

By Martin Clifford.

In our next grand long, complete tale of the chums of St. Jim's the old school is swept by a wave of patriotism. A great self-denial movement is set on foot by no less a personage than Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and the studies engage in friendly rivalry to help swell the various funds for furthering the comfort of Britain's soldiers and sailors. D'Arcy's wheeze is a splendid one, but Tom Merry goes one better. A football match is organised, and the proceeds of this thrilling game combine, among other things, to make

"TOM MERRY'S WAR FUND"

a huge and conspicuous success.

AN ANONYMOUS READER'S GENEROSITY.

It has been my pleasure, as Editor of the "Invincible Trio," to be the recipient of letters from all parts of the globe containing expressions of appreciation concerning the ever-popular "Gem Library," but I doubt if it has ever fallen to my lot to receive a communication written under such novel circumstances as was the document I have before me. It comes from the pen of one of those admirable fellows who have thrown in their lot with Lord Kitchener's Army.

I have the greatest pleasure in reproducing my soldier-chum's letter:

"The Northamptonshire Regiment.

"Dear Mr. Editor,—When I quitted the somewhat dull and prosaic life of a postal clerk, and departed into a remote part of the country with the above regiment, I left behind me several regrets. I do not infer, of course, that I was not eager for military service; on the contrary, I was keen as mustard from the outset, and considered it very hard lines that insufficient training precluded me from going out to the fighting-line.

"One of my regrets—and a very real one, too—was that I should have to dispense with my favourite story-paper from that time onwards. You see, we were going to an outlandish place where periodicals were practically unobtainable, and I felt rather morose about it.

"The first days of camp life were fine fun, but the novelty soon wore off, and we were soon at our wits'-end to know how to kill time after the drills and route marches. We were a jolly sight too fagged to punt a football about, I can tell you!

"Then, after we had been in our new quarters about a week, the officer who distributes the magazines opened the flap of our tent and shied a bundle of papers in, addressed to me. Judge my unbounded joy on finding that they were the latest numbers of my favourite weekly! I started reading one at once. It was called 'The King's Pardon,' and I became so engrossed in the yarn that my comrades insisted that I should read it aloud. I did so, and before we turned in that night they apologised handsomely for ever having spoken disparagingly of the 'Gem.'

"But this is the point that mystifies me. The bundle of 'Gems' afforded me no clue to the sender, for no letter of any sort was enclosed. Since that time I have received the 'Gem' regularly every week, and am still in the dark as to who sends them. I should like, however, through the medium of your Weekly Chat page, to express to this Good Samaritan my heartiest thanks for his generosity.

"Well, I will not take up your time any further, but I should like to say in conclusion that, in my opinion, the good old 'Gem' Library improves each week, if that is possible. The Talbot yarns are simply superb.

"With my best wishes for your continued success, believe me, very sincerely yours,

"J. G. TRAVERS (Corporal)."

I thank you most cordially for your splendid letter, Corporal! Such remarks, coming as they do from one of our loyal Tommies, are extremely encouraging. I hope your letter will meet the eye of the reader who has shown his generosity in such a modest manner. Like the philanthropist of old, he will have the satisfaction of knowing that he has "done good by stealth, and blushed to find it fame."

I trust that other loyal "Gemites" will follow his worthy example.

THE EDITOR.

PUBLISHED IN TOWN AND COUNTRY EVERY WEDNESDAY MORNING

The GEM LIBRARY 1D

COMPLETE STORIES FOR ALL, AND EVERY STORY A GEM!

SAVING TALBOT!

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale, dealing with the Adventures of Tom Merry & Co. and the Toff of St. Jim's.

Specially Written for the "The Gem" Library.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.
Landed at Last.

"COME in!" sang out Tom Merry cheerily.

There were four to tea in Tom Merry's study in the School House. A cheerful fire blazed in the grate, and the gas-light gleamed upon a well-spread table. Outside, in the old quadrangle of St. Jim's, the October dusk was deepening into night, and a keen wind rustled the branches of the old elms and scattered the dying leaves. But within the study all was bright and cheery, and Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, the owners of the study, and Talbot, their guest, looked particularly "chippy."

Talbot's study was next door, with Gore and Skimpole; but Talbot much preferred tea with the Terrible Three. And they were very glad to have him. And the talk was running cheerily on the football prospects for the season when a tap came at the study door. It was a slight, timid tap, as if the applicant for admission was in doubt whether to knock at all. But in response to Tom Merry's hearty call the door of the study opened.

Levison of the Fourth entered the study.

"Hallo!" said Tom Merry, not very cordially.

Levison of the Fourth was not very popular in that study. He was not very popular anywhere, as a matter of fact. The Terrible Three had had unpleasant experiences of his underhand manners and customs—and Talbot had been made to feel what his enmity was like. The four Shell fellows stared at him inquiringly.

"Anything wanted?" asked Monty Lowther, proceeding with his tea.

"I—I just looked in——" said Levison, hesitating.

"Good! And now you can look out again!" said Manners, who was an extremely plain-spoken youth. "Good-bye!"

"I—I——"

"Shut the door after you," said Manners.

Levison gave him a dark look, and seemed about to make an angry reply. But he checked himself. Evidently he had not come there to quarrel with the Terrible Three.

Tom Merry's expression softened a little as he regarded the cad of the Fourth more closely. Levison was not looking his usual aggressive self. The sneering expression that was habitual to him had vanished. His face was pale, and his brow had a wrinkle in it that told of worry.

"Nothing wrong, I hope?" asked Tom Merry good-naturedly. "Shut up, Manners!"

"Oh, rats!" said Manners.

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! *(See chapter 13.)*

"And many of them!" said Monty Lowther. "Run away, Levison!"

Talbot did not speak; but he looked very curiously at the Fourth-Former. Levison had been his enemy, at a time when his enmity made a good deal of trouble for the Shell fellow. But Talbot had known worry enough in his experience to make him sorry for any fellow who was "up against it."

"Cheese it, you chaps!" said Tom Merry. "Pile in, Levison! If there's anything up, get it off your chest!"

Manners and Lowther sniffed. They did not like Levison, and they did not trust him, and they considered Tom Merry a great deal too good-natured. But that was Tom Merry's way.

Next Wednesday:

"TOM MERRY'S WAR FUND!" AND "A BID FOR A THRONE!"

No. 353. (New Series). Vol. 9.

"I—I just looked in——" Levison stammered again. "I—I wanted to speak to you, Tom Merry. I—I know it's no good, but I thought I'd speak to you. I'm in trouble."

"Sorry!" said Tom politely. He was sorry, right enough; but really he could not see what Levison's trouble had to do with him. They were not friends, and had never been on good terms.

"Been looking for trouble and found some, I suppose?" Monty Lowther asked humorously.

"Yes," said Levison, somewhat to Lowther's surprise. "I've been looking for trouble, and I've found it—bad!"

"You don't mean to say you've got the cheek to come to Tommy to help you out?" demanded Manners indignantly.

"Shut up, Manners!" implored Tom Merry. "Give the chap a chance to speak."

Levison's pale face flushed.

"I—I've got landed at last!" he muttered.

Lowther snorted.

"Oh, I smell a mouse! Any ass could have told you what you were heading for, Levison. You've been following a bit too closely the shining example of Cutts of the Fifth. Is that it?"

"That's it!" said Levison, with unexpected meekness.

"Then it serves you right if you're landed," said Lowther coolly. "Cuts and Gilmore and Tresham and St. Leger, and that set in the Fifth, they're all rotters; but they know how to look after themselves. And they've got the money to pay up when they make fools of themselves; you haven't. You've been following their lead, without the cash or brains to keep yourself out of a scrape. If you've come a cropper, it's your own business. Like your cheek to come here, I think!"

"Monty, old man, you talk too much," said Tom Merry.

"Bow-wow!" said Lowther.

"I think the same as Monty——" began Manners warmly.

"Then don't let's have it all over again," said Tom Merry, laughing. "Do give Levison a chance to speak. If he wants some good advice we can give it to him, I suppose. Don't hit a chap when he's down."

"Well, I don't want to do that," said Monty Lowther, relenting a little. "Get it out, Levison! What's the matter?"

"I—I owe some money!"

Another emphatic sniff from Lowther.

"Might have guessed that! Backed the wrong horse—what?" he growled. "Been taking some of Cutts's or Tresham's tips, and they haven't come off?"

"Cutts thought it was a cert——"

Sniff!

"But—but it wasn't——"

Sniff!

"I—I must have five quid!" said Levison desperately. "I've come here as a last chance—not that I think it's any good!"

"Quite right there!" said Lowther. "Quids don't grow on study tables, and you don't pick fivers from the bushes. Better go to your precious pals in the Fifth! They got you into this; let 'em get you out!"

"They—they can't! They're all hard hit. I've been to them."

Sniff!

"Do you mean that you owe somebody the money?" asked Talbot, speaking for the first time.

"Yes."

"Schoolboys can't be made to pay gambling debts!"

"Of course they can't," said Tom Merry; "and they oughtn't to, either. You're all right, Levison!"

"It isn't a gambling debt. I—I've settled that. I had to. And—and I bought something on tick, and—and sold it to raise the money," said Levison, in a low voice. "Now I've got the bill—with a threat if I don't pay! I—I bought a bike on tick, you see, and—and I've paid something off it; but—but it was supposed to be for cash, and Hanney's won't wait any longer. I—I believe they suspect what I've done. Anyway, they want the bike back at once or the rest of the money. And—and I haven't the bike, and I can't raise the money."

"My hat!"

"And—and they're going to send in the bill to the Head to-morrow if I don't pay!" groaned Levison. "Then there'll be an inquiry. My pater's hard up; I know he won't pay. The Head will want to know where the bike is; and then it will all come out! It means the finish here for me!"

The Shell fellows stared grimly at Levison.

"Do you know what you've done?" said Manners. "You've swindled! What you've done is the same as stealing!"

"I—I've got to get out of it somehow. I—I shall have to leave St. Jim's if it all comes out!"

"Jolly good thing for St. Jim's!" growled Manners.

Tom Merry looked distressed. Levison had done wrong; he had followed that up by acting dishonestly; but the captain of the Shell could not help being touched by his worried, miserable look.

"If—if some of you fellows would help me——" muttered Levison wretchedly.

"Try your own pals!" growled Lowther.

"I—I've tried them. Mellish and Gore can't help me, and Crooke won't."

"Nice pals!" snorted Manners.

"I—I know I've no right to come to you chaps—we've never been on good terms. But—but——"

"I'm glad you see that, at all events," said Lowther drily.

"We can't do anything, Levison," said Tom Merry. "It's rather too thick, you know. I'm sorry, but we couldn't raise five pounds any more than we could raise five hundred. Five shillings would be nearer the mark."

Levison gave a groan.

"Well, I'm sorry, too!" said Lowther, after some consideration. "Still, I must say that if you're landed at last, Levison, you've only got yourself to thank. You can't say you haven't had warnings; and yet you would keep on playing the rotter——"

"Cheese it, Monty!"

"Well, I can't stand him, and never could!" growled Lowther. "What right has he to come here and tell us he's been swindling, as if it were a thing any chap might do?"

Levison's eyes glittered. He had come there for nothing; he could see that. Tom Merry's good-nature was well known, and the cad of the Fourth had presumed upon that knowledge. If Tom had had the money, there was little doubt that he would have handed it out, even to a fellow he disliked and despised, as he did Levison, to save that fellow from ruin. But he hadn't the money, or anything like it, and that settled it. The wretched imitator of the Blades of the Fifth had humiliated himself for nothing. And as there was nothing to gain by further servility, Levison's real nature showed itself at once.

"Well, if you can't lend a fellow a hand, don't give me jaw!" he broke out savagely. "I never expected anything of you, anyway. And as for not being able to stand swindlers, you seem to be able to stand a convicted thief pretty well."

Talbot of the Shell turned deadly pale.

He had not said a word to call for that outburst of insult from the cad of the Fourth; but Levison's meanness had no bounds. He could strike the Terrible Three through their chum, and he was quivering with spiteful rage and revenge.

Talbot of the Shell, before he became a scholarship boy at St. Jim's, had had a peculiar past. It was well known in the school, and it was agreed on all hands that it was to be buried in oblivion. It was like Levison to drag it to the light.

The Terrible Three jumped up with one accord.

"You rotten cad!" shouted Lowther.

"You—you worm!" blazed out Tom Merry. "What has Talbot done to you? Get out!"

Levison sneered—quite his old sneer.

"You're down on me! You're glad I'm landed! And yet you chum up with that fellow who's been a criminal—a cracksman—a thief——"

Levison got no further. Tom Merry's dawning sympathy had been quite crushed by that attack on Talbot. His face was flushed with anger, and he ran straight at Levison, his eyes blazing. Lowther and Manners were not behind. The three Shell fellows grasped Levison, and he went spinning through the doorway.

"There, you cad!" panted Tom Merry. "Now come in again, and we'll smash you!"

Levison did not come in again. He picked himself up in the passage, shook his fist into the study, and limped away. Manners slammed the door after him.

"Don't mind the cad, Talbot, old chap," said Tom, a little awkwardly.

"I don't," said Talbot, in a low voice. "It's true what he said. He knows my past. It's hard that I should never hear the end of it. But I've deserved it before, if I don't deserve it now. I can stand it."

"The rotten cad!" growled Lowther. "My hat! I've a jolly good mind to go after him and wipe up the floor with him!"

"Don't," said Talbot quietly.

"Well, he's going to be sacked from the school most likely, and that will be a jolly good thing all round," said Manners.

"I can't say I shall be quite sorry," said Tom Merry.

The chums of the Shell settled down to their tea again. But there was a cloud on Talbot's brow now, and the Terrible Three were feeling a little constrained. Levison's visit had had the effect of banishing the cheery atmosphere of the study, and tea was finished almost in silence.

CHAPTER 2.

The Mighty Fallen.

CUTTS of the Fifth did not look happy.

There was gloom in Cutts's handsome study, the headquarters of the Blades of St. Jim's.

Four youths were there—Cutts himself, the dandy of the Fifth, and Gilmore, Tresham, and St. Leger, his admiring disciples and followers.

The Blades of the Fifth had fallen upon evil days. Luck had gone against them. As a rule, Cutts's luck was phenomenal. It was not only that he was always successful in keeping his little peculiar ways a secret from the powers that were, and escaping the "sack," which would have rewarded any fellow who was less acute and resourceful, but his "dead certs" sometimes were really certs, and Cutts generally had plenty of money in his pockets. His followers had great faith in him. But Cutts's luck had failed him at last, and the latest plunge had been a ghastly failure. Cutts of the Fifth was "stony," with difficult debts to meet, and Gilmore and Tresham and St. Leger were in the same bad box, to say nothing of their wretched imitator in the Fourth Form—Levison.

The heroes of the "Smart Set" at St. Jim's were feeling exceedingly sorry—not for their conduct by any means, but for themselves. Glummest of all was the face of Cyril Tresham. The other three young rascals had resources in one way or another upon which they could draw to tide over the evil time; but Tresham hadn't, and his face was pale and lined with anxiety, and looked years older. And the looks his comrades gave him were far from friendly. It was, as Cutts remarked, a case of each for himself, and they had no time to bother about other people's troubles. And Tresham, who had asked his friends to help him out, had to make the best of that reply.

"But something will have to be done, Cutts," said Tresham desperately. "I'm in it deeper than you are—right up to the neck."

Cutts laughed harshly.

"You can't be in much deeper," he said. "I'm stony-broke to the wide. My allowance is booked up to the end of the term."

"Same here," remarked St. Leger—"worse than that. I've had to sell most of my things; and the fellows have been asking me what I've sold my bike for. I've got the prospect of being penniless till I can screw out something from home; and I've had too much lately to get any more in a hurry."

"As for me, I'm fairly done," said Gilmore. "Only that Banks has agreed to give me time, I shouldn't know which way to turn. And he won't wait long, either. The fact is, we've made a ghastly muck of it this time, and we've got to face it."

"Yes, but——"

St. Leger made an angry gesture.

"For goodness' sake, Tresham, don't ask us to bear your troubles!" he exclaimed tartly. "Can't you see we're loaded up with our own? If you couldn't afford to face bad luck, what did you plunge for? It looked like being a good thing for us all round, but there was the chance of a cropper, and you ought to have understood it."

"Cutts said it was a good thing," said Tresham sullenly. "I followed his lead."

"Don't put it on me!" growled Cutts. "I did think it was a good thing. I went into it right up to the neck. But the horse was beaten, and there's an end of it. I can't see that you're worse off than we are. The bookie will wait a bit for his tin—he'll have to. It wouldn't pay him to show you up. He wouldn't get his money then, anyway. You'll get time on your debts."

"Besides, you've got resources that we haven't," said Gilmore, in a low voice. "You're treasurer of the Form footer club, and if you borrowed some of the funds for a week or two nobody would be the wiser."

"Chuck that!" said Cutts sharply. "Don't make bad worse! Tresham will have to account for all the money in his hands as treasurer, and if he couldn't do it, it means ruin and the sack. I wouldn't stand by him, for one, if he were caught swindling the club."

"You wouldn't?" said Tresham, with a haggard look at the dandy of the Fifth.

Cutts shook his head decidedly.

"No, I wouldn't! Having a little flutter is all very well, but I bar swindling. If you touched the club funds it would be theft—simply theft. And, as a member of the club, I'd be as down on you as anybody. I warn you of that!"

Tresham bit his lip.

"But—but suppose I—I——"

"I'm not going to suppose anything about it," said Cutts. "Leave money alone that isn't yours. You'll get through somehow. If you can't—well, take it like a man, without becoming an embezzler and a thief. You'd better keep your head shut on that subject, Gilmore. No need to make bad worse."

"Well, it was only a suggestion," said Gilmore. "I wouldn't do it myself, but——"

"Then don't advise Tresham to do it. It's bad enough without that. Besides, it couldn't be hidden for long. There are some good-sized bills to be paid this week or next, and then it would come out. And Lefevre would be down on Tresham like a shot if he suspected anything was wrong."

"But—but suppose——" repeated Tresham wretchedly.

"Oh, rats!"

Knock!

"Mum's the word!" said Cutts hastily. "Come in!"

Levison of the Fourth came into the study, and closed the door behind him. The four Fifth-Formers glared at him. Levison of the Fourth was the person they least desired to see just now.

"What do you want, confound you?" snapped Cutts.

"I—I want help!" said Levison sullenly. "Look here, Cutts——"

Gerald Cutts pointed to the door.

"You've been here cadging before," he said. "Don't I keep on telling you that I'm broke to the wide? I can't help myself, let alone you. I don't know that I'd help you, anyway. I'm not a philanthropist, and I've got no sympathy for lame ducks. Tresham's been hammering at me for money already, and I haven't any. Do you think I can supply cash for every fool who plunges and loses?" exclaimed the dandy of the Fifth, in an exasperated tone.

"Tresham could raise some money if he liked," said Levison. "I could tell him how to do it——"

"Cheese it! Get out!"

"Well, I'll tell you this!" said Levison bitterly. "If I get the sack—and it looks like it now—somebody else will suffer too!"

Cutts shrugged his shoulders.

"Which means that you will tell tales about us?" he sneered. "Well, go ahead and do it. Something more than your word will be wanted—especially as you're known to be an habitual liar, Levison. If you say a single word against me, I'll have you up before the Head and demand an inquiry!"

"Wha-a-at!"

"And where would you be then?" demanded Cutts contemptuously. "Your word against mine. And you'd be flogged for slandering me, and sacked too, and serve you right!"

The other Fifth-Formers, who had looked uneasy for a moment, burst into a laugh at the expression on Levison's face. Levison clenched his hands. It was true enough. He knew that Gerald Cutts had covered up his tracks very carefully. He could make an accusation if he liked, but he would not have an atom of proof to offer in support of it. Cutts had taken good care of that.

"Now you'd better clear," said Gilmore. "We've got bother enough without a rotten fag troubling us, too."

Cutts threw open the door.

"Travel!" he said tersely.

"Look here, Cutts——"

"Will you get out, or shall I pitch you out?" said Cutts savagely. "I tell you I'm fed up with you."

"Pitch me out, and I'll go straight to the Housemaster and tell him what I know," said the junior between his teeth.

"All serene—go, if you like!" Cutts grasped the Fourth-Former by the shoulders, and swung him out of the study. Levison staggered across the passage, and reeled against the opposite wall. "Now go and do as you like, you young cad!"

The door slammed on Levison.

"I—I say, do—do you think he'll go to Railton?" stammered Tresham nervously.

Cutts laughed jeeringly.

"Of course he won't! He daren't! But I don't care if he does!"

"You—you don't care!"

"Not a scrap! Do you think I haven't foreseen anything of the kind? All we've got to do is to stick together and deny it," said Cutts coolly. "Where is his proof coming from?"

"I—I suppose you're right, Cutts. But—but what is going to be done about me?" said Tresham, returning to that subject wearily.

"That's for you to think out," said Cutts shortly.

"I must get some money somehow."

"Well, you know that we haven't any, and can't raise any. What's the good of telling us that you must have money?" said Cutts irritably.

"You must see that it's no good, Tressy, old man," said

St. Leger. "I'd stand by you like a shot, if I could; but I'm in the same hole."

"So are we all," said Gilmore.

Tresham nodded.

"I—I suppose you can't help me," he said. "Goodness knows what's going to be done. I—I must try to think it out."

He left the study with downcast face and heavy steps. Cutts gave a sniff of contempt as he departed. The cool, hard-hearted, iron-nerved dandy of the Fifth had no sympathy for a "lame duck." A fellow who could not face the music in bad times should keep clear of the risk, that was Cutts's view. Tresham spent money freely when luck held good, and now that it was bad he threw himself on the mercy of his companions in vice. Cutts had nothing but contempt for such weakness.

Tresham went slowly along the passage to his own study. The door was open, and Levison of the Fourth was there. Levison was standing close to Tresham's desk, which was locked. He swung round suddenly as the Fifth-Former came in. Tresham gave him an angry look.

"What are you doing at my desk?" he exclaimed.

"Nothing. It's locked, anyway. Look here, Tresham, I've got a suggestion to make," said Levison in a low, eager voice. "You've got the funds of the Fifth Form footer club, and I know it must be a good amount."

"Hold your tongue!"

"Nobody would know. You could replace it afterwards. We might have a stroke of luck before you'd be called on to pony up."

Tresham flung himself into a chair with a groan.

"Shut up, you young idiot! You don't know what you're talking about! Get out!"

Levison gave him a startled look. The haggard misery in the senior's face seemed to tell him a secret. He drew a quick, sharp breath.

"I—I say, Tresham—you don't mean to say you—you've already——"

Tresham started to his feet, passing suddenly from despairing weakness to savage anger, after the manner of a weak character.

"What do you mean, you young cad? Get out of my study! What are you daring to insinuate? By gad, I'll——"

Levison whipped out of the study as Tresham caught up a stick. He hurried away, with a new expression on his face.

"My hat!" muttered Levison. "The silly fool—the silly ass! He's dipped into the funds already—that's what's the matter with him. He's in a worse hole than I am, and serve him right! Hang him! Hang them all! What am I going to do?"

Levison went to his study in the Fourth Form passage to think it out. There was evidently no help to be had from the Blades of the Fifth, especially when Tresham, who was not only penniless, but in danger of being exposed as an embezzler. Truly, matters were very bad with the heroes of the Smart Set, and never had a set of doggish youths had so much reason for sincerely repenting of their doggishness.

CHAPTER 3.
A Friend in Need!

"CAN I come in?"

Talbot of the Shell asked the question as he looked into Levison's study.

Levison was alone there. He was seated at the table, with his elbows resting there, and his head on his hands. He was plunged in deep and despairing thought, and he had not heard a knock at the door. He looked up quickly, however, at the sound of Talbot's voice, and turned a stare of hatred upon the Shell fellow.

Talbot held the open door in his hand and hesitated. There was a curious expression upon his handsome face, an expression Levison did not understand, and did not choose to understand. There was only spite and hatred in Levison's face as he looked at the handsome, sturdy Shell fellow.

"Oh, come in!" said Levison, with bitter sarcasm. "I'm glad to see you! It must be amusing for you to see me like this. Come in, by all means."

Talbot flushed a little, but he came into the study and closed the door behind him.

"All alone?" he remarked.

Levison laughed sardonically.

"Yes. I've been trying to borrow money of my study-mates, and I think they're giving me a wide berth. Naturally. They don't quite know the fix I'm in, you see, or they'd come and gloat over me, perhaps, the same as you're doing."

"I haven't come for that," said Talbot.

"Oh, pile in—it's your turn now!" said Levison, rising to his feet, and facing the Shell fellow. "You're up, and I'm down. Quite a change, isn't it? When you were first here, I was up, and you were down."

"And you were pretty hard on me," said Talbot quietly.

"I knew you for what you were. I knew you were a thief—that you'd shoved yourself into the school under false pretences. When it came out that you were the Toff—the son of a cracksman, and a cracksman yourself, all the fellows had to admit that I was right; but they were down on me, all the same. I expected that. Well, now you've got your revenge. I tried to get you kicked out of the school because you were a criminal. You'll see me kicked out in a day or two because I'm a swindler. Then I hope you'll be satisfied."

"I——"

"All the same, I'm not so bad as you are," said Levison. "I don't have your luck, that's all. You made the Head believe that you'd reformed. Rot! You even dodge the police. But the King's pardon, by gad, by stopping a German from blowing up a troop-train! And they gave you a Founder's Scholarship for it, along with the pardon; and now you've the cheek to come back to the school—the Toff, the cracksman—setting up as a St. Jim's fellow! You're staying here, and I'm going to be sacked. Where's the justice of that?"

"But——"

"You're staying here—popular with everybody, although a few months ago you were in a gang of criminals!" said Levison venomously. "How's your old friend Hookey Walker? Have the police caught him yet? I suppose you keep up your acquaintance with him?"

"I have heard nothing of him."

"Perhaps. It would pay you to keep honest now, I suppose!" sneered Levison. "You're making it pay pretty well. St. Jim's has swallowed you whole. No reference to your past in case it should hurt your feelings. Pah! You'll hear enough of it from me, till I get the order of the boot, anyway!"

"Probably."

"I shall be called a swindler; but what's that to what you've done before your precious reform, which I don't believe in, for one!" said Levison passionately. "Now you've come here to gloat over me, you thief—you criminal!"

Talbot's face went very pale.

"Ah, that touches you on the raw, does it?" sneered Levison.

"Yes, it does."

"What did you come here for, then? Did you expect me to make polite speeches?"

"No. I came here to be a friend to you, if you'll let me."

"Oh, cheese it!"

"I came here to help you out of your scrape," said Talbot quietly. "What you've said is true enough. What you've done is nothing to what I've done in the past. I've no right to throw stones, anyway. And—and now you're down, I don't want to gloat over you, as you suppose. I want to help you out of your scrape."

Levison stared at him blankly.

"You—you're only mocking me!" he gasped. "You don't mean it—you can't mean it!"

"I do mean it!"

"Words ain't much good!" said Levison savagely. "I've had plenty of words from Mellish and Crooke and Pigott. What I need is money."

"I understand."

"Well, you've got no money, unless you're keeping up your cracksman game in secret!" said Levison, with a sneer. "You're a beggarly scholarship kid now. I knew you were only fooling. You're going to help me with good advice—what? Keep it!"

"I haven't much money," said Talbot evenly. "I never kept a penny that didn't belong to me. But I saved a little while I was at work on Slingsby's Farm. And along with the scholarship I have an allowance for my expenses. It isn't more than enough for my use. I have to be careful with it. But I've been through hard times, and I know how to be careful with money; and, in a word, I'll stand you the five quid you need, if you like."

Levison started back.

"You can't mean it! You—you can't! You're fooling me!" he muttered hoarsely.

"Money talks!" said Talbot quietly.

He opened a little cheap leather purse, and counted out five sovereigns on the study table. Levison watched him as if mesmerised. Even the sight of the golden coins hardly convinced him. He felt like a fellow in a dream. After the insults and injuries he had heaped upon Talbot, it seemed impossible that the junior would come to his aid in this way. And it was not as if Talbot was the Toff of old, with plenty of money in his pocket.

Levison knew well enough that it was none too easy for a scholarship boy to make both ends meet when he had no parents or relations to help him out. Parting with five pounds

meant rigid economy and privation for a long time for the generous lad who was helping him out of the scrape into which his own rascality and folly had led him.

Levison looked blankly at the little heap of gold coins. Talbot stepped back.

"There you are!" he said.

"I—I—I——" stammered Levison. "Talbot! What—what are you doing this for? You can't be in earnest—you can't! What are you doing it for?"

Talbot smiled slightly.

"I've been in a bad scrape myself—as bad a scrape as a fellow could be in," he said, in his quiet tones. "Well, I found helping hands at that time. I've been a rascal—when I knew no better. I've thrown all that behind. I've made a fresh start; I've found friends who believe in me, and help me, and stand by me. You can do the same if you like, Levison. You've had a bitter lesson—well, chuck up playing the fool, and when you're out of this scrape, don't get into another. But I don't want to preach to you; I won't say any more. There's the tin. Good-bye!"

Talbot turned to the door.

Levison gathered the sovereigns up and slipped them into his waistcoat-pocket. He realised it now—realised all that it meant to him. It meant salvation—freedom from debt—freedom from the carking care that had made his life a burden for the past week or more. It meant safety for the present, and hope for the future. And it had come from the lad he had injured and reviled—whom he had greeted, only this moment, with insults and mockery.

"I—I say, Talbot!" he stammered. "Hold on a minute! This—this rather knocks me over. I—I—I'm sorry I—I talked to you like that——"

"That's all right; you misunderstood what I'd come for, I suppose."

"Well, I couldn't guess that you meant this," said Levison, "and I don't understand it now. But you're a good chap. My own friends wouldn't have done this for me, and I've always been your enemy. I—I'd never have believed that any fellow would have done this, Talbot. I—I ask your pardon."

"That's all right!"

"I—I'll let you have the money back—when I can—next term, perhaps——"

"Don't worry about that."

"Well, it's not any good saying much; I don't know where to get the money, and that's the truth. But I'll pay it up some time. I must say you're a brick, Talbot. And if—if I get a chance of helping you at any time—I don't suppose I shall, but if I do, I'll show you that I haven't forgotten this. I mean it!"

The sneering look was quite gone from Levison's face; he was earnest for once in his life—deeply earnest and grateful. Talbot's action had touched even his hard heart; it had made him realise that his conception of human nature was wrong somewhere. Look at it how he would, there was no selfish motive he could discover for Talbot's action—and Levison felt abashed and ashamed.

Talbot smiled, and held out his hand impulsively.

Levison took his hand; and then they parted without another word. And Levison, with joy in his heart, relief in his face, hurried away to pay his debt—with Talbot's money. When he came back to the school, Levison looked as if he were walking on air. One at least of the black sheep of St. Jim's had been freed from black care.

And Levison, in an unusual mood of gratitude and cordiality, repeated to himself more than once, "I'll make it up to him somehow—somehow!" And little as he thought it then, the time was at hand when Levison, the cad of the Fourth, was to have his opportunity of repaying Talbot's act of generous kindness—and in a way he would never have dreamed of. And when that time came Levison did not fail.

CHAPTER 4.

Tresham Wakes Up a Hornet's Nest.

"MIND your pockets!"

Tom Merry started, and looked round with a gleam in his eyes.

A group of juniors were standing in the doorway and porch of the School House cheerily discussing the forthcoming football match with the Grammar School. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth Form was laying down the law on the subject of the off-side rule, keeping on cheerfully, though nobody was listening to his remarks. Talbot, looking very fit and cheerful, was leaning against the stone balustrade of the steps with his hands in his pockets.

Talbot had been given a place in the St. Jim's junior team as a matter of course. He was, in fact, a rod in pickle for the Grammarians, and Tom Merry rejoiced at having secured such a recruit.

Cutts & Co. of the Fifth came along—Cutts, Gilmore, and Tresham. And it was the last-named who made that offensive remark as he passed Talbot.

The cheery talk of the juniors stopped dead. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy forgot all about the off-side rule, and turned his eyeglass witheringly upon Cyril Tresham. The Fifth-Former's words were, of course, referring to Talbot.

Talbot did not seem to hear.

The one-time Toff had come back to St. Jim's expecting that all reference to his unfortunate past would be dropped. There were fellows who delighted in bringing it to mind—only a few, but enough of them to keep the subject alive. Talbot bore it quietly. It was a matter upon which he could scarcely defend himself; he could only hope that, in the course of time, he would live it down; and meanwhile he bore it as cheerfully as he could, without giving a sign of how it hurt him.

But his friends were not disposed to take that kind of thing quietly. And it surprised them, as well as angered them, to hear it from Tresham of the Fifth. For a Fifth-Former, naturally, had very little to do with the juniors. Tresham never came into contact with Talbot, and it was not possible for enmity to rise between them. Why the Fifth-Form fellow should go out of his way to make himself unpleasant to a junior who had never offended him was a puzzle.

Even Cutts—not a very good-natured fellow himself—was surprised.

"Chuck that, Tresham!" he muttered. "What do you want to rag that kid for? What has he done to you?"

Tresham gave a sneering laugh.

"I was only giving you a warning," he said. "It's necessary to be careful when there's a pickpocket about."

"Oh, ring off!" snapped Cutts. "Don't get into a row with a gang of fags."

"Bai Jove! You wottah, Twesham——"

"Cad!"

"Rotter!"

"Shut up!"

"Bump him!"

Tresham glanced sneeringly at the angry juniors, who were gathering round him. The Terrible Three lined up in his way, and the Fifth-Formers, who were just going out, had to stop. The chums of the Shell looked very warlike.

"Clear out of the way, you fags!" growled Cutts.

"Rats!"

"Clear us out!" said Manners. "We're ready!"

"Bump that cad!"

"Pile in!"

Talbot looked up, a red spot burning in his cheeks.

"Don't make a rag of it, you fellows," he said quietly. "Never mind!"

"But we do mind!" said Tom Merry quietly. "What is that cad slanging you for?"

"Don't give me any of your cheek——" began Tresham.

"I'll give you more than cheek," said Tom Merry. "Take that!"

"That" was a fierce smack from Tom Merry's open hand, and it rang like a pistol-shot on the Fifth-Former's cheek. Tresham started back with a cry. Then he rushed at the captain of the Shell.

Tom Merry, athlete as he was, was hardly a match for a senior in the Fifth, and it would have gone hard with him if he had been alone. But his chums were with him, and they were all anxious to get at the fellow who had so wantonly insulted Talbot. The Terrible Three met Tresham's rush together, and laid violent hands on him, and the next moment he was down on the steps, struggling with the three juniors.

"Pile in!" roared Blake of the Fourth. "Give him beans!"

"Yaas, wathah! Go for him!"

"Bump the rotter!"

"Bumping" a Fifth-Form senior was an unusual performance, even for the reckless juniors of the School House; but they meant to bump Tresham. Blake and Herries and Digby and D'Arcy laid hands on him, as well as the Terrible Three, and Tresham struggled wildly and unavailingly in the mob of juniors.

"Help me, Cutts—Gilmore——" he gasped.

Cutts shrugged his shoulders.

"If you choose to get into a fag row, you can get out of it by yourself!" he snapped. "Come on, Gilly! Let's get out of this!"

Cutts and Gilmore walked away. They had no mind to take part in a free fight with an army of fags in the doorway. The masters' studies were close at hand, and there was certain to be interruption from the masters; but of that the angry juniors recked nothing. They clawed Tresham up, and

bumped him heartily on the steps. There was a yell of anguish from the cad of the Fifth.

"Leggo! You young villains! Ow! Oh! Ow!"

Bump, bump!

"Huwway! Give him anothah, deah boys!"

"Bump him!"

"Pile in!"

Bump! Bump!

"Yaroop! Help! Oh, crumbs! Leggo!" wailed Tresham. "Oh, my hat! Yaroooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Sure, and lemme get at him!" roared Reilly of the Fourth. "Gimme a hold, ye spalpeens! Can't I have a whack, too?"

"Make room for a chap!" yelled Kangaroo of the Shell. "Don't keep the cad all to yourselves! Fair play's a jewel!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Juniors were crowding round from all sides, all anxious to get hold of Tresham of the Fifth and have a hand in punishing him.

In two or three minutes the unfortunate Fifth-Former was in a shocking state. His collar was torn out, his tie was gone, his hat was smashed, his hair rumpled, his coat split up the back, and all the buttons gone from his waistcoat. He struggled wildly in the midst of the hornet's-nest he had so suddenly awakened. But his struggles were of no avail. He was helpless in the grasp of so many hands.

"Bump the cad! Give him another!"

"Oh! Ow! Help!"

"Cave!" called out Levison from indoors. "Here comes Railton!"

"I don't care!" panted Tom Merry. "Bump him again! Give him a lesson! Rag the cad bald-headed!"

"Yaas, wathah! Wag him—wag the wottah! Huwway!"

Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House, strode upon the scene, with a thunderous brow, and a cane in his hand. He was amazed at such an uproar in the doorway of the House, close to his own study. And he was as angry as he was amazed.

"Boys!" he thundered. "How dare you! What does this mean? Cease this disturbance instantly!"

The juniors reluctantly relinquished their victim. As they fell back, panting, Tresham staggered up on the steps—a pitiable object. Mr. Railton gazed at him blankly.

"What—who is this?" he gasped.

"Ow-ow-ow-ow-ow!" gurgled Tresham.

"Tresham!" ejaculated Mr. Railton. "Upon my word! Tom Merry, Blake—all of you—you have dared to handle a Fifth Form senior in this manner—and in this place——"

"Yes, sir!" said Tom Merry fearlessly. "And we'd do it again, too, if he said again what he said to Talbot—the rotter!"

"Merry! That is not the way to speak to me!"

"I'm sorry, sir! But that cad——"

"Come into my study, all of you!" said Mr. Railton sternly. "Go into my study also, Tresham. This must be inquired into!"

The panting, spluttering Fifth-Former limped into the Housemaster's study, and Mr. Railton followed him; and after the Housemaster came the dusty and gasping juniors. They were feeling a little uneasy now. But they were not sorry for handling Tresham. Even if it meant a licking all round they were not sorry for that.

CHAPTER 5.

Levison Wants to Know.

TRESHAM, torn, dishevelled and smothered with dust, stood panting in the Housemaster's study. He was out of breath, and aching all over, and nearly frantic with rage. All his dignity as a member of a senior Form was gone; he looked like a fag who had been through an especially severe rough-and-tumble.

Mr. Railton fixed his eyes sternly upon the crowd of juniors.

"Now, tell me what this means!" he exclaimed. "You have attacked and ragged a senior boy! How dare you!"

"Weally, Mr. Wailton——"

"You see, sir——"

"The cad——"

"The rotter——"

"Don't all speak at once!" rapped out the Housemaster.

"Yaas, pway leave it to me, deah boys; I will explain the mattah to Mr. Wailton. Undah the circs, sir——"

"He asked for it, sir!" said Blake. "Simply asked for it!"

"You are intewwuptin' me, Blake!"

"Cheese it, fathead!"

"Weally, you ass——"

"Silence!" exclaimed the Housemaster. "Tom Merry, explain this to me! What excuse have you to offer?"

Tom Merry breathed hard. His eyes gleamed contemptuously at the tattered, dusty, and infuriated Fifth-Former, as he answered:

"That cad insulted Talbot, sir! So we ragged him! Serve him right!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Indeed!" Mr. Railton understood, and his eyes had a glint in them as they turned upon Tresham. "What did you say to Talbot, Tresham?"

"I—I—I——" Tresham stammered. He knew how little the Housemaster would approve of what he had done. Mr. Railton had been one of those who helped the one-time Toff to obtain the scholarship for St. Jim's. "I—I—— It was merely a remark, sir——"

"What was the remark?"

"I—I really, sir——"

"Did you make some unpleasant reference to Talbot's unfortunate past, Tresham?"

"Yes, I did, sir," said Tresham, pulling himself together, and speaking sullenly. "I don't like the fellow! I think it's wrong to have such a fellow in the school! It's well-known that he was an associate of criminals; and I don't believe in talk about his reformation and all that! I think he's a disgrace to the school! And I believe he will break out again if he's allowed to remain here!"

"You uttah wottah——"

"You cad——"

"Silence!" thundered Mr. Railton; and the furious juniors held their tongues, but with savage looks at the Fifth-Former. "Tresham, what you say is utterly unjustifiable!" said Mr. Railton severely. "Talbot had an unfortunate upbringing. He has fully atoned for the past—given full proofs that he is now as honest and straight as any boy in this school——"

"Heah, heah!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Silence, D'Arcy! The faith that Talbot's own Formfellows have in him, Tresham, should be a proof to you that your ungenerous opinion is totally mistaken. At all events, you are aware that Talbot has been admitted here with the knowledge and approval of the whole Board of Governors. You have acted scandalously!"

Tresham set his lips sullenly.

"I cannot blame these boys for having lost their tempers, Tresham, when they heard you taunt a brave and unfortunate lad with what he cannot help," said Mr. Railton. "Merry, call Talbot here."

"Yes, sir!"

Tom Merry fetched Talbot into the study.

"Tresham, you will immediately beg Talbot's pardon—here, in my presence, and the presence of the boys who heard you utter your insult!"

Tresham's face became scarlet.

"Oh, no, sir!" exclaimed Talbot hurriedly. "It—it doesn't matter, sir! I—I——"

"This matter is in my hands, Talbot. Tresham, if you do not immediately beg Talbot's pardon, and promise me that there shall be no recurrence of your gross conduct, I shall take you to the Head at once!"

Tresham bit his lips hard. The juniors looked on grimly. As Jack Blake remarked afterwards, old Railton was playing up like a real sportsman. There was a moment of silence in the study.

"You hear me, Tresham?"

There was no help for it. Tresham turned towards Talbot, with burning eyes.

"I—I—I——" It did not come out easily. "I—I beg your pardon, Talbot."

Talbot nodded without speaking.

"Now your promise, Tresham!" rapped out Mr. Railton.

"I—I promise that it shall not occur again, sir," stammered Tresham.

"Very good! You may go."

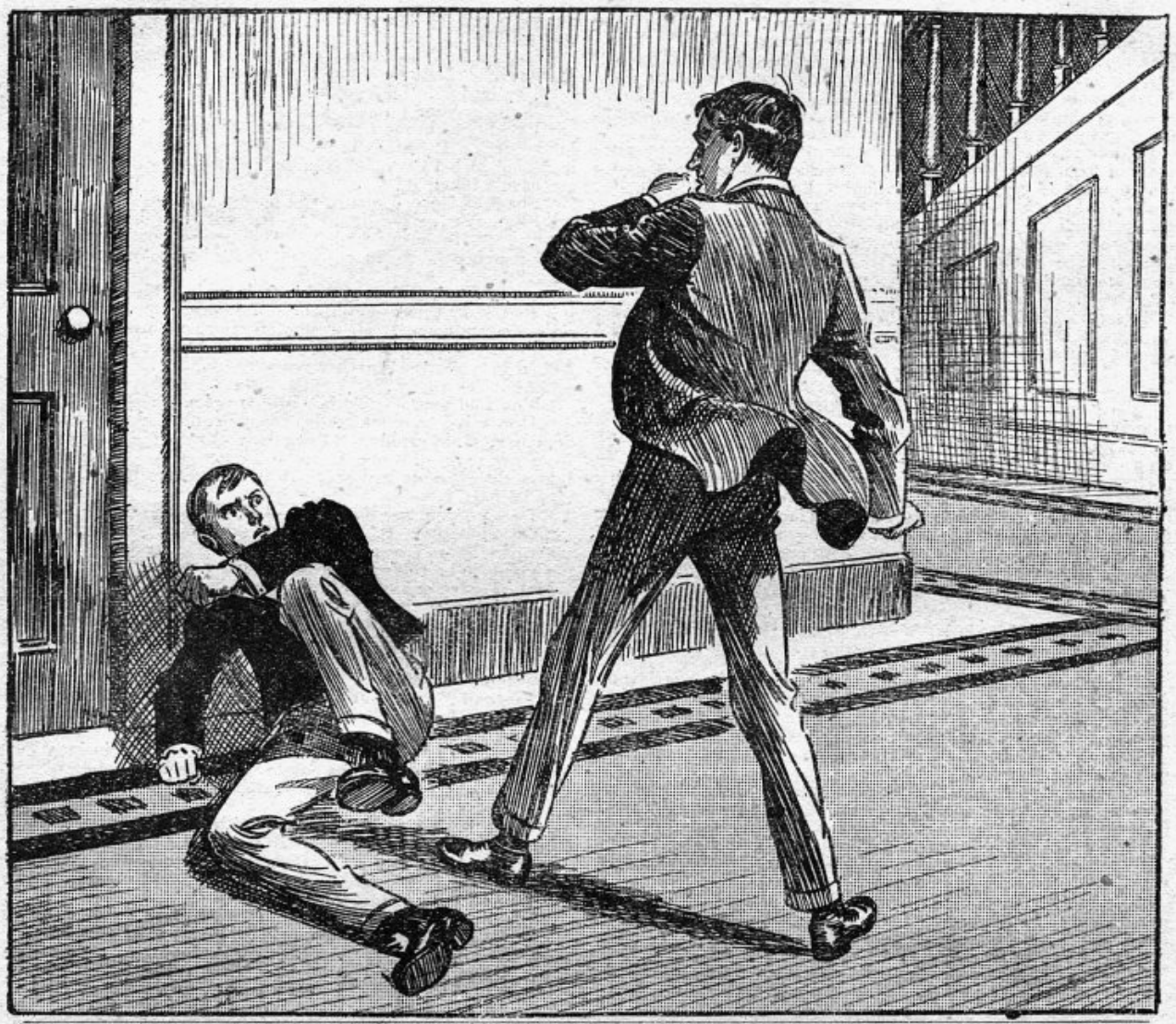
Tresham limped furiously from the study. Mr. Railton made a gesture of dismissal to the juniors, and they crowded out after the Fifth-Former. Tresham, with fury in his face, hurried away to the Fifth Form Dormitory. He needed a change.

"Good old Railton!" said Blake cheerily. "Isn't he a brick—a real brick!"

"He is a splendid fellow!" said Talbot, in a low voice.

"Yaas, wathah! I wathah think that Twesham will think twice befoah he plays the giddy ox again!" chuckled Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I'm afwaid we've wathah wuined his clothes. On any othah occasion I should not appwove of wuinin' a fellow's clobbah——"

"The rotter didn't get half what he deserved!" growled Tom Merry, as Talbot walked away in silence. "He ought



"You clumsy fool!" gasped Tresham, throwing Levison violently off, and staggering to his feet. "Why don't you look where you're going, you idiot?" (See Chapter 13.)

to have had some more! Talbot don't say much, but anything of that kind hits him awfully hard."

"It's a rotten shame!" said Levison.

Tom Merry stared at him. It was his own opinion, but he had not expected to hear it endorsed by Levison of the Fourth.

"Glad you can see it!" he said shortly.

Levison coloured.

"Talbot's a brick!" he said. "I've got good reason to think so. You'll never hear me say another word against him; and I'm sorry I ever said anything. I can't say more than that."

"Bai Jove, you are weally not such a wottah as I have always supposed, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus, with unaccustomed cordiality. "Of course, anybody who isn't an out-and-out wottah must see that Talbot is one of the best!"

"It's jolly odd that Tresham should go for him like this," said Levison. "What did he do it for?"

"Because he's a rotter, I suppose!" growled Monty Lowther.

"But he hardly knows Talbot," said Levison, evidently very much puzzled. "He never has anything to do with him; they haven't quarrelled. Tresham's never taken any notice of him before. It's jolly queer that he should go for him like this for nothing at all that anybody can see!"

"Oh, he's a cad!" said Tom Merry. "That's all there is about it. Now, about that match with the Grammar chaps, you fellows——"

Levison drove his hands deep into his pockets, and walked away, his brow wrinkled in thought. He was not interested in the footer match with the Grammar School, but he was interested in the question of Tresham's sudden and curious attack upon Talbot. Why had he done it? Why had the black sheep of the Fifth—whom Levison more than suspected of dishonesty himself—gone out of his way to taunt Talbot—to bring into publicity once more the fact that Talbot's past was shady and questionable?

It was a puzzling question. Levison was much keener than most of the juniors, and he was not disposed to dismiss it as they did, by saying that the fellow was a cad. There was something more than that in it. Tresham had had a motive. And Levison—in his new role of faithful friend to the lad who had generously helped and saved him from ruin—meant to know what that motive was, and what it meant.

CHAPTER 6.
Black Suspicion.

"My dear Gore—— Ow! My d-d-dear—ow-ow!—Gore—yow!"

The Terrible Three recognised Skimpole's voice as they came along the passage. It was the day after the affair of Tresham. Lessons were over, and the Terrible Three had been taking advantage of what light remained to get in a little footer practice. But the dusk drove them in to an early tea, and as they came tramping along the Shell passage Skimpole's voice came to their ears from the study next to their own.

"That blessed bully Gore again!" growled Tom Merry, with a frown. "He's always ragging Skimmy. We'll look in."

"My dear Gore, I assure you—— Ow-ow!"

Tom Merry threw open the study door. The Terrible Three looked in, frowning. The study belonged to Talbot and Gore and Skimpole, but Talbot was not there, not yet having come in from the footer ground. Skimpole, the brainy youth of the Shell, was dodging round the study table, and Gore was pursuing him, with a poker in his hand.

Skimpole was a terrifically clever youth, and knew all sorts of brainy things that the other fellows didn't know and didn't want to know; but he didn't know anything about fisticuffs—knowledge that would have been more useful to him in the Shell at St. Jim's than any amount of wisdom on abstruse subjects. Gore of the Shell was a first-class bully, though since Talbot had been his study-mate he had been kept in somewhat better order.

"Hallo! What's the trouble?" demanded Tom Merry.

Skimpole blinked at him through his large glasses, and then gave a howl as the poker lunged across the table and caught him on the waistcoat.

"Oh! Yow-ow! Oh, really, Gore——"

"Put that poker down!" said Tom Merry firmly.

"Mind your own business!" growled Gore. "I'm going to make him own up what he's done with it!"

"My dear Gore, I haven't seen it!" wailed Skimpole. "I do assure you, my dear Gore——"

George Gore made another lunge with the poker, and Tom Merry caught him by the shoulder and jerked him back. Gore swung round with a growl, and Tom twisted the poker from his hand, and flung it with a clang into the grate.

"Look here——" roared Gore.

"I'm looking," said Tom. "'Nuff of that! You're too much of a bully, Gore. If you touch Skimmy again I'll go for you!"

"Mind your own business, hang you! He's going to give me my ten-bob note!"

"My dear Gore——"

"'Tain't the first time he's done it!" howled the aggrieved Gore. "He gave my cake to a beggar the other day——"

"The poor man was in want, my dear Gore," said Skimpole, who was a philanthropist, among his many other "ists." And Skimpole did not always take care to be just before he was generous.

"Blow the poor man!" snorted Gore. "Then he gave a pair of my boots to a kid who was on tramp—actually my boots!"

"His own boots were quite worn out, my dear Gore——"

"That was bad enough," continued Gore, breathing fury. "But when it comes to giving my money away——"

"My hat! You'd better draw the line at that, Skimmy," said Monty Lowther. "That isn't philanthropy; that's stealing."

"But I assure you—I assure Gore——"

"Told me there was a tramp wanted some cash, and asked me for it!" howled Gore. "Ten bob Treasury note that came this morning. Soon as he saw it asked me for it to give to a tramp. I dotted him on the nose——"

"You acted very brutally, my dear Gore."

"And now he's taken it out of my desk," said Gore; "and I'm jolly well going to have it back or smash him! Don't talk philanthropy to me! I want my ten bob!"

"Well, that's only natural; but you can ask for it without a poker," said Tom Merry. "Skimmy, old man, you had better draw the line at giving other people's money away."

"Keep your hands from picking and stealing, Skimmy," said Monty Lowther solemnly.

Skimpole blinked at the Shell fellows distressfully.

"But I have not taken it," he said. "I have not seen it since it was in Gore's hand this morning. I keep on telling Gore that I have not taken it. Although I am a philanthropist, I should not think of taking anybody's money to help the poor. Boots and cakes are different. I think that quite justified. If Gore's boots had not been fortunately here, I should have given my own—I should really——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But money is quite a different matter," said Skimpole. "I should not think of taking it, even for a noble and philanthropic purpose. Gore is quite mistaken. I do assure you that I know nothing whatever about the ten-shilling note."

"Gammon!" said Gore.

"My dear Gore, I assure——"

"Bosh! Hand over my note, I tell you!" shouted Gore. "If you've given it away already, I'll go to the Housemaster about it, by Jove! I'm not going to be robbed!"

"Hold on!" said Tom Merry steadily. "Hold on! Skimmy is several sorts of an ass and a chump and a fathead, but he isn't a liar! If he says he hasn't taken the note, Gore, he hasn't."

"Then where is it?" demanded Gore. "I put it in my desk for safety, and it's gone. If Skimpole hasn't given it away to one of his precious tramps, somebody's stolen it, that's all!"

"Oh, rot! Who'd steal your blessed ten-bob note?" said Manners. "Look in your desk again, Gore."

"I've looked! Look yourself!"

"Well, in your pockets, then."

"I've been through my pockets, though I know I left it in the desk. If Skimpole hasn't had it, there's a thief about here!" growled Gore. "Now will you say that that howling ass hasn't taken it?"

"My dear Gore, I assure you on my word——"

"Skimmy's giving it to us straight," said Tom Merry shortly. "He hasn't had it. And before you start a yarn that somebody's stolen it, you'd better make jolly sure it's gone."

Gore grunted, and went to his desk again. He realised himself that it was necessary to be quite sure before he made so serious a statement. He threw out the contents of the desk savagely. Mellish of the Fourth and Crooke of the Shell looked in while the search was going on.

"Ain't tea ready?" asked Mellish.

"You told us five o'clock," said Crooke.

"How can I have tea ready, when I can't find my money?" demanded Gore gruffly. "Somebody's pinched a ten-bob note from my desk—the one I had from my pater this morning. I thought Skimmy had given it away to some tramp, but he says he hasn't——"

"I assure you, my dear Gore——"

"Oh, shut up! It's not here," said Gore. "Somebody's taken it. Now I want to know who. I know jolly well I'm not going to be robbed, and take it lying down!"

Mellish gave one of his unpleasant chuckles.

"Considering the kind of fellow you have in the study, Gore, I don't see much to be surprised at," he drawled. "I shouldn't leave my money lying about if I were in this study."

Gore started.

"Talbot, do you mean? What rot!"

"You cad!" burst out Tom Merry, making a stride towards Mellish. "How dare you insinuate——"

Mellish promptly dodged behind Crooke.

"Keep your wool on," he said. "I'm not insinuating anything. But when a banknote is stolen, and a fellow's in the study who used to—— Keep your hands off, you rotter! Ow!"

Mellish landed in the passage with a bump and a yell. Gore was standing with a startled expression on his face.

"My hat!" he said. "It does look queer——"

Tom Merry turned on him.

"Do you dare to hint that Talbot——"

"Oh, don't try to bullrag me!" said Gore, with a sniff. "I'm not a funk like Mellish, and I'll give you as good as you send, I'll promise you. I say it's queer about my note being taken out of my desk, considering what Talbot was when he came here, that's all. I don't accuse anybody. But I'm jolly well going to the Housemaster about it. If there's a thief in the School House, the sooner he's nailed the better, whoever he is!"

The disturbance in Gore's study had brought a good many fellows along the passage now. Most of the juniors had come in to tea, and were on the spot. Talbot and Levison and the chums of Study No. 6, and Kangaroo and Glyn and Clifton Dane, and a dozen other fellows came on the scene as Mellish scrambled to his feet in the passage.

"What's that about a thief in the house?" demanded Jack Blake. "Are you talking out of your neck, Gore?"

"Gore says a banknote for ten shillings has been taken from his desk," said Tom Merry, with a worried look.

"More ass Gore to leave it there!" growled Herries.

"Well, I shouldn't have left it there if it had been a half-quid," said Gore. "But it was one of those red ten-bob notes. They're all numbered, and a fellow would think they were safe. I've got the number all right in my pater's letter; he jotted it down. Nobody can pass it without being bowled out, so how was I to guess that anybody would be silly idiot enough to steal it?"

"Nobody could pass it here," said Crooke, with an unpleasant grin. "A fellow who happened to have connections among the criminal classes could send it away to be passed safely enough somewhere else, I fancy!"

"Bai Jove, Cwooke, you wottah——"

"Keep your wool on, Tommy," murmured Lowther, catching his chum by the arm. "This can't be settled by fisticuffs. It's jolly lucky it was a note, and not a half-quid. We shall be able to trace it now, and prove that it wasn't Talbot."

"Yes, that's so," said Tom Merry, relieved.

Not for a single instant did the Terrible Three waver in their faith in Talbot. That the Toff had broken out again, in spite of his plighted word, they would never have believed, unless he had told them so himself.

"Here's Talbot," said Levison. "Let him speak for himself. I for one know quite well that Talbot knows nothing of it!"

"You!" said Mellish, with a stare.

Talbot came through the crowd of juniors into the study with a pale face. He had heard the words from the study, and knew what had happened. George Gore fixed an inquiring—or, rather, an accusing—look on him.

"Do you know where my note is, Talbot?" he asked.

"No," said Talbot quietly.

"Have you taken it?"

Talbot's eyes blazed for a moment. Only for a moment; then he was quiet and subdued again.

"That question is an insult," he said, in a steady voice. "I mean, it would be an insult, but for—for what I have been. Under the circumstances, I suppose it is natural such a suspicion should come into your mind, Gore, and I have no right to resent it. So I will answer you. I did not take it!"

The quiet dignity of Talbot's look and manner somewhat abashed Gore.

"Well, I—I don't say you did," he mumbled. "Only somebody did; and there's only us three in the study, and Skimpole says he didn't!"

"Anybody might have come into the study and taken it," said Kangaroo.

"Who'd know it was there?" said Gore. "Only my study-mates!"

The juniors looked exceedingly uncomfortable. There was force in that remark. No one outside the study was likely to know that there was a ten-shilling Treasury note in Gore's desk.

"Might have come here on spec," murmured Blake.

Gore grunted.

"If some thief were going round on spec, he wouldn't come here. There's better studies than this for robbing—D'Arey's, for instance, or Tom Merry's. Whoever took that note out of my desk knew it was there, and I don't see how anybody but my own study-mates could know!"

"That's as good as saying that it was Talbot or Skimpole," said Digby.

"I don't think it was Skimpole," said Gore. "I thought he might have given it to some beggar, as he gave my boots; but he says he didn't, and that ends it."

Talbot drew a hard breath.

"That narrows it down to me," he said quietly. "I give you my word, Gore, that I know nothing whatever about it!"

"Go to the Housemaster, Gore," said Crooke.

"Tell Railton; he ought to know," urged Mellish. "There ought to be an inquiry. We don't want a thief in the House!"

Gore hesitated. He was a great deal of a bully, but he was not a bad-hearted fellow in the main. And he had rather a liking for Talbot, in spite—or because of—the fact that Talbot would not stand any of his nonsense.

"I don't want to make an uproar over ten bob," said Gore at last. "I—I can't think it was Talbot, really! He's been decent ever since—ever since he came back here, anyway. I—I sha'n't say anything about it. If the fellow who took it likes to put it back in my desk, that will make it all right. I'll give him a chance; and I warn him, whoever he is, that I've got the number of the note, so he can't pass it. That's all I've got to say!"

"I—I rather think the matter ought to go to the Housemaster," said Tom Merry. "It's rotten unpleasant to leave it like this!"

"We shall have the New House bounders chipping us about a thief in the place when this gets out," said Blake uneasily.

"Well, you can go to the Housemaster if you like," said Gore. "I'm not going to. I don't want to jump on a fellow when he's down!"

"I don't object to your calling Mr. Railton in," said Talbot. "I am not afraid. My conscience is clear!"

"Yaas, wathah! We all know that, Talbot, old chap!"

"Oh, let it drop!" said Gore. "The rotter may bring it back when he knows he can't pass it, and that will be good enough for me!"

And Gore refused to say another word on the subject. The juniors dispersed from the study with clouded faces and mingled feelings. There was a thief in the School House: and, whatever Gore might say, the matter could not rest there. Something would have to be done. In a few hours the story would be all over St. Jim's—School House and New House would be buzzing with it!

And when it came to the ears of the Housemaster—as it must come—there would be an investigation. And then——

Hardly anything else was discussed in the junior studies, and the name of Talbot cropped up continually in the discussion. Fellows like Mellish and Crooke and Pigott made as much capital out of it as they could. They did not disguise their belief that it was the Toff—the one-time cracksman—at work again!

And other fellows could not help admitting, even unwillingly, that it looked like it! A theft had been committed, and it had happened in the Toff's study, and Skimpole was certainly above suspicion.

Some of the fellows said sapiently, "Once a thief, always a thief"; and, anyway, it looked very suspicious. And ere an hour had passed Talbot of the Shell knew that the finger of suspicion was pointed at him from all sides.

CHAPTER 7.
Not Levison.

"I—I say, you chaps, this is horrible!"

Tom Merry muttered the words miserably.

The Terrible Three had come in to tea, but they were not thinking of tea now. The happening in George Gore's study had taken their appetites away.

They knew the talk that was going on all over the School House—that had spread to the New House by this time. The theft—and Talbot's name coupled with the theft—was the theme on all tongues.

How could it be otherwise? The chums, who knew Talbot so well, had the most loyal faith in him. But fellows who did not know him so well, naturally, did not share their faith.

Upon the whole, St. Jim's had treated Talbot very well when he came there with his scholarship. It could not be denied that his past was black—as black as it could be painted. His repentance and reform—the heroic deed by which he had won his pardon—had blotted out the past—atoned for it fully, it was agreed on all hands. And the obvious fact that he was now as straight as a die weighed in his favour.

Almost everybody in the school had agreed that the chap ought to have a chance to live down his wretched past. Indeed, schoolboys have short memories, and that unpleasant past was already fading out of mind, when Tresham's conduct had recalled it and blazoned it forth, as it were. Tresham's action had been the talk of the school, for a day—the fact that a senior, a fellow who could not be supposed to have any personal dislike for a junior in the Shell, whom he hardly knew—had publicly declared to his Housemaster that he did not think a boy who had been a criminal should be allowed to remain in the school.

Most of the fellows heartily agreed that Tresham was a cad, but the incident brought Talbot's wretched past freshly and clearly to everybody's mind. And now, on the heels of that incident, followed a theft in Talbot's own study—from one of his study-mates!

The most impartial fellows could not fail to put two and two together. It looked as if Tresham of the Fifth had been right, after all!

Tom Merry & Co. had been down in the common-room; but the nods and whispers and significant expressions of the fellows got on their nerves, and they retreated to their study again.

They were distressed and miserable. Their faith in Talbot never wavered, but they knew how the current of opinion was running in the House.

"It's horrible!" said Tom Merry.

"I'll never believe it of Talbot!" said Monty Lowther. "Of course, Mellish & Co. are making the most of it!"

"They would!" growled Manners. "And Levison, I suppose?"

"No. That's queer enough," said Lowther. "Levison's standing up for Talbot—blessed if I know why! He's had a fight with Crooke about it—so I heard—knocked Crooke down for saying Talbot was a thief!"

"Levison did?"

"Yes. Blessed if I catch on to it! Can't be Levison himself who had the note, I suppose?" hazarded Lowther.

"He'd be glad to fix it on Talbot if that were the case," said Tom Merry. "Levison seems to be playing up quite decently. But it's no good blinking the fact that most of the fellows suspect Talbot. Under the circumstances, it's not to be wondered at; but I know there's nothing in it!"

"Only—only somebody must have had the note," said Manners musingly. "Who the dickens could it have been?"

"Goodness knows!"

"Now that Gore's told everybody he's got the number, the thief won't try to pass it," said Lowther. "We sha'n't be able to spot him that way."

"There ought to be a general search."

"I suppose there will be when Railton gets to hear of it," said Tom Merry. "Only a note is so easily destroyed. The

thief may burn it, or swallow it, perhaps, if he's in danger. Then it will never come out!"

"And that means that old Talbot will always be under suspicion," said Manners.

"Looks like it! It's rotten!" Tom Merry clenched his fists. "I jolly well wish I knew who the rotter was! No way of finding out, either. The place was deserted while we were all down at the footer, and anybody might have come along here without being spotted. Might even have been a New House chap, for all we know. If—if it had been a larger amount, I should have thought of Levison. We know he was badly in need of money. But a miserable ten bob——"

"Every little helps," said Lowther.

"It wouldn't be fair to suggest it without an atom of proof; and Levison seems to be standing up for Talbot, too," said Tom reflectively. "That might be only his cunning, of course. He's as deep as a well. We know how he was up against old Talbot all the time. Only the other evening, here, you remember what he said. And he was frightfully pushed for money."

"Let's go and see him," said Lowther. "He's none too good for it, I know that; and if it had been a five-pound note instead of ten bob, I'd have plumped for Levison at once. He may have gone there for more, and only taken what he could get. Anyway, we may be able to spot him—by seeing him—if he's really the rotter."

Tom Merry nodded.

"Might as well try," he said. "If he's innocent, he's only got himself to thank for being suspected. A fellow who would swindle—as he told us the other night he had done—wouldn't stop far short of stealing."

The chums of the Shell made their way to Levison's study. All four of the juniors who occupied it were there—Levison, Mellish, Lumley-Lumley, and Blenkinsop. Three of them were doing their preparation. Mellish was dabbing his nose with a handkerchief, which was stained red. Lumley-Lumley greeted the Terrible Three with a grin.

"Just too late for the fun," he remarked.

The Shell fellows looked at Mellish.

"What's happened?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Levison, in his new role of champion of the oppressed, I guess," said Lumley-Lumley, with a chuckle. "He considers that he is the only chap who has a right to slang Talbot. Our esteemed friend Percy took the liberty of calling Talbot a thief. I was just going to punch his nose, when Levison saved me the trouble."

"I'll punch anybody's nose who calls Talbot a thief," said Levison savagely.

The Terrible Three stared at him.

"What's the little game, Levison?" demanded Tom Merry. "If you mean that, I'm with you. But it's rather a sudden change of front, isn't it?"

Levison was silent.

"At his old games," said Lowther. "He's trying to throw dust in our eyes, of course. I suppose we know better than to trust him by this time."

"Yes, rather," said Manners emphatically.

Levison flushed.

"I don't suppose you fellows would understand," he said awkwardly. "I've said before that I'm sorry I was up against Talbot. He's one of the best. That's all I've got to say."

"Quite enough, too, if you mean it," said Lowther. "But you can't catch an old bird with chaff, my infant. We didn't come here to have our leg pulled."

"I guess it does sound rather thick from Levison!" chuckled Lumley-Lumley. "But he did punch Mellish's nose. Look at it!"

"Grooogh!" came from Mellish, as he dabbed his nose furiously.

"We want to speak to you, Levison," said Tom Merry. "We'd rather speak to you alone, if you don't mind. Will you trot along to our study?"

"No, I won't!" said Levison, with a scowl. "Say what you've got to say here, and go and eat coke. You say you can't trust me—you can't take my word. Leave me alone, then. I'm not asking you to talk to me."

"It isn't for the pleasure of your conversation," said Lowther. "If you'd rather have it out in public, here it is! You were saying the other night—do you still want it in public?"

"I—I'll come to your study!" snarled Levison. "I told you that in confidence, and you're a cad if you blab it about the House!"

"Keep your rotten confidences to yourself," said Lowther. "Still, if you'd rather have it in private, come along."

Levison sullenly accompanied the Shell fellows to their study. Tom Merry closed the door, and Levison eyed the Terrible Three defiantly.

"Well, what is it?" he growled.

"Have you paid that debt you were speaking of the other night?"

"What business is that of yours?"

"We want to know, and we mean to know," said Tom Merry quietly.

"Well, I have paid it."

"When?"

"End of last week—the same evening I came to you, if you want to know!" said Levison savagely.

"You raised the money, then?"

"Looks like it, doesn't it, if I've paid the bill?" said Levison, with a sneer. "If I hadn't paid it, I should have been sacked before now. Monday morning was the latest."

The Shell fellows looked a little nonplussed. If Levison had settled that pressing account several days ago, certainly he could not have taken the ten-shilling bill from Gore's desk this very day to help towards it. Levison regarded them with a sneering grin. He could read quite easily what was in their minds.

"You're on the wrong track, you see!" he said sarcastically. "I didn't take Gore's ten-bob note. I know that's what's in your minds. Well, you're barking up the wrong tree. And if you dare to hint it in public, I'll call you to account for it too."

"You've only got yourself to blame, if it crossed our minds," said Tom Merry quietly. "It seems rather suspicious to us the way you are standing up for Talbot. Only the other night you were slanging him in our presence. You must have some motive for it. I don't pretend to be as deep as you are, so I can't guess what it is."

Levison shrugged his shoulders.

"And we've only got his word for it that he's paid that bill," said Lowther, "and his word's worth about as much as that of a German diplomat."

"Quite so," said Tom Merry.

"It's no business of yours!" snarled Levison. "But I'd rather satisfy you than have you starting a story about me. I can prove it."

"Prove it, then."

"Call Talbot here."

"Talbot!" exclaimed the Terrible Three in astonishment together.

"Yes."

"What on earth can Talbot know about it?"

"Call him in and ask him."

"He's in the next study," said Manners. "I'll call him in. Blessed if I can see what you're driving at, Levison, but I'll call him."

Manners stepped to the next study, and came back in a minute or so with Talbot, who was looking surprised. Talbot glanced at Levison.

"What's wanted?" he asked.

"These fellows suspect me of robbing Gore!" said Levison, with a sneer. "They think I was getting money together to settle my bill with Hanney's. I told them to ask you about it. You know whether I had the money to pay it or not last Friday."

Talbot coloured a little.

"That's right enough," he said. "Levison had the money that night."

"Five pounds!" exclaimed Lowther.

"Yes, that was the amount."

"You—you saw it?"

"Yes, I saw it," said Talbot, with a slight smile.

Levison burst into a laugh.

"You duffers! Can't you see how it was?"

"No need to talk about it, Levison," said Talbot quickly.

"I don't care if they know, so long as they don't jaw it over the house," said Levison. "Talbot lent me the money—or, rather, he gave it to me. I told him I hadn't any idea when I could pay it back."

"Talbot!" almost shouted Tom Merry.

"It—it came out of my scholarship money, you know," said Talbot, his flush deepening. "I—I wanted to help him out of a hole, that's all."

"After the way he slanged you!" yelled Monty Lowther. "Well, you ass—you fathead—you—you silly duffer—you brick!"

Talbot laughed and quitted the study. Levison looked sarcastically at the Terrible Three.

"I don't want it jawed all over the House," he said.

"We sha'n't jaw it. But, Talbot, what a splendid chap he is," said Tom Merry—"what a really splendid chap!"

"Now you know why I punched Mellish's nose, and Crooke's, too," said Levison, and he left the study and slammed the door.

The chums of the Shell looked at one another.

"It was ripping of Talbot," said Lowther, "and Levison seems to see it, too. But we were on the wrong track, you chaps. This business in Gore's study wasn't Levison."

Tom Merry and Manners shook their heads. They were satisfied upon that point now. But the certainty that their first vague suspicion was ill-founded only left them further at sea than ever. It was not Levison. But who was it? Not Talbot. True, his generous help to Levison must have straitened his already circumscribed funds. He would be in want of money, and if his action had been generally known it would have been an added point against him, probably. But the Terrible Three would not entertain such a thought for a moment. Their admiration and affection for their chum was stronger than ever since that discovery. But the task of clearing him of suspicion was harder than ever!

CHAPTER 8.
Tresham's Trouble.

LEFEVRE, the captain of the Fifth, looked into Tresham's study. Tresham and Gilmore, who shared that study, had finished their preparation, and they were chatting and smoking cigarettes. Lefevre sniffed, partly because of the haze of smoke, partly to show his contempt for that pet indulgence of the Blades.

"Hallo!" yawned Gilmore. "Help yourself, Fevvy!" And he extended his case towards the captain of the Fifth.

"Rats!" said Lefevre ungraciously. "If I was a prefect, I'd report you fellows for playing the giddy ox like that. That's what I say—I'd report you!"

"Lucky you're not a prefect, then," said Tresham, laughing.

"I looked in to speak to you, Tresham," said Lefevre. "I met Benson in Wayland."

Tresham's countenance changed a little.

"Benson? By Jove! I forgot to send him his bill!" he said.

"So he told me," said Lefevre grimly. "I thought I'd remind you, Tresham. As you seem to devote yourself more to smoking than to looking after the accounts, it mightn't be a bad idea for the footer club to get another secretary and treasurer."

"Oh, don't be an ass!" said Tresham lightly. "I'll settle Benson's account to-morrow. I'm going over to Wayland."

"Have you settled Hanney's account, too—for the new goal-posts?"

"Hanney's? Yes, I think I settled that."

"Then he's forgotten all about it!" said Lefevre sarcastically. "I was in his shop to-day, about my new footer, and he began a yarn about being short of cash, owing to the war. And the long and the short of it was, as I found out, that he wants his bill paid."

Tresham flushed.

"I—I—I suppose I overlooked it," he said. "Now—Yes, when I come to think of it, I didn't settle with him."

"He allows a discount for cash," said Lefevre. "That won't be taken off now. It means a loss to the club."

"I'll make it all right," said Tresham.

"That's all very well, but it ain't a secretary's duty to lose money for the club, and make it up out of his own pocket," said Lefevre tartly. "It seems to me that you're getting pretty slack, Tresham. I've been going to speak about it before, as a matter of fact; and if you don't buck up a little, I shall have to put it to the club at the next meeting that we want a new sec."

"Put it to the club, and be blowed!" said Tresham sulkily.

"Peace, my infants—peace!" said Gilmore, as Lefevre was about to make an angry retort. "It's all right, Fevvy, old man. I'll see that Tresham settles the bills to-morrow. I'll go down with him and see him do it. Tressy's a jolly good sec, only he's had some private worries lately, and he's let things slide a bit."

"Well, I want those bills paid before I see the people again!" growled Lefevre. "It's jolly unpleasant to me to be dunned for money, when I go into a shop to get a new footer, because Tresham forgets to pay the accounts."

"I'll see to it," said Tresham.

Lefevre grunted, and left the study. Tresham sat very still in his armchair, the cigarette burning between his fingers. He was no longer smoking.

Gilmore looked at him very curiously.

"I suppose it's all right, Tres, old man?" he said suddenly, when the silence in the study had lasted some minutes.

Tresham started out of the reverie into which he had fallen.

"What's all right?" he exclaimed. "What do you mean?"

"About the money."

"The money! What money?"

"The club money," said Gilmore testily. "You know what I mean well enough. You've got the money to pay the accounts, haven't you?"

Tresham's cigarette trembled in his hand.

"Of course I have!" he said. "What makes you ask such a question as that, Gilmore? The fellows have all paid up their subscriptions long ago."

"Yes, I know that. I was wondering whether——"

"Whether I'd taken your precious advice?" asked Tresham, with a sneer. "No, I haven't! I'm not quite such a fool as that!"

"Well, I only suggested your borrowing it for a time, if you were certain of putting it back before it was wanted," said Gilmore. "You seemed so worried for money. Not that it's a thing I would have done myself."

"Well, I wouldn't do it, either," said Tresham. "The money's all right—it's in my desk there, locked up quite safe."

"All of it?"

"Of course!" said Tresham irritably. "How you keep on, Gilmore! There's about twelve pounds in all, as near as I remember. Anyway, I've got it all down in my accounts."

"Well, that's all right," said Gilmore, rising with a yawn. "Only the thought crossed my mind; you've left the accounts so jolly late. Fevvy is annoyed about that discount being lost. Don't leave it over to-morrow, anyway."

"You can come with me to pay the bills, if you like!" said Tresham tartly.

"All right; don't get ratty! I'm off to bed."

Gilmore left the study, giving his study-mate a very curious look as he departed.

Tresham did not notice it. He remained in his chair, staring at the dying fire, the cigarette going out, unsmoked.

Tresham's face was pale; a deep line furrowed his brow. As he sat there alone, gazing at the dying embers, his brow grew more and more haggard.

He rose at last, restlessly, and began to pace the study. It was past bedtime, but he did not notice it. The door opened, and Gerald Cutts looked in.

Tresham stopped abruptly in his restless pacing, and made a visible effort to pull himself together.

"Not going to bed?" asked Cutts, looking at him curiously. "All the fellows are gone up. Anything the matter, Tresham?"

"No. What should be the matter?" muttered Tresham. "Yes, I'm going up to bed. I didn't notice it was so late."

He turned out the light in his study quickly, without waiting for Cutts to reply. But Cutts had seen his face, and he wondered.

In the Fifth-Form dormitory, the dandy of the Fifth glanced several times at Tresham, with a very odd expression on his face. Tresham did not seem to see it, and he turned in quickly without a word.

But he did not sleep.

CHAPTER 9.
What the Morning Brought.

KILDARE of the Sixth saw lights out for the Shell that evening. Kildare looked at the juniors a little suspiciously. There was an unusual quietness in the dormitory, in the place of the usual buzz of cheery talk. The Terrible Three were looking grim, and Talbot was very grave and quiet. Some of the fellows spoke to one another in low voices, and that was all.

It was so unusual for the Shell to be so subdued that the captain of St. Jim's could not help observing it. He suspected at once that something was "on," though as yet he had not heard of the happening in Gore's study. So far, that had not come to the knowledge of the prefects.

"No larks here to-night," said Kildare warningly.

Some of the juniors grinned a little. Kildare's surmise was that a "rag" was in preparation. The Shell fellows felt little enough in the humour for "larks."

"All serene, Kildare!" said Kangaroo.

Kildare gave the juniors another suspicious glance, and turned out the light, and retired from the dormitory.

There was a low buzz of voices in the dark; some of the Shell fellows were conversing in whispers. Talbot did not speak, and none of the whispered remarks reached his ears. But he knew that he was the subject of them.

No one had spoken to him that evening, with the exception of Tom Merry and his friends. The juniors did not exactly avoid him, but they did not address any remarks to him, and Talbot knew only too well why.

He was under suspicion.

It was a heavy blow to him, but he could not wonder at it. A theft had taken place in his study, and it could not but bring to the minds of the juniors his old record. It was

certain in advance that, if anything of the kind occurred, suspicion would turn upon the Toff.

It was only to be expected, and Talbot did not allow himself to feel bitter or resentful towards the juniors who averted their eyes from him. It was part of the price he had to pay for the miserable past. He was not bitter, but he was inexpressibly sad and downcast. It seemed as if he would never be able to emerge from the black shadows of his early career.

If the thief was not discovered, vague suspicion and distrust would cling to him. There could be no doubt about that. It would make his position at the school intolerable. His faithful friends would stand by him loyally, but he would gradually find himself avoided by all the rest. In the course of time, even his own chums might fall away from his side; indeed, he questioned whether he had a right to make a division between them and the rest of the fellows. For it was pretty certain that the juniors who stood by him would at last become isolated along with him. The outcome of their loyalty to him would be estrangement for the rest.

It was only beginning now, but it would grow. After the buzz of talk had died away, and the juniors were asleep, Talbot lay for a long time sleepless. He was trying to think the matter out to decide what he had better do. Who had taken the ten-shilling note from Gore's study? If it were only possible to find the fellow — But he knew that there was slight hope of that. Indeed, if Talbot had had an enemy in the House, he felt that he would have suspected that this was merely a trick to cause him injury — that the note had been taken for no other purpose.

If Levison had still been his enemy, he would have suspected Levison. But he could not suspect him now. That was out of the question. And who else could have done it? Mellish Crooke—they were "down" on him, but not so bitterly as Levison had been. They were making capital out of the occurrence, but he knew that it would be absurd to suspect them of having planned the whole thing, as Levison might have done a while ago. They did not dislike him bitterly enough for that, and they would not be rascals enough for such a plot—they would not have nerve enough. And he had no other enemies in the House that he knew of.

He was driven to the conclusion that it was, after all, an ordinary theft. Some mean rascal had taken the note, knowing that suspicion must fall upon Talbot, and thereby render the real thief secure. Some wretched boy had taken this cunning and unscrupulous advantage of his old reputation.

That seemed the only possible explanation; and that the truth could be revealed and proved it seemed impossible to hope.

It was long before Talbot slept.

When the rising-bell rang out in the morning he was sleeping soundly. Tom Merry was the first out of bed, and he shook Talbot by the shoulder.

"Wake up, kid!"

Talbot started and opened his eyes.

"Rising-bell!" said Tom cheerily. "Sleepy?"

"Ye-es, a little," said Talbot, rubbing his eyes. "All right!"

He jumped out of bed.

"Ripping morning!" said Lowther, looking out of the window. "Good weather for footer this afternoon."

"Topping!" said Manners. "Feel in good form, Talbot?"

"Yes, right as rain," said Talbot dully.

It was almost too obvious the way the Terrible Three made it a point to speak to Talbot as if nothing had happened. Kangaroo chimed in cheerfully. But there was a grim silence from most of the other fellows. They avoided looking at Talbot.

"What are you going to do about your ten-bob note, Gore?" Crooke asked, with a sidelong glance at Talbot.

Gore grunted.

"Nothing!" he said.

"Going to lose it?" asked Crooke.

"Oh, blow the note!" said Gore peevishly. "I wish I hadn't said anything about it now. 'Tain't so very much, after all—ten bob."

"It isn't the money," said Crooke; "it's having a thief in the House that matters. Nobody's money is safe while this goes on. It's pretty rotten that we've got to take the trouble to lock everything up."

A slight flush came into Talbot's pale cheeks. Crooke was not speaking to him, but he was speaking "at" him, so to express it. Tom Merry set his teeth, but it was impossible to "come down" on Crooke for his remarks. He was only saying, in fact, what most of the Shell fellows were thinking. If there were a thief in the House it was necessary for all the fellows to be careful with their valuables, and such a worry was enough to exasperate them. A fellow had a right to suppose that his things were safe, without the turning of keys to secure them.

Talbot left the dormitory alone, having dressed quickly. He went out into the quadrangle, but the Terrible Three very soon joined him there. They were determined that they, at all events, should not seem for a moment to be deserting their chum. Blake and D'Arcy joined them in the quad.

"Let's have a trot 'round before brekker!" said Manners cheerfully. "Come on, Talbot!"

"Yaas, wathah, let's have a wun, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus, with a rather anxious look at Talbot, who did not move.

Talbot shook his head.

"I'd better speak out plainly to you chaps," he said abruptly. "It's no good blinking the facts of the case. The whole House suspects me!"

"Not quite so bad as that," muttered Tom.

"Not the whole House," said Blake. "I'm afraid some of them do; but—but lots of us know it's all right, Talbot. Even Levison stands up for you."

"Yaas, that boundah is weally turnin' up twumps for once."

"No good moping over it, old chap," said Lowther. "The silly asses will get over it—it will be all right!" Lowther tried to speak cheerfully, but there was no conviction in his tones.

Talbot responded with another shake of the head.

"They won't get over it," he said quietly. "It will get worse, not better. I know you fellows trust me——"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"And you are right. I give you my word of honour that I know nothing about Gore's note—if the Toff's word of honour is worth anything!" added Talbot bitterly.

"Don't say that!" said Tom Merry quickly. "We know you're as straight as a die. As for the others, let them go and eat coke—the duffers!"

"It can't be done!" said Talbot. "I can see how this is going—I'm going to be sent to Coventry. I don't complain: it's only natural, under the circumstances, that they should think as they do. They don't know me so well as you fellows do; they don't trust me as you do, anyway. Well, I'm not going to get you fellows into trouble with the rest of the House. You'd better make up your minds to it at once, and leave me alone."

"Rats!"

"Yaas, wathah—wats!"

"Don't be an ass!" urged Tom Merry. "Whatever the others think, we know! And we're sticking to you, whether you like it or not!"

"You won't be able to get wid of us, deah boy," chirped Arthur Augustus; "we're goin' to stick to you like anythin'!"

"Like glue!" said Lowther.

"But you can see what it's coming to," said Talbot steadily. "I'm being cut on all sides. If you stand by me you'll be cut, too, in the long run. It will make dissension—trouble all round. You'd better——"

"Rats!"

"Rot!"

"Bow-wow!"

Talbot laughed, in spite of himself. Tom Merry took his arm.

"Now you've done talking rot, come for a sprint," he said cheerily.

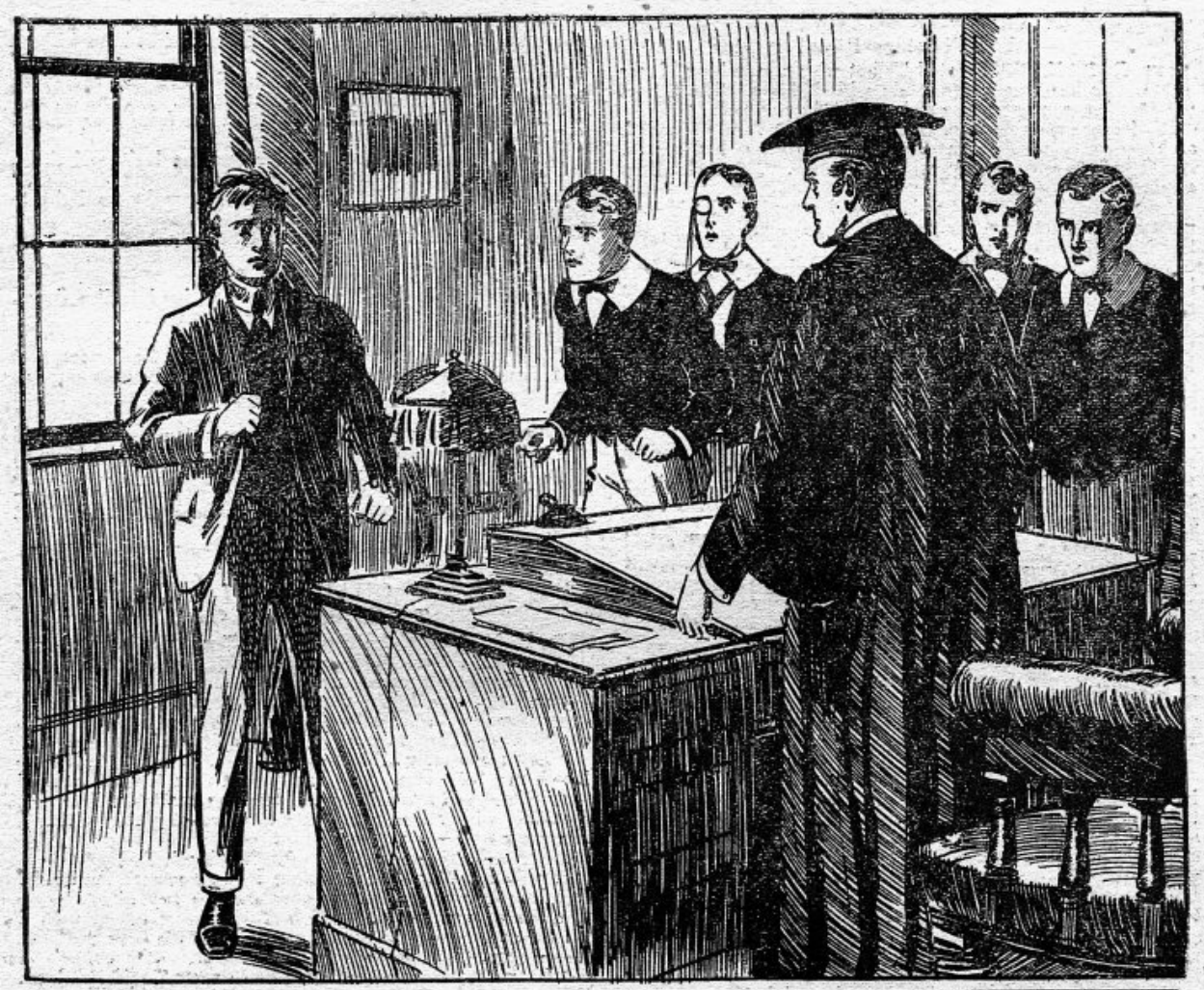
And Talbot went. Other fellows came out into the quadrangle, and there were whispers and glances as they noticed Talbot sprinting with the Co. Crooke and Mellish sneered portentiously, and other fellows shrugged their shoulders.

"Birds of a feather," said Crooke. "Perhaps they're whacking it out among them."

"Shouldn't wonder!" said Mellish.

The chums of the School House stopped as Figgins & Co. came out of the New House and bore down on them. Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn had evidently heard the story. They greeted Talbot cheerily.

"We heard a yarn last night from your House," said Figgins, in his direct way. "It seems that some silly duffers have an idea in their heads——" he paused. "Look here,



Tresham, torn and dishevelled and smothered with dust, stood panting in the Housemaster's study. He was out of breath, aching all over, and nearly frantic with rage. Mr. Railton fixed his eyes sternly upon the crowd of juniors. "You have attacked a senior boy!" he exclaimed. "How dare you?" *(See Chapter 5.)*

Talbot, I may as well out with it. You must know the jaw that's going on. Well, I want you to understand that we know you're true blue. Rely on us!"

"Yes, rather!" said Kerr and Wynn together.

"Thank you!" said Talbot, in a low voice.

"Pity you didn't come into the New House, after all, when you came here," said Figgins. "Look here, you can change over if you like; the Head will let you, and we'd be jolly glad to have you in our House. And if any fellow there said a word against you I'd pulverise him—simply pulverise him!"

Talbot smiled.

"You're a good chap, Figgy! I'm afraid you can't change a chap's ideas by pulverising him, though. Thanks, all the same!"

"It's rotten!" said Figgins to the Co., as the School House fellows went on their way. "We all know that Talbot is one of the best! And if they make things warm for him in the School House we'll have him over here, whether he likes it or not. We know a good thing when we see it, if those duffers don't!"

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

Tom Merry & Co. came back to the School House flushed and cheery after their sprint in the keen morning air. But as they came into the House the cheery looks died off their faces. Kildare met them in the doorway, and the expression on his face was quite enough to banish their momentary high spirits. The captain of St. Jim's was looking grave and worried, and his eyes fixed upon Talbot with an alarming expression.

"You're wanted, Talbot!" he said shortly.

"Yes?" said Talbot.

"In the Housemaster's study, please."

"I—I say——" burst out Tom Merry. "If Gore has been complaining——"

"Gore?" said Kildare. "What has Gore to do with this?"

"I—I thought——"

"It has nothing to do with Gore!" said Kildare. "You haven't heard what has happened, then?"

"What's happened?" repeated Tom Merry. "What can have happened?"

"I will tell you, then. It's only just been found out. Tresham's only just come down."

"Tresham?" said Tom, with a vague feeling of alarm. "What are you driving at, Kildare? What's happened?"

"Last night Tresham's desk was broken into and burgled!" said Kildare grimly.

"What?"

"The lock was picked, and twelve pounds taken from his desk."

"Good heavens!"

"But—but what has that to do with Talbot?" exclaimed Manners.

Kildare shrugged his shoulders, and did not reply to the question.

Talbot's face had become deadly pale; there was a look of despair in his eyes.

"It's all up!" he said tonelessly.

"Talbot, you—you don't know anything about it?" almost shouted Tom Merry.

"Nothing at all!" said Talbot, with a quivering lip. "But everybody will believe that I do! I was a fool to come here! I see it now! I'm ready, Kildare!"

With a firm step Talbot followed the captain of St. Jim's to Mr. Railton's study.

Tom Merry & Co. were left, rooted to the floor, looking at one another in silence, their faces full of horror and consternation.

CHAPTER 10.
The Finishing Blow!

MR. RAILTON greeted Talbot with a searching glance as he entered the study with Kildare. The School House master was looking deeply troubled.

His faith in the reform of the Toff had been firmly founded, as his severity with Tresham a few days before had shown. But it had received a staggering blow now. There had been a burglary in the House!

And in the light of that unheard-of happening, the Housemaster could not help feeling that perhaps his faith in the boy had been misplaced.

Suspicion pointed to Talbot with an inevitable finger. The boy realised it himself only too clearly. Once he had been guilty—that was known. And Fate was hard upon the guilty. The way of the transgressor is hard, and repentance was no guarantee for the future. Talbot felt inwardly that it was "all up," and the despair and misery in his heart showed only too plainly in his face, and might well have been taken for the signs of conscious guilt.

The searching look of the Housemaster brought a sudden hot flush into his white cheeks. He saw that he was suspected even here.

Tresham was in the study. The Fifth-Former was looking harassed, as was only natural under the circumstances. He did not look at Talbot.

"You know why I have sent for you, Talbot?" asked Mr. Railton. His voice was hard; quite unlike his usual kindly tones.

"Kildare has told me, sir," said Talbot dully.

"Do you know anything of what happened last night?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Talbot, I will not say that you are suspected, but you must see for yourself how the matter looks. Tresham reports to me that his study was entered last night, the lock on his desk was forced, and the money there—the funds of the Fifth Form football club—taken away."

"Yes, sir."

"It was undoubtedly done by someone inside the School House. There is no sign of the House having been entered from outside. Moreover, a common burglar would not go to a boy's study; a burglar would seek the safe, not a boy's desk, and a stranger could not possibly know that Tresham was secretary and treasurer of a football club, and kept the funds in his desk. You see that? This theft was committed by someone belonging to the School House."

"It looks like it, sir."

"And you know nothing of it?"

"Nothing."

"You did not leave your dormitory last night?"

"I did not."

The Housemaster's look became more searching. Talbot bore it as calmly as he could; but he flinched a little. The knowledge that he was suspected, that in most minds he was already condemned, unnerved him. The iron nerve of the Toff seemed to be gone. He had so much at stake now—his honour was dear to him. The knowledge of all he stood to lose was like ice in his heart.

"Very well, Talbot," said Mr. Railton, after a pause, compressing his lips. "Heaven forbid that I should do you an injustice. I have asked you the question, and you have denied knowledge of the matter. For the present, do not suppose that your word is doubted. I hope sincerely that you may come out of this without a stain upon your name. It is a matter for proof, not for suspicion. There will, of course, be a most searching investigation. The facts, whatever they are, must come to light. The guilty party will be discovered."

"I hope so, sir!"

"You will please remain here for the present, Talbot. You have no objection?"

Talbot smiled bitterly. He understood that he was to be detained in the Housemaster's study so that he could have no opportunity of concealing the plunder, if it was in his possession.

"I have no objection, sir."

"Very well; remain here. You may come with me, Tresham."

"Yes, sir," said Tresham, in a subdued voice.

He followed the Housemaster from the study. Talbot was left alone. He sank down in a chair with a groan that came from the depths of his heart.

A few minutes later the study door opened softly. Tom Merry looked in, and he felt a pang at his heart as he saw Talbot with his face buried in his hands. The unhappy boy did not look up. Tom Merry gazed at him, and almost fiercely drove away a wretched doubt that crept into his mind. Talbot was innocent, but he did not look innocent at that moment. His attitude was that of guilt and despair.

"Talbot!" muttered Tom.

Talbot dropped his hands from his face. He was deathly pale, and his eyes were burning. He stared at Tom without speaking.

"I—I want to tell you we don't believe it," said Tom hurriedly. "We know it's all right, Talbot. Depend on us."

"Merry!" It was Kildare's sharp voice from the passage. "Come away at once!"

Tom Merry gave Talbot a last reassuring look, and closed the study door.

But his words of faith and loyalty brought no light to Talbot's face, no hope to his heart. The belief of one fellow—of a dozen fellows—what could that help him now? He was lost!

He knew it!

His evil record, that he had fought so hard to live down, had risen, as it were, from the grave to ruin him.

There was no hope!

His honour was gone, tarnished for ever; the honour that was all the dearer to him because it had come newly into his life, because it had cost him many a hard struggle and sacrifice.

Fate had been against it. It was written that he should not succeed in the task he had set himself. All had been in vain. And the unhappy junior, his hopes crushed, his heart aching, sat in the study in stony silence and despair, waiting—waiting for the sentence that was to come, undeserved but irrevocable.

CHAPTER 11.
Twelve Pounds in Gold.

DR. HOLMES, the Head of St. Jim's, was in Tresham's study. Mr. Railton had told him of what had happened. The news was already being buzzed through the school. In the passage groups of fellows were discussing it with hushed voices. Tresham, in his study with the Head and Mr. Railton, was very quiet and subdued.

"Tell me exactly what has happened, Tresham," said the Head, in a low voice. "When did you make the discovery?"

"As soon as I came down this morning, sir," said Tresham, speaking with an effort. "I came into my study, and I found my desk—as you see it now, sir."

The Head's eyes were fixed upon Tresham's desk.

It was a strong desk, standing in a corner of the study. The lock had been a strong one, and the key of it was on Tresham's watch-chain. The lock had been forced with a chisel or some such instrument. The lid of the desk had been forced open, the lock cracking under the strain.

"I saw that the lock had been broken, sir," said Tresham. "I went to the desk at once to see if the money was safe. I thought of that at once, sir—especially because of the talk I had heard about a theft in the House yesterday——"

"What is that?" said the Head.

"What are you alluding to, Tresham?" asked Mr. Railton. "A theft in the School House? I have heard nothing of it."

"I don't know the particulars, sir. It occurred in one of the junior studies," said Tresham. "The juniors have been talking of it a great deal. I thought all the House knew about it."

"The prefects cannot know. It has not been reported to me," said the Housemaster. "This must be inquired into. Are you aware what was stolen?"

"A small banknote, sir, I think, from Gore's study."

"Gore's!"

The Head and the Housemaster involuntarily exchanged glances. Talbot shared Gore's study.

"Well, then——" said the Head, after a painful pause.

"I looked in my desk for the money, sir, as soon as I saw that the lock had been forced. It was gone."

"How much money was there?"

"Twelve pounds and some odd shillings, sir. I can easily ascertain the precise amount. It was the money I am taking care of as treasure of the Form club."

"Was it generally known that you kept the money there?"

"I—I suppose so, sir. Everybody knows I have the money in my charge, and naturally I should keep it in my desk, as it has a strong lock. Of course, I was careful with the money, though I could not anticipate anything like this."

"And when you found the money was gone——"

"I thought I had better go to Mr. Railton at once, sir," said Tresham.

"Quite right. In what form was the money?"

"That is an important point," said Mr. Railton. "In the form of notes, the money can easily be traced."

"It was in gold, sir."

"In gold!" said the Head, raising his eyebrows a little. "You had twelve sovereigns in gold, Tresham, at a time when gold is scarce as it is at present? I should have expected part of the money at least was in Treasury notes."

"You see, sir, the subscriptions come in in small amounts," Tresham explained—"half-sovereigns and silver. Most of it was in half-sovereigns, and, for convenience sake, I generally changed the silver into gold when I could when I had a large enough amount."

"It would have been equally convenient to change it into small notes, and a great deal safer," said the Head.

"Well, sir, I've always been in the habit of doing so, and these Treasury notes are a new thing," said Tresham. "Some of the money has been there a good time, too. I was going to pay most of it away to-day, as a matter of fact."

"Well, well, it cannot be helped now," said the Head. "On another occasion you will probably understand that paper money is far safer to keep. The money, being in coin, will be impossible to trace."

"I'm afraid so, sir," said Tresham. "I'm afraid the fellows in the club will blame me. But I couldn't do more than lock it up. I always take great care of the key. I wear it on my watch-chain."

"Call Talbot here," said the Head.

Mr. Railton left the study. He returned in a few minutes with Talbot, upon whose face, pale and drawn, the Head's eyes rested scrutinisingly.

"Talbot, my dear boy," said the Head gently, "you know what has occurred, and you understand the suspicion that must enter naturally into many minds on the subject."

"I understand, sir," said Talbot.

"Have you anything to tell me?"

The Head made a gesture towards the rifled desk.

Talbot shook his head.

"I know nothing of it, sir."

"You did not come downstairs last night?"

"No, sir."

"Did you know that Tresham kept the club funds in that desk?"

"I'd never thought about it, sir. I knew he was treasurer of the Fifth Form club, of course. All the fellows know."

"You give me your word, Talbot, that you are innocent?"

"Yes, sir." Talbot's eyes strayed to the desk, and a pale smile came over his lips. "There is a proof there, sir, in a way."

"In what way, Talbot?"

"The way the desk has been opened. You remember what I was in the past." Talbot coloured deeply. "If I had robbed that desk when—when I was a cracksman, I should not have needed to smash the lock like that. Whoever broke that lock must have made a good deal of noise. He might have been heard, and interrupted. I could have opened it quite easily without breaking it. I have not lost my skill. There is not a lock in the house I could not open if I tried without a key. That lock would not have delayed me half a minute if I had wanted to open the desk. I should not have risked making a noise in the middle of the night!"

"That is very true," said the Head, struck by the remark.

"Talbot is only making the case blacker against himself, sir," said Tresham, with a curious look at the Shell fellow. "He had better hold his tongue!"

"What do you mean, Tresham?"

"We all know, sir"—Tresham's lip curled—"all the school knows that Talbot was a thief, and that he can pick locks. If that lock had been picked, there wouldn't have been the slightest doubt who had done it. Talbot might as well as left his card there as picked the lock. That's why he smashed it!"

The Head started, and Mr. Railton nodded involuntarily. The point was well taken.

Talbot understood it, too, and he suppressed a groan.

"I didn't think of that," he muttered. "Tresham's right; I've made it look worse instead of better. But Heaven knows I am innocent!"

"You've got to prove that!" said Tresham.

"That will do, Tresham," said the Head coldly. "Everyone must be believed innocent till he is proved to be guilty. If the lock had been picked, as you say, it would have been presumptive evidence against Talbot, as no one else in the school could have done it. But the lock has been broken, which proves nothing. Talbot, you may return to Mr. Railton's study. Kindly remain there till you are sent for!"

"Yes, sir."

Talbot went out.

"This matter must be carefully investigated," said the Head slowly. "I cannot bring myself to believe that Talbot is guilty; but, at all events, the matter must be proved one way or the other. Let the boys go in to breakfast, Mr. Railton—it is past the time. Afterwards, there must be a search. If any boy is found in possession of a large sum in gold, he must account for it. And, meanwhile, I will inquire into the matter which Tresham has mentioned—of a theft in a junior study yesterday. Immediately after breakfast, will you bring the boys belonging to that study to me?"

"Very well, sir."

There was a buzz of talk in the dining-room when the School House fellows came in to breakfast. Talbot did not appear. His breakfast was taken to him in the House-master's study. It was understood that he was to be kept isolated until the inquiry had taken place.

Many glances were cast at Tresham, and it was not surprising that he was seen to look pale and harassed. He was responsible for the money in his charge, and if he was called upon to make the loss good, it would be a heavy call upon his resources.

Cutts and Gilmore and St. Leger regarded Tresham very keenly as he joined them at the breakfast-table Tresham avoided their glances.

After breakfast, Gore and Skimpole were called upon by Mr. Railton, and they followed him to the Head's study. The juniors understood what that meant. The story of George Gore's ten-shilling note had come to light, and was to be inquired into.

Cutts of the Fifth joined Tresham as the fellows left the dining-room. He walked out into the quadrangle with him, and did not speak till they were out of hearing of the others.

"This is a jolly queer business, Tresham," said Cutts, fixing his eyes upon his chum's face, with a look as if he would read his very heart.

Tresham met his look defiantly.

"I don't see anything queer in it," he said tartly. "We've got a reformed burglar in the House, and it's only natural he should get up to his old tricks again!"

"In a way, yes," said Cutts musingly. "I thought the chap was straight; but you never know, of course."

"Once a thief, always a thief," said Tresham.

"Possibly. But even if he is a rascal, he has never struck me as being a fool—an absolute fool!" said Cutts. "And he must be a thumping fool if he has done this! He must have known in advance that he would be suspected immediately!"

"Of course, he hopes to brazen it out. I don't suppose any of the money will be found on him. He's hidden that safe enough!"

"But he'll have to go, proven or not proven," said Cutts, with a shake of the head. "It was a bit thick having him here at all, and this suspicion is enough to ruin him. He can't stay—it's impossible!"

"All the better. Let him go back to the swell mob where he came from."

"Yes; but I mean, he must have known all that in advance if he did it," said Cutts. "He's practically given up a valuable scholarship and a good quarterly allowance for the sake of twelve quid! It's very odd! Rascal or not, it's queer that he should be such a fool!"

Tresham shrugged his shoulders.

"Look here!" said Cutts abruptly. "Is it square, Tresham?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"What I mean is—was the money there?"

Tresham turned deadly pale.

"I—I—what do you mean, Cutts? You know the money was there. The fellows had—had paid up their subscriptions, and—and the money was there. I hadn't paid the bills——"

"Yes, I know. I've heard Lefevre grumbling about your leaving the bills so late. He says he was dunned in Hanney's shop. Why did you leave them so late?"

"I—I've had other things to think of. Hang it! You know I've had worries enough on my mind lately—chiefly owing to you and your precious dead certs!" said Tresham, angrily and passionately. "What are you driving at, confound you?"

"Well, it's odd," said Cutts moodily. "If you'd paid the bills at the proper time, as you ought to have done, the money wouldn't have been there to be stolen!"

"Some of it would have been there," said Tresham sullenly.

"It's jolly odd! You happened to leave the bills unpaid, and now the money's taken, just at the last moment. They were to have been paid to-day, I understand. What about your debts? Have you been settling them lately?"

"You can ask Banks. I haven't settled any."

Cutts looked relieved for a moment.

"That's all right, then. I couldn't help thinking—you looked so queer, too—and then there was the way you went for Talbot the other day, dragging it all up about his past—for no reason that I could see. But I suppose it's all right. And—and if he has stolen Gore's banknote, as the juniors think, I suppose that settles it. The club will have to meet this loss; we sha'n't hold you responsible!"

"Well, they ought to," said Tresham.

"Some of the money may be recovered—the notes, anyway!"

"There weren't any notes; it was all in gold, excepting the odd change."

Dark suspicion came into Gerald Cutts's face again.

"In gold! Twelve quid in gold! Why, I remember my subscription was in a one-pound Treasury note, Tresham!"

"I—I changed it for a sovereign afterwards. I preferred having it in gold!"

Cutts compressed his lips.

"Look here, Cutts," said Tresham, in a low, hoarse voice, "I—I don't know what's in your mind, but if you dare to insinuate—— I—I mean, if you say anything that—that——"

He broke off, panting.

Cutts looked him in the eyes.

"I'm not going to say anything," he said shortly. "It's not my business to round on a fellow who's been my pal. But if you've played a rotten, underhand trick in this business, Tresham, look out for yourself. I'm not a particular chap, but I draw a line at——"

"At what?" said Tresham fiercely.

Cutts gave a shrug of the shoulders.

"Never mind. But hoe your own row; don't expect me to have a hand in that kind of game. You can rely on me to keep my mouth shut—that's all!"

And Cutts walked away, leaving Tresham looking after him with a haggard face.

CHAPTER 12.

What Levison Knew.

LEVISON of the Fourth came out of the School House, and looked round the quad. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther were standing by the old elms, talking in low tones.

There was glum discomfort in their looks. They believed that Talbot was innocent; but all the same they felt that it was "all up" with their chum, as he had himself declared. Levison joined them.

He was greeted with dark looks. His late championship of Talbot did not atone to the Terrible Three, for the fact that he had always been the unfortunate junior's enemy.

"What do you want?" growled Manners.

"A word with you," said Levison, lowering his voice cautiously. "It looks to me as if Talbot is done for this time."

Tom Merry clenched his hand.

"Have you come here to say——"

"Nothing against Talbot," said Levison quietly. "I don't think he's guilty. More than that, I know he isn't."

"You—you know?"

"Yes. Have a little sense. A fellow doesn't give away five pounds for nothing one day, and steal twelve quid another, with a dead certainty of being found out. I didn't believe at first that his reformation was genuine. I believed he was humbugging. But I never believed he was a silly fool. I knew he wasn't. And only a crass fool would have done this—in Talbot's place. I know he didn't do it!"

"It's plain enough to us that he didn't do it," said Tom Merry. "But how is it going to be proved?"

"It's got to be proved."

The Terrible Three stared at Levison. This was an altogether unexpected line for the cad of the Fourth to take. Levison smiled—his old sneering smile—as he read their expressions.

"I mean it," he said. "Talbot saved me from the sack. I'm not exactly a hog. I know what I owe him. I'm going to save him—if I can."

"Good luck to you," said Tom Merry. "I don't see how you're going to do it. I'd give anything to clear him. But we're helpless."

Levison sneered again.

"You may be," he said. "But I'm not. Talbot may find my friendship a little bit more valuable than yours after all. Look here, I know he's innocent. Never mind how I know it—I do know it. The misery is I can't prove it; if I told what I knew, I shouldn't be believed."

"Your own fault!" snapped Lowther.

"No good rubbing that in now. But I know; it is my own fault in a way. I can't give Tresham away without giving myself away, too——"

"Tresham! What has he to do with it?"

"Never mind!" said Levison hastily. "I—I let my tongue slip—never mind. But look here, I must see Talbot. It's necessary."

"He's shut up in Railton's study," said Tom Merry. "Nobody's allowed to see him. I looked in for a minute, and Kildare called me away. Kildare's keeping an eye on the study now. The fools—the fools! They think Talbot's got the money somewhere, and that he might slip away and hide it before a search is made! Idiots!"

"I must see him!" said Levison excitedly. "I've seen Kildare in the passage. But I've got to see Talbot. Look here, the money won't be found—not a single sov of it!"

"How do you know?"

"I do know! You'd know, too, if you knew—never mind. But that money isn't inside the school now."

"Look here, you know too jolly much!" broke out Monty Lowther. "Blessed if you don't make me think that you——"

"That I busted Tresham's desk and took it?" sneered Levison. "Well, you can think so if you like—I could prove that I didn't, if it wasn't for other matters coming out at the same time. I want to save Talbot, but I'm not looking for the sack. And I tell you, I'm the only one who can save Talbot, because I'm the only one that knows the trick that's been played."

"What trick?"

"This trick!" said Levison impatiently. "Are you a fool? You know Talbot didn't take the money—somebody else did, then. There was a theft in Gore's study yesterday; can't you see it was the same chap?"

"I dare say it was!" said Tom Merry. "There's no proof."

"Proof—proof!" growled Levison. "Haven't you any common-sense? What did the thief want with Gore's miserable ten-shilling note—which he couldn't pass because there was a number on it? It's so much waste-paper to the thief—rubbish to him; he can't use it as money. He can use it for something else, though."

"What else?" asked Tom Merry, utterly mystified.

"Suppose it's found on Talbot, or in Talbot's things?"

"It can't be, as he didn't take it!"

"He didn't take it, but it might be found on him all the same," said Levison, in a shrill whisper. "Can't you see—or won't you see? That note found on Talbot would prove that he was a thief yesterday. If he was a thief yesterday, he was a thief last night—that follows. Can't you see? That note was stolen from Gore's study, to make it look suspicious against Talbot, so that this robbery could take place in the night, and be planted on him this morning. Are you blind?"

"Good heavens!" muttered Tom Merry. "You—you mean to say there's a fellow in the House who's rotter enough——"

"Can't you see for yourself?"

"Oh, it's all rot!" said Lowther uneasily. "There's only one chap in the House who'd be cunning enough to think out such a scheme, and that's you, Levison."

"Well, I didn't think this scheme out, but I've bowled it out," said Levison. "I wondered yesterday what the note had been taken for. I couldn't make it out. I knew it hadn't been taken to spend. When I heard of this burglary this morning I knew. And I tell you that note will fix it on Talbot, when it's found among his things. That's what it was taken for—to prove Talbot still a thief. That proved, this robbery will be put down to him as a matter of course, and there won't be an inquiry—the real thief will be as safe as houses. Can't you see?"

"It—it sounds too horrible!"

Levison gave a sneering, impatient laugh.

"I dare say it sounds horrible, but the fellow who did it was at the end of his tether. It was that—or the same for himself. Either he had to prove that there was another thief in the place or be proved to be a thief himself. And he picked on Talbot, because of the Toff's reputation. I dare say he's justified it to himself in his mind, too—very likely thinks that Talbot is really only spoofing, and that he may as well be condemned for this, as allowed to run on till he really breaks out. Anyway, he had to save himself, and Talbot's the scapegoat. And I tell you that Gore's note is in Talbot's pocket—or in his things—and Talbot doesn't know it."

The Terrible Three looked helplessly at one another. The plot as unfolded by Levison's cunning reasoning seemed incredible to them. It was such a plot as might have been contrived by Levison himself in his worst days.

"But who—who is the chap?" muttered Manners, at last.

"Never mind who. I'm telling you how it is. I must see Talbot, and——" Levison ground his teeth as if in despair. "The Shell dormitory is locked up——"

"How do you know?"

"I've been there, of course. They suspect the loot may be in Talbot's box, and Mr. Railton went up and locked the dormitory immediately. I've been there to see. I couldn't get in. Look here, there's no time to waste. The Head is jawing to Gore and Skimpole in his study. The next thing will be a search. Whether you believe me or not, I suppose you want to help Talbot."

"Yes, yes; but——"

"Get to the window of Railton's study and speak to him. Tell him to go through all his pockets and see if the note is there. If it is, make him burn it—no good saying it was planted on him; he wouldn't be believed. Of course, it's much more likely to be in his box; it wouldn't be easy to plant it on Talbot himself. But it might have been done. Go and speak to him, and ask him. And I'll——" Levison broke off abruptly.

"You'll what? What will you do?"

"Never mind. Go and do as I tell you."

It was curious enough for the Terrible Three to be taking their orders from Levison, the cad of the Fourth, whom they always disliked and despised. But his fierce excitement had impressed them strangely. They nodded assent, and hurried away towards the window of Mr. Railton's study. Levison hurried off in the opposite direction. Tom Merry tapped softly on the study window. Talbot came to it. He was still alone in the study.

He opened the lower sash.

Tom Merry hurriedly explained to him. Talbot started.

"It's impossible!" he muttered.

"I think it is, too—but Levison thinks—anyway, go through your pockets and see, for goodness' sake!"

"Right-ho!"

Talbot made a hurried search through his pockets. Then he shook his head. The window of the study was closed again; the Terrible Three walked away.

"Where's Levison?"

But Levison of the Fourth was not to be seen.

With his eyes turned upwards, he climbed on. To save Talbot he had to get into the Shell dormitory unknown. That he had discovered the plot against the suspected lad—of that he was assured. That the thief could have placed the note upon Talbot's person was possible, but not likely. If it was as Levison suspected, Gore's banknote was concealed somewhere in Talbot's belongings—somewhere where he would not be likely to find it himself before the time. Somewhere in his box in the dormitory, among his shirts or collars, or in his hat-box. Levison was as clear upon that point as if he himself had planned the whole scheme. It rested upon his shoulders to save the boy who had saved him, and he was striving to do it.

How he finished that terrible climb he hardly knew. But his grasp was upon the window-sill at last. He dragged himself up with a final effort, and his knee rested there. He pushed up the window, and rolled into the dormitory, so spent that he fell upon the floor, and lay there for a full minute without moving, only panting, and panting, his breath coming and going in great throbs.

But there was no time to lose. At any minute now the Head might be finished with his examination of Gore and Skimpole, and the search would follow. Before that came, Levison must be gone from the dormitory, unless he was to fall, after all.

He dragged himself to his feet with aching limbs. A moment more, and he was searching Talbot's box. If it had been locked, it would have saved him the trouble; but it was not kept locked, and so he knew that the plotter had had easy excess to it, if he had chosen. With swift fingers Levison made the search.

CHAPTER 13.

Levison's Way.

LEVISON was not far away.

The chums of the Shell would have been surprised, however, if they could have seen him at that moment. Levison was risking his life.

The School House fellows were mostly in the House, and gathered in groups in the quad near the doorway. Round the angle of the building, where the windows of the Shell dormitory looked out on the old elms, there were no eyes to watch Levison. He was climbing the ivy that grew thickly on the old stone walls, and between the high windows of the dormitory.

Tom Merry, and one or two other venturesome juniors, had climbed the ivy to and from the dormitory windows. But it was a difficult feat, and full of danger. Levison was the last fellow in the school almost who would have been expected to attempt such a feat. But he was attempting it now.

Already he was halfway up the dangerous height. Levison was not in the good physical condition of Tom Merry; he did not follow the same pursuits. And the strain told upon him terribly. Old and strong as the ivy was, there was little foothold to be found in it, and most of the time the climber's weight was on his arms. More than once he swung there, with only his aching arms holding him from a sudden and terrible death. Levison's face was white, his teeth hard set, and thick perspiration was on his brow and running down his cheeks.

He had set himself to a task beyond his strength, and he knew it. He had known it before he started. But he climbed in with grim resolve. He was already aching in every limb. It was the strength of desperation that upheld him now.

Nothing—nothing!

Had he been mistaken! And time pressed. Every second he feared to hear steps in the passage—to hear the key turning in the lock. If he were discovered! He smiled bitterly at the thought. If they found him there, suspicion might turn upon himself. He pursued the search with savage earnestness. He ransacked the box, but he found nothing. He rose to his feet, baffled and almost in despair. He was sure that his suspicion was well-founded. Was the note hidden so securely that only a minute search of every article in the box would reveal it? Yet how could the plotter have found the opportunity to bestow it so carefully? The rascal would not have ventured to spend much time in the junior dormitory for fear of being surprised there.

Levison uttered a suppressed exclamation.

"Fool, not to think of that before!"

He ran to the large cupboard at the end of the dormitory. There were several hat-boxes there, among them Talbot's. He tore it open. Inside reposed the "Sunday topper." He anathematised himself for not thinking of it sooner. That was the place the plotter would have chosen. Talbot was not likely to open that box before Sunday. Levison took out the topper, and his teeth came together with a sharp snap. Under the lining of the top-hat a crumpling paper met his fingers. He jerked it out. It was a Treasury note, printed in red, for ten shillings!

He had found it!

If Talbot's best friend had made that discovery it would have staggered his faith in Talbot. But Levison had expected it. He knew that Talbot had not placed it there. For it was clear to his mind that Gore's note had been taken by the same hand that had taken the money from Tresham's desk; and he knew that that was not Talbot's hand. He had the best of reasons for knowing that. For Levison, alone of

all the fellows in the School House, knew that Tresham's desk had contained no money the previous night—that the breaking of the lock, the story of a robbery, were pretences to account for the loss of the money that had already been expended in betting transactions.

He replaced the hat hastily, replaced the box in the cupboard, closed the door. He had succeeded. It remained only to be gone. He listened—still silence in the passage. He hurried to the window.

His very heart sickened within him as he looked out from the height. Levison was not of the stuff of which heroes are made. The climb looked more terrible from above than from below.

But there was no choice in the matter now.

He nerved himself to it, and clambered out of the window, and gripped the ivy. For a moment the elms, the quadrangle, the buildings, swam before his gaze. Then he pulled himself together. He knew only too well that if he lost his nerve, it was death. A rush through the air, and death upon the hard earth so far below.

With his teeth set, hand below hand, he clambered down the ivy. It seemed ages before his feet rested on the firm earth; but they rested there at last. He reeled against the wall and panted for breath.

His eyes gleamed with triumph now. He had succeeded. Something yet remained to be done. He was not finished yet. But the rest was easy to Levison.

He dusted down his clothes, rubbed his soiled hands hard on his handkerchief, and, with as much carelessness of manner as he could assume, strolled round to the doorway of the School House.

"Here he is!"

It was Tom Merry's voice. But Levison did not glance towards the Terrible Three. He walked into the house.

Lessons had not commenced that morning as usual. The fellows, seniors and juniors, stood in groups in the passages, talking in hushed tones. The discovery in Tresham's study had put to flight everything else. Before the school settled down to its usual routine, there was the investigation to come, and an expulsion.

Tresham of the Fifth was in the passage, with a moody brow. Cutts and Gilmore and St. Leger seemed to be avoiding him. It was easy for Levison to guess why. What he knew, they suspected.

Levison's eyes glittered as he looked at Tresham. He broke into a run, and, apparently, by accident, ran full tilt into the Fifth-Former. Tresham staggered under the shock, and Levison threw his arms around him as if to save himself; and they stumbled to the floor together.

"You clumsy fool!" gasped Tresham.

He threw the Fourth-Former violently off, and staggered to his feet.

"Sorry. I didn't see you!"

"Why don't you look where you're going, you idiot?"

Levison picked himself up, and went on his way. He went into the common-room, where a crowd of juniors were talking eagerly. There was a smile upon Levison's thin, sharp face now. His collision with Tresham of the Fifth had not been an accident. Tresham did not know—though most of the Fourth-Formers could have told him—that Levison was a past-master of the art of conjuring and sleight-of-hand. Levison had not forgotten his old skill. It had served him many a time to play ill-natured tricks. It had served another purpose now. The red-lettered banknote was no longer in Levison's possession. It was in the breast-pocket of Tresham of the Fifth.

The Terrible Three joined Levison in the common-room. His smile puzzled them a little.

"We've spoken to Talbot," said Tom Merry abruptly. "It's all right. You were mistaken."

Levison nodded coolly.

"Well, any fellow might make mistakes," he remarked.

"But you suspected——"

"They're going to search," called out Kangaroo in the passage, and there was a general crowding out of the common-room. Levison went with the rest; and the Terrible Three followed him, puzzled and angry.

CHAPTER 14

The Proof of Guilt!

GORE and Skimpole had been closely questioned in the Head's study. Dr. Holmes and Mr. Railton elicited all the circumstances of the losing of the ten-shilling Treasury note. And Gore passed some uncomfortable minutes.

"You should have reported the matter immediately to your Housemaster," the Head said severely.

"I didn't want to make a fuss, sir," said Gore. "It was only ten bob. And I thought the rotter might put it back when I'd said that I'd got the number."

"You have the number?"

"Yes, sir, in this letter—T—22—0000044," said Gore.

"That is well. The note at least can be traced. You cannot tell me that you suspect who may have taken it?"

Gore flushed uncomfortably.

"Well, it looks as if it were a chap in my study, sir," he said. "Of course, lots of fellows knew I had the note. I opened the letter in the hall yesterday morning. Still, as it was taken from my study, naturally it looks; but I know it wasn't Skimpole."

"My dear Gore, I assure you——"

"I am satisfied that it was not Skimpole," said the Head, motioning the genius of the Shell to be silent. "But your only other study-mate is Talbot."

"Well, sir, most of the fellows think it was Talbot, considering his record."

"It is not fair to condemn him for the past," said the Head. "Do you yourself think it was Talbot?"

Gore hesitated.

"I—I can't say I do, sir," he said at last. "I know what he was, but—but since he's been in my study we've had some rows. But it's only fair to say that he's been thoroughly decent, as straight as a die. I think I ought to say that."

Dr. Holmes nodded approval.

"I am glad to hear you say so, Gore. However, we shall see. The next step, Mr. Railton, is to make a thorough search. Talbot's belongings must be examined carefully. He is still in your study?"

"Yes, sir, and I took the precaution of locking up the Shell dormitory so that no one could enter there, in any case."

"Very good. That was well thought of. You may go, boys. Kindly call Toby, Mr. Railton. He shall make the search under our eyes."

Gore and Skimpole left the study, glad to get away. Toby the page, was called, and he proceeded to the Shell dormitory with the two masters. Mr. Railton signed to Tresham to join them.

An eager crowd watched them ascend the stairs. Mr. Railton produced the key, and unlocked the door of the Shell dormitory. The juniors ventured to follow as far as the passage outside.

"Better send for Talbot," said the Head. "It is only fair to conduct the search in his presence."

"I was thinking so, sir." Mr. Railton stepped back to the door. "Kildare, will you kindly bring Talbot here? He is in my study."

In a few moments Kildare came through the crowd in the passage with Talbot. They entered the dormitory. Dr. Holmes turned a sorrowful look upon the boy.

"I have ordered a search of your box, Talbot. You have no objection?"

"None, sir."

"Very well."

The search commenced. Toby turned out the contents of the box, and under Mr. Railton's keen eye the search was thorough. Every article was removed and shaken out; but the notes or the money did not come to light. Tresham watched the proceedings, with a slight sneer upon his face.

"There is nothing there!" said the Head, with a sigh of relief.

"Talbot may have another box, sir," said Tresham.

"Have you any other box here, Talbot?"

"Only my hatbox, sir."

"Please bring it here."

Talbot brought out the bandbox in which reposed his Sunday topper. Tresham's eyes were glistening now. Toby opened the box and lifted out the hat. Mr. Railton looked into the box.

"There is nothing there!" he said.

"Then we are finished here," said the Head.

Tresham bit his lip.

"One moment, sir——"

"You have something to suggest, Tresham?"

"Mr. Railton has not looked into the hat, sir."

"It is as well to be thorough," said the Head; and the Housemaster nodded and took the hat. He turned back the lining inside, and shook his head.

"There is nothing there," he said.

Tresham almost staggered.

"Nothing there?" he repeated, in agitated tones. "You—you are sure, sir?"

"Of course I am sure, Tresham!" said Mr. Railton tartly.

"But—but——" Tresham stammered.

"But what?"

"May—may I look, sir?"

"Certainly, if you wish."

Tresham of the Fifth took the topper and turned back the inside lining and scanned the interior of the hat. Certainly there was no banknote there. The Fifth-Former turned his

eyes upon Talbot with a strange, hunted look. Talbot met his gaze calmly.

"Well, Tresham?" said the Housemaster impatiently.

"It—it certainly appears to be as you say, sir," said Tresham, in a voice he vainly endeavoured to render firm. "There is nothing there."

Mr. Railton was looking very hard at him.

"Really, Tresham, this is very peculiar! Had you any special reason for supposing that Talbot had concealed something in this hat?"

"Oh, no, sir!" gasped Tresham. "Not at all, sir! I—I thought, as it wasn't in the box——"

"You have no right to conclude that Talbot had anything to conceal," said the Head sharply.

"Yes—no, sir!" stammered Tresham. "I am sorry, sir! There—there certainly is nothing here!"

"That will do. Talbot, I ask you to allow the boy to search your person," said the Head.

"He is welcome, sir."

Toby proceeded to "go through" Talbot's pockets. Through the half-open doorway the juniors were watching with all their eyes. The Terrible Three were further along the passage. They were waiting, with sickening apprehension, for the end of the search.

Levison's words were fresh in their minds. Suppose the banknote had been "planted" on Talbot—suppose it were found in his box? The anxiety they felt was sickening in its intensity. Levison came quietly back from the door of the dormitory, his eyes gleaming.

"They're going through Talbot's pockets now," he whispered. "They've found nothing in the box."

"Thank Heaven!" breathed Tom Merry.

"Nothing proved either way, then," said Lowther. "Not guilty, and not innocent! Poor old Talbot!"

"Do you want to save him?" said Levison, in a whisper. "Listen to me! You can speak up; I can't. I must keep out of it—I've my reasons! But you, if you choose to save him, you can; and I will tell you how."

"You know I'll do anything," muttered Tom Merry. "What are you driving at? For goodness' sake, speak a little plainer!"

"Very well, I'll tell you." Levison spoke in a low, intense whisper, audible only to the ears of the Terrible Three. "Do you guess how I knew that Talbot hadn't taken the money from Tresham's desk?"

"No!"

"Because I knew that there was no money there!"

Tom Merry caught his breath.

"Levison——"

"Don't you understand?" Levison's whisper was almost fierce. "Tresham, Cutts, and the rest have been gambling—and losing! I was in the same boat! They threw me out when I asked them to help me! Well, Tresham was in deeper than the rest, because he had used the footer club funds! Do you see?"

"Good heavens! How do you know?"

Levison made an impatient gesture.

"Never mind how I know—it's certain! Listen to me! I know—as well as if I saw him do it—that Tresham went down last night and busted his desk, so as to have a yarn to tell to account for the money being gone. It was the only way he could save his skin—by pretending it had been stolen, and putting it on Talbot."

"The villain!" said Tom Merry between his teeth.

"But is it true?" said Lowther. "We all know Levison——"

"Do you want to save Talbot?" almost hissed Levison.

"Yes—you know that! What do you want us to do?"

"Tresham's made them search Talbot. You can speak up as Talbot's chum, and demand a search of Tresham!"

"I? But——"

"I can't speak—it's impossible for me! You're Talbot's chum! Won't you take that much trouble to save him?"

"I'll do that—or anything! But——"

"You won't do it on my advice," said Levison bitterly. "You'd rather let Talbot be kicked out of the school! That's what your friendship's worth, is it?"

"I want to be sure before I——"

"Very well, wait till you're sure—after Talbot's turned out of St. Jim's in disgrace! It's now or never! Please yourself!"

Levison turned savagely away.

Tom Merry stood with his brain in a whirl. Was this one more of Levison's old tricks, or—or was it true? He could not doubt the savage earnestness with which Levison had spoken. He must have some grounds for his statement, and if it was true——

There was a movement in the passage. The Head and Mr. Railton came out of the dormitory, followed by Tresham and Talbot.

Tom Merry made up his mind. If it was only a flimsy chance—still, it was a chance—and he would hesitate at nothing to save his chum. He ran forward.

"Dr. Holmes, may I speak?" he panted.

The Head paused.

"What have you to say, Merry?"

"Before anybody's condemned for taking the money from Tresham's desk, sir, it ought to be proved that the money was there!" said Tom.

There was a buzz in the crowded passage. Dr. Holmes looked at the Shell fellow in amazement. Tom Merry's heart was thumping, but as he caught the look on Tresham's face he knew that Levison was right. For the Fifth-Former had turned a ghastly colour, and the look in his eyes was of deadly terror—a terror of discovery. The shock of Tom Merry's sudden words had found him utterly unprepared, and he could not pull himself together.

"What do you mean, Merry? Tresham has told me that the money was there—the funds of the Fifth Form football club, of which he was secretary."

But Tom Merry was certain now. Tresham's ghastly face was enough for him. And he spoke confidently.

"Anybody could break a lock, sir, and say the desk had been robbed."

"Merry!"

"What is the matter with you, Tresham?" asked Mr. Railton.

"I, sir? N-n-nothing!" stuttered Tresham. "Does that young hound mean to insinuate—to imply—— Dr. Holmes, you do not believe——"

"Unless you have some good grounds for what you say, Merry," said the Head sternly, "you are doing very wrong to make such a suggestion."

Tom Merry's heart thumped hard again. But he was in for it now.

"I know that, sir. But Talbot has been searched. And, as Talbot's chum, and a fellow who believes in him, I think it's fair that Tresham should be searched too."

"Tresham?"

"Yes, sir!" said Tom unflinchingly. "Why not?"

"Either you are speaking wildly, Merry, or else you must know something about this matter that I am not acquainted with!" said Dr. Holmes sternly.

"I have no objection to being searched!" said Tresham, with a bitter look at the junior. "Merry is saying this because——"

"I could say a good deal more if I chose," said Tom Merry, with a flash in his eyes. "But I won't say anything without proof. Let him be searched the same as Talbot has been. What is good enough for the Shell is good enough for the Fifth."

"Yaas, wathah!" chimed in Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "As a mattah of fact, there isn't any pwoof that there's been a wobbewy at all, only what Twesham says—and I wouldn't take his word against old Talbot's."

"This—this is extraordinary!" said the Head. "However, for Tresham's own sake, a search had better be made, since these unpleasant suspicions seem to be rife. Talbot has submitted to it, so there is really no reason——"

"I have no objection," said Tresham.

The Head made a sign to Toby, and the page proceeded to search Tresham as he had searched Talbot. Almost the first object that came to light was a ten-shilling Treasury note.

The Head started.

"Give that to me," he said. "Of course, this is yours, Tresham—don't think I have any doubt on that point, but I will ascertain the number, so that there can be no room for doubt in anyone else's mind."

Tresham did not reply; his eyes were fastened upon the note in a stare of terror. His head seemed to be turning round.

"'T—22—0000044'!" read out the Head.

There was a yell from George Gore.

"That's my note, sir!"

"What!"

"That's the number. I told you in your study, sir. I've got it here in my pater's letter!" yelled Gore excitedly.

The Head, his face very grim now, took Gore's letter and compared the number written therein with the number marked upon the note. Then he turned to Tresham.

"Tresham"—his voice was like the rumble of distant thunder—"this banknote is the property of Gore. How came it in your pocket?"

"Bowled out!" yelled Blake. "It was Tresham!"

"Bai Jove! Twesham was the thief!"

"Tresham, I am waiting for your reply. This note was stolen from Gore's desk, and it is found in your possession. What have you to say?"

"I—I—I——" Tresham's tongue clove to the roof of his

mouth. It was the stolen note—the note he had deliberately placed in Talbot's hat-lining, to convict him—and it had been discovered in his own pocket! Was he dreaming? Was it Fate that had intervened to reveal his villainy? Or had he blundered? He had acted in fear and trembling, his nerves in a twitter. Had his senses failed him, then, and had he left the note in his pocket instead of placing it where he believed he had placed it? The passage, the sea of faces, seemed to swim about the wretched boy. His nerves, weakened by dissipation and by the stress of the last few days, failed him utterly in that fearful crisis. Had he had time to pull himself together—to reflect? But he had no time. It was there and then that he must speak, and the consciousness of guilt weighed him down and tied his tongue. Levison of the Fourth had calculated well.

He stammered helplessly, and the guilt and terror in his face were visible to the dullest eye.

How had the note come there? In the horrible confusion of mind of the moment, he could only believe that he had left it there, instead of placing it where it would incriminate Talbot, and he had no time to think it out. If he had been innocent, it would have been different; he would have shown surprise, anxiety, but not the terrible fear that was gripping his heart and drawing his blanching face into haggard lines.

"Tresham!"

"Speak, Tresham!" said Mr. Railton; and his voice sounded to the almost fainting boy's ears like the knell of doom. "The stolen note is in your possession. What have you to say? Do you confess now that you yourself are responsible for the money that is missing from your desk?"

Tresham did not speak. The condemnation he read in every face and the guilt that lay like ice upon his own wretched heart were too much for him. He burst into tears and covered his face with his hands.

The Head silently handed the note to Gore. There was a subdued buzz of voices in the passage. Tom Merry put his arm through Talbot's, his face bright with relief.

Talbot was breathing hard. To him, most of all, this came unexpectedly—not for a moment had his suspicions turned upon Tresham of the Fifth. It was as if Providence had interposed to save the innocent and punish the guilty. But now that it was out, Talbot understood it all; it was clear enough to him now—clear enough to all the fellows who knew or suspected Tresham's entanglement in betting transactions and gambling debts.

"I have only one more word to say to you, Tresham!" The Head's voice was as hard as iron. "I need not ask you if you are guilty. You have attempted to deceive me—to deceive us all—to throw your own guilt upon an innocent boy. Tell me why you did this—why have you abandoned every scruple, every consideration of honour—for the sake of a wretched sum of money?"

Tresham groaned.

"It wasn't that—it wasn't the money. It was gone, and I had to account for it!" he moaned miserably. "It was gone, and the fellows ——" He broke off in a sob of utter shame and misery.

"I understand. You had spent the money entrusted to you, and you planned to account for it by a prtended robbery, and to this end you were willing to sacrifice a lad who had done you no wrong?"

Tresham moaned again, reeling against the wall as if he were about to faint. Mr. Railton grasped his arm.

"To your Form-rooms, boys!" said the Head. "Tresham, follow me to my study."

. . . . . .

Tresham was gone from St. Jim's by the time the fellows came out from morning lessons. There had been no public expulsion; he had left quietly.

What he had told the Head was never precisely known. Cutts & Co. waited in fear and trembling for the end of that interview.

They had not been parties to Tresham's base plot. But the ruined Fifth-Former could have told many things if he had liked, which would have made matters exceedingly uncomfortable for them, and in his despair it was only too likely that he might seek to drag down others into his ruin.

But perhaps some rag of honour prevented him from turning on his old associates. There came no summons to Cutts & Co. to repair to the Head's study, and when Tresham was gone they breathed more freely.

But it was a blow to Cutts & Co. Tresham was the second member of that delectable circle who had gone to the dogs, and had been sacked from the school, and the prestige of the Blades of the Fifth suffered in consequence.

With Tom Merry & Co., however, all was rejoicing.

Talbot had been cleared, their faith in their chum was justified. And they rejoiced accordingly.

And, most amazing part of all, they owed it to Levison. And later that day they sought Levison, to make him explain. They listened to what he had to tell them in amazement, and with very grave faces.

For the trick Levison had played upon Tresham was not the kind that was likely to be approved by them. Levison understood their thoughts, and he smiled his old sneering smile.

"It wouldn't have hurt him if he'd been innocent," he said. "It was only because he was guilty that it knocked him out. And I knew he was guilty. I knew he'd embezzled the funds of the footer club; so as soon as I heard of the robbery I knew, of course, it was a dodge to account for the money not being there. Then I could guess easily enough what the note had been taken for. He couldn't plant any of his money on Talbot—he'd spent it all long ago. And a theft in Talbot's own study, of course, looked better—for his plan, I mean. Having got Talbot already under suspicion of theft, as soon as a robbery was announced, everybody suspected Talbot at once, instead of suspecting that it was a spoof robbery. It was awfully deep; he was a clever rascal. But there had to be proof; so long as the matter remained open, there was always risk for him. One ten-bob note found in Talbot's traps was enough for proof. He would be supposed to have hidden the gold somewhere else. I worked it all out, you see; I was a match for him. You fellows weren't."

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

Levison shrugged his shoulders.

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

"True enough!" said Merry. "We've no right to find fault with Levison, when he has saved Talbot! And he's done that right enough."

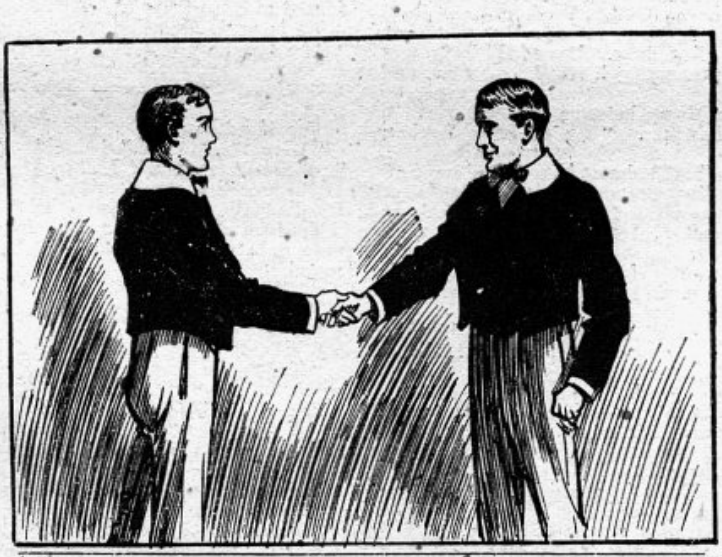
"One good turn deserves another," said Levison. "Talbot and I are quits now."

"And friends, too, if you choose," said Talbot, holding out his hand.

. . . . . .

Levison of the Fourth was not likely to change his character in a hurry. Tom Merry & Co. did not expect that. But they were not likely to forget his service to their chum, and whatever Levison's faults might be—and their name was legion—he would always have a friend in the junior who, by his own peculiar methods, he had proved not guilty.

THE END.



"One good turn deserves another," said Levison. "Talbot and I are quits now." "And friends too, if you choose," said Talbot, holding out his hand. "Done!" said Levison.

OUR GRAND NEW WAR SERIAL.

A Bid for a Throne.

A Thrilling War Story.

By CLIVE R. FENN.

READ THIS FIRST.

When war breaks out between Britain and Germany, Paul Satorys, the rightful heir to the throne of Istan, succeeds in reaching England with the Istan troops, and, staking all on a bold coup, he declares himself to the army as the rightful king. Stanton, an impostor, and the exact double of Satorys, flees, and Paul comes into his own. Herr von Blumstock, a German Secret Service agent, uses the likeness between Paul and Stanton for his own benefit, and pays Stanton to secure information in London likely to be of use to Germany. Strolling down the Strand one evening, Stanton meets a very old friend of his, Sam Bourke. The latter realises that his former associate is a spy, and resolves to thwart him in his treacherous designs. Meanwhile, Satorys, who has been decoyed to a house and trapped at Blumstock's orders, makes his escape. He proposes to warn the police of the headquarters of the German spies, but this is most difficult, as the neighbourhood in which he was confined is alive with aliens. Sam Bourke comes to his aid, however, and the police are warned. In a melee on the road Bourke is badly wounded by the Germans, who escape with the idea of making for a second stronghold of which the police know nothing.

(Now go on with the story.)

The Passing of Sam Bourke.

But it was not enough, as Blumstock realised, to hasten the hour of the rising of the Germans in the country, thus paralysing the authorities, and spreading, it was hoped, panic amongst the people. Orders were given for the waylaying of the car which would carry Satorys to London. Blumstock had seen to it that no message could be transmitted by wire, for the communications had been cut.

"We shall do them, sir, right enough," said the officer, who was seated by Satorys in the car which raced southward.

"Hope so. Hallo! What's that?"

Blumstock's agents stopped at nothing. As the car, containing Satorys, the officer of police, and Sam Bourke, raced down the road shots rang out. The message which would thwart the rising must not be delivered.

The police-officer, who was driving, threw up his hands and fell back dangerously wounded. Satorys sprang up and seized the driving-wheel, while Bourke snatched the revolver he saw sticking out of the injured man's pocket, and fired at the figures whom he saw amidst the trees.

A volley of bullets pattered against the side of the car.

The car, under the control of Satorys, dashed on. There was a howl of rage from the baffled murderers, another volley rang out on the morning air, but the range was too short, and the fusillade was harmless. Satorys shouted to Bourke to help get the officer into the other seat. This task was accomplished, and Satorys drove on, drove madly, the car rocking, turning corners on two wheels only, and quivering as every bit of power was used.

Satorys feared another ambush. His enemies, he knew, would follow, and he was on the qui vive for the sound of pursuit, but mile after mile was covered, and he breathed more freely.

"We shall do it," he said.

There was no reply. Satorys turned his head. Bourke was lying back as if dead, and the officer who had had his share of lead seemed in no better plight. Satorys set his teeth, knowing he could do nothing then. He was in the outskirts of London. The big city was just waking up, and people stared at the spectacle of the car, its doors ripped by the firing.

The car swung into Whitehall, and Satorys sprang out to race to the door of the building, where life never ceased in those days.

Tattered and almost unrecognisable as he was, he yet gained admission, and a minute later he was pouring out his story to a highly-placed official, who listened at first with incredulity, and then with the keenness of a man who knows what he hears is true.

The official was talking energetically through the telephone. Satorys staggered back against a table, and to the man who darted forward he said hoarsely:

"See to the chaps in the car outside."

"Of course."

The other hurried away, and Satorys followed him slowly to gain the vestibule where the officer of police was coming round. It was different with Bourke. The doctor, who had been summoned, was bending over the poor fellow. Then he drew back after doing all that was possible.

"He has been asking for you, sir," said the doctor, as Satorys came forward.

Bourke opened his eyes.

"Is it all right, sir?" he asked.

Satorys nodded.

"You gave the message?"

"Yes, my poor fellow!"

"That won't do, sir," said Sam Bourke; "that won't do at all. I am not a poor fellow any more. Was one once, but maybe this bit will be useful. Knew that Jem Stanton was up to no good. I'm glad it has all turned out like this."

Satorys felt sad at heart. It was possible to know a man in the shortest space of time, and he felt he knew Sam Bourke, knew him for what he really was—a good, true-hearted fellow, despite his past and his extraordinary view of things.

"You've made it all jolly pleasant for me, sir," said Bourke faintly. "I reckon my luck was in all right at the last, and I don't care now. Wish I had gone straight, but——" The poor fellow's voice sank.

"You've wiped out everything," said Satorys as he took the man's hand.

Bourke opened his eyes and gazed at Satorys, such a look as comes but once, a look of gratitude and good cheer. He tried to say something else, but his head fell back, and it did not need the word of a police-sergeant who was standing by to tell Satorys that his brave ally was gone.

Exit Stanton.

"If you will take our advice, sir, it is this," said a high police functionary a few hours later. "Let this Stanton have a bit more rope before you show yourself and spoil his little game. That will give us a bit of a chance to lay the

whole gang by the heels. If we frighten Stanton, the others will take alarm."

"And what of Miss Lang?"

"The poor lady has been spirited away in another of the places where the Germans keep their watch on us; but we will find her and them, sir, never fear."

Satorys had to accept the counsel. There was nothing to be done for the moment. The ports were watched. There was little likelihood of the prisoner being got out of the country. The best policy was to lie low.

The war of lies and slander could go on, the real truth be obscured by the adroit and unscrupulous writers in the pay of the infamous leader of the degraded German people; but at least, thanks to Satorys and his loyal ally, the hideous scheme to take the heart of the British Empire by surprise was stopped out of hand.

In the hours of tense, high-wrought excitement which ensued, Satorys did certainly think of the plotters who had escaped, vanishing into thin air, of Miss Lang, who, for all he knew, was still a prisoner in their hands; but at least he realised that Blumstock and his gang had not been able to apprise their followers of the discovery of the vile plan.

The authorities were ready, and that night the troops surrounded the groups of enemies who were mustering in force in Portsmouth, disarming them, and marching them off to one of the penal encampments without even the inhabitants of the great seaport knowing that anything out of the ordinary was astir.

It was one more blow for Germany—Germany, which could not be honest even in war, Germany which was rightly execrated by every right-thinking man or woman for its perfidy, its utterly unprovoked attack on France, leave alone plucky little Belgium, and in his enforced retirement Satorys had time, despite his anxiety, to think of the course of events. He, like many another of his friends, had studied at Heidelberg, but Heidelberg represented the old style Germany, which lived for truth, for learning, the old-time land of music, and the things which went for the good of the world.

Acting under the advice of the authorities, Satorys merely watched his rival, and Stanton, ignorant of what had passed, maintained his role.

Meanwhile, matters had been rushing forward to the frightful climax, apparently desiderated by the Prussian Kaiser and his purblind advisers, the mad-brained camarilla at Berlin. Belgium, who had never asked for more than to be left alone to go about its own affairs, was ruined, despite the splendid resistance of its brave army and the grand leadership of the King.

There were still some people who pretended to think well of Germany, to find excuses for the nation which has been reared in brutality, and which lives according to the ethics of the murderer and the thief; but even the weak apologists for the criminal bureaucracy at Berlin were beginning to see that the case was hopeless. Louvain, Huy, Rheims, Aerschet, a score of places in Belgium and over the frontier in Northern France stood as evidence of what the world had to expect from the German breed, the vile vermin reared on lies and carnage, the race which, according to its writers, was destined to rule the world.

It came as a relief to Satorys to be told that he was free at last to act as he thought well.

"We shall have Stanton any time we choose, sir," said the official, who told Satorys that the police felt sure enough of having clipped the wings of the scoundrel, and were about to arrest him.

Satorys took the liberty which was offered to him, and mixed in Society once more. The secret of Stanton's treachery had been well kept, and the intriguer did not know as yet that all his messages were intercepted. He attended social meetings, feeling proud of his success, but a big surprise was awaiting him at one of the mansions where he was bidden. Satorys was also present, and he determined to make an end of the trickery of his adversary. He had waited long for this time.

Satorys watched his rival from a doorway. Stanton advanced smilingly, confident that all was well. He had been unwilling to pose again as King of Istan, but now that all had been made smooth and easy for him, and he had had time to appreciate the advantages of the position, he was glad that Blumstock had been firm and had coerced him into playing the part.

The reception was strictly official, not a brilliant affair as it might have been in time of peace, but some of the highest in the land were present, and Stanton moved about amongst the other guests, little thinking that Nemesis was so near.

Since he had assumed the role, he had been able to transmit much valuable information to his German employers, and he was supplied with liberal funds for his traitorous work.

The unexpected happened so far as Jem Stanton was concerned. He had lost any pluck he ever possessed. He suddenly saw Satorys approaching him.

"So we meet again!" said Satorys grimly.

Stanton looked at his rival. For a moment he tried to brazen the thing out.

"I do not know you," he said.

"You do not? I am more fortunate. You are Jem Stanton, and in the pay of the German Government. There, it is no use denying it. The game is up!"

Stanton drew back. He saw no police present in the crowd which was hemming him in, and he remembered Blumstock's advice to bear down any opposition. Besides, he had been received as the Ruler of Istan, and he had all the cards in his hand still.

"I am at a loss to understand what you mean, sir," he said coldly. "You make a mistake. This is some blackmailing scheme, perhaps."

Satorys laid his hand on the other's arm. He was prepared even then to leave the arrest of the scoundrel to the police, even to give him his chance so long as Stanton would tell him the place of imprisonment of Miss Lang.

"Look here!" he said sternly. "It isn't a bit of use keeping up this imposture any longer. You will explain——"

It was the calm manner of Satorys which told, as well as the attitude of those around.

Jem Stanton swung about. He saw peril everywhere, people watching him, people ready enough to believe the words of Satorys, and suddenly his coward heart told him the game was up, and that his German friends and supporters could do nothing for him here.

With a spring he was at the window, dashing aside a man who had seized his arm.

He was certain now that he would get away, certain, for had not Von Blumstock, the resourceful and ever ready, assured him that all would be well, and that there was nothing more to fear from Satorys? Stanton was thinking of these things, his mind in a whirl through the sudden appearance of his old enemy, as he dropped from the window into the gardens surrounding the mansion, and, recovering himself, for he had staggered forward as he dropped on the soft earth, set off at a run.

Paul Satorys felt exasperated by the solitude. London was changed vastly, and the streets were dark. If Stanton were to be captured, apparently it was up to Satorys to do the job. There were no signs of police, and the few passers-by drew back as they saw the fugitive race down the thoroughfare, with Satorys in hot pursuit.

Stanton ran as one possessed, vague ideas surging through his mind of regaining safety in the obscure quarters of the town, where it was possible to lie up and wait, maybe to forget Blumstock and all his works. But Satorys was hard after him, and the adventurer knew well enough what would be his fate if caught. There was short shrift for spies and other enemies of England in those days, and he raced on into the murk of the autumn night with desperation lending him strength.

He wanted to get to the other side of the river, and, threading his way through narrow streets, he reached one of the bridges, thinking to throw off his pursuer in the darkness, for the rows of lamps on either side had been extinguished here to baffle the Zeppelins which were reported ready to make a descent.

"Stop!" roared Satorys as he came level with his enemy.

Stanton gave a gasp. He saw others running up, and knew his time was up. It would be proved beyond all refutation that he, a Britisher, had worked for the foes of his country, and the temper of the nation was up. If he escaped lynching straightway on the part of the infuriated mob, he would indubitably be court-martialled and shot. In despair he dashed to the parapet of the bridge, dread of capture overmastering his fear of the swirling waters, and, the next second, as Satorys gripped him, he had slipped his coat and was on the parapet, a dimly seen figure which swayed and then was gone.

Satorys fell back, the fugitive's coat in his hands. The work was taken up by the police who had suddenly appeared. A boat was putting off from the little landing-stage—the river police searching for the missing man; but twenty minutes later, as Satorys waited in the headquarters of the police close by, the report was brought in.

"Not a sign of him," said the inspector who was in charge. "My men looked thoroughly, you may be sure. The poor wretch must have been sucked under at once."

Satorys had tossed the coat on to a bench. Now he rose and examined the garment, drawing out a few papers which were in the breast-pocket. He glanced at them carelessly,

but suddenly his attention was seized by a fragment of a letter written in a foreign hand:

"You will communicate with us at Fordham, the White House. We are preparing anew."

"This is important," he said. "The scoundrel has gone, and will trouble us no more, but there is a nest of the conspirators in the country yet, and we will have them before the alarm is given."

The intelligence was more than Satorys had hoped for. There had been no news of Miss Lang, and he had no doubt that the girl was kept as a hostage by his enemies, though where the latter had fled to when they had beaten so rapid a retreat from Larches the most careful search had failed to reveal. He was hoping again that the poor girl might be saved as he sat in the leading car with several officers of police, speeding through the country en route for the place named in the letter.

Blumstock was not a man to acknowledge defeat. On the day when Satorys escaped from captivity and carried the news of the forthcoming rising of the Germans domiciled in England, the secret agent of the Berlin Government had immediately set about recasting his plans. He was ready then to throw Stanton overboard. The important thing was to fly from Larches, seeking asylum in another of the retreats of the strong party he led, and by his orders the girl was carried away, too. But Blumstock had overlooked the fact that Stanton was aware of the new headquarters, and that the man he had employed would be foolish enough to risk detection.

The house at Fordham, despite its harmless-looking exterior, was regarded as impregnable if matters came to the worst, and it was here that Miss Lang found herself still a prisoner, carried there despite her energetic resistance.

"If you wish to serve Paul Satorys," said Blumstock angrily, as he faced the girl in the room where he was busy with new plans, "you will write to him at my dictation. Sit down there!" He forced her into a chair. "Tell him that if he dares to take further action your life will be the forfeit."

The girl threw aside the pen which had been handed to her.

"I will write nothing!" she said angrily. "I am prepared for anything you can do. I will not fetter the hand of the man I esteem."

Blumstock turned upon her savagely, gripping her wrist, all his courtesy gone.

"You will obey me, Miss Lang!" he thundered out.

There was a shake of the head. Blumstock shouted out an order, and two of his subordinates dragged the girl away. During the hours which passed she had time to reflect on the utter hopelessness of her position, and she was torn with anxiety as to what was happening out there in the world where she imagined Satorys was fighting unequally against the band of foes who were working sedulously for the downfall of Britain, working as relentlessly as their compatriots in Europe.

She had been hustled into an underground apartment, and hours passed. She forgot the flight of time, and was giving way to despair, when suddenly the sound of firing came to her. She sprang to her feet. The unnerved state in which she had been plunged left her, and she dashed to the side of the room where, high above her head, was a barred window.

That which had seemed impossible before appeared different now. She seized the one chair the place contained and mounted on it, to find that she could reach the rusty bars of the window. She tugged with all her might, injuring her hands; but to her delight one of the bars, eaten with rust, gave, and then another, and a minute later she was raising herself and squeezing through the aperture.

She forced her way out, to drop exhausted into a little, grass-grown quadrangle, where the sunshine was brilliant. Supporting herself as she could, she crawled forward, peering through a doorway, to see those who had been her captors fighting desperately against a strong body of police. The descent which had been made on the second stronghold of the German agents was well planned, and Blumstock realised that defeat was near.

He had been roused from sleep, to find that the house was surrounded by the London police, and he raved out orders to his followers, urging them to hold out. Not for a man of the Blumstock type was surrender; but as he made ready, resolving to sell his life dearly, it was borne in upon him that this was really the end of his intriguing.

He heard the summons at the door:

"Open, in the King's name!"

Blumstock drew himself up, his revolver ready, as he hurled out a defiant answer to the challenge.

"We are here for his Imperial Majesty the German Emperor," he shouted, as he fired at the door, thinking to awe those outside.

The reply was a thundering at the panels. The door quivered and then gave way before the onslaught, the police bursting into the apartment.

The agents of the German Government saw their desperate case. There was not likely to be much mercy for those who had openly set the laws at defiance, and the trapped men fought with the courage of despair.

They were borne back, but, forming a breastwork of the furniture, they held the police at bay, Blumstock proving himself as stern a fighter as he had been a "diplomatist." It was at this time that Miss Lang ran forward, just as Blumstock levelled his revolver at Satorys, who had entered with the police.

"It will be the end of you, anyway!" said Blumstock savagely, as he fired, rage filling his heart as he saw that it was Satorys who had by some means managed to track down the band.

The girl saw the act, and flung herself forward; but Satorys was in time to catch her arm and force her back, while the next moment he had dropped, badly wounded.

The rest of the fight was blotted out so far as he was concerned. But matters were shaping all right for the police, who relished this brush with the sworn foe of their country. Blumstock did not have a chance to fire again. A muscular Northerner hurled himself on the spy, jerking the weapon from his grasp and pinning him against the table. Things were faring just as badly with the others. The fierceness of the fire from the little group of German agents, who were fighting for their liberty if not for their lives, died down.

Blumstock was silent. He had failed. He had failed in all his highly-developed plans for the subjugation of Britain, just as his military compatriots, inspired by the brutal bully of Berlin who disgraced a throne, had failed to crush out the splendid spirit of the brave Belgians or wipe out the British Army, which was on the road to the capital of the German Empire.

But he was not given much time to think out those things then. To the police who had captured him he was a spy and worse, and, together with his handcuffed comrades, he was hustled out to the waiting motor-cars, to be carried at once to a place of safety while his fate was decided upon.

Meantime, the inspector who was in command of the force approached Miss Lang. The officer examined Satorys.

"Got it pretty badly, miss," he said. "But it isn't fatal; you can rely on that."

It seemed to the wounded man to be ages afterwards ere he came back to himself, though it was only a matter of a day. He opened his eyes, to see the girl standing by his side. He was lying in a comfortably-furnished room, with pretty casement windows, and there was a suggestion of peace about the scene. Miss Lang anticipated his inquiries.

"I had you removed here, Paul," she said gravely. "It is a cottage a few miles away, and, of course, you will be safe here now, for they are all arrested."

He smiled up in the girl's face. Was it possible that this was the end of the trouble? No; he was sharply brought back to realities which were bad enough in all conscience by a stabbing pain in his shoulder as he tried to move.

"Glad they've got them all," he said. "I had time to see that much ere I was done in."

The girl smiled and sank into a seat by the couch.

It was then that the whole of the facts of the last few hours flashed upon Satorys.

"Look here, dear!" he said, as he took his companion's hand. "You would not have heard. That scoundrel was busy again up in London; but he won't do any more harm, and you are free, for he was drowned before my eyes as I tried to capture him. It was thanks to what he had on him that I managed to trace you down here."

The girl stared at the speaker, wonderment in her eyes.

"Stanton dead?" she said.

"Yes, he was desperate. I am not surprised. Seems he had been masquerading as myself for long enough, while I was safely under lock and key; and he must have done us a lot of harm by selling our secrets to the enemy. They would not have had any mercy for him if we had laid him by the heels."

There was silence for a space in the room, broken only by the faint hum from the garden and the music of the wind amidst the trees in the garden.

"Look here," said Satorys at last, "we have waited a long time, you and I. We have been tricked, imprisoned; but maybe it could be all right now. Will you marry me as you are free?"

There could be only one answer to that question, and the girl gave it; but she knew well that it must be some little time ere Satorys could leave the cottage, for his hurt was bad.

(Another splendid long instalment of this grand serial next Wednesday.)

A Cash Prize for Every Contributor to this Page.

Our Weekly Prize Page.

LOOK OUT FOR YOUR WINNING STORYETTE

A BEGINNING.

The railway compartment was full, and one gentleman stooped and picked up a coin.

"Who has lost a sovereign?" he asked.

"I have!" replied a portly gent in the corner seat.

"Well, here's a farthing towards it," said the humorist, handing him the coin.—Sent in by A. Chatfield, Dover.

WHY HE RAN.

An Irishman, carrying a ladder up a street one day, accidentally broke a plate-glass window, whereupon he took to his heels. The owner of the window, however, managed to overtake him.

"Sir," he cried, "are you aware that you have broken my window?"

"To be sure I am!" said Pat. "An' didn't ye see me running home to get the money to pay ye for it?"—Sent in by Fred Hawksworth, Nantwich.

THINKING PROFESSIONALLY.

Editor's Wife (reading paper): "What a terrible thing! I see a baby in Brixton has swallowed a bone button."

Editor: "Let's hope the child won't come to any harm. Still, if it should die, think what a splendid heading one could make: 'Brixton Baby Bolts Button and Becomes Breathless'!"—Sent in by Clifford Wade, Leeds.

"MARY HAD A LITTLE LAMB"
(Oxford University Style).

Tradition testifies, and history verifies this testimony, that one Mary was at one time possessed of a youthful member of the genus, sheep,

Whose excellence of blood and neatness of manner rendered his (or her) exterior fringe as beautifully translucent as the driven snow.

And it is stated in the most authentic manner—pages 2 and 3 of "Nursery Rhymes," Vol I.—that nowhere did this charming lady perambulate, than

The aforementioned quadrupedal vertebrate did, with alarming alacrity, approximate thither.—Sent in by W. Makepeace, South Shields.

THE SAME THING.

An absent-minded man, who was out of work, was given a barrow-load of radishes to sell. He had not gone very far when he forgot what he was selling.

Seeing a man with a barrow just ahead, he went up to see what he had for sale. Just as he came up to him, the man shouted out:

"Fine watercress!"

The absent-minded man went back to his barrow, and shouted:

"The same as him, with knobs!"—Sent in by C. W. Appelbee, Walthamstow.

JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS.

Lady (engaging servant): "Oh, Jane, I ought to tell you that we are all strict tectotallers here. I suppose you won't mind that?"

Jane: "Oh, no, mum! I've been in a reformed drunkard's family before."—Sent in by Alex. G. Edden, Northampton.

IRONY.

Teacher (to scholar, who has received his deserts for drawing caricatures): "Well, Jones, what did the Head say about your funny picture?"

Boy (with dignity): "He said, sir, that only the lowest of the low would call it funny."—Sent in by G. H. Fletcher, London, E.C.

A TALL ORDER.

A certain Mrs. Brown had a lodger of the Goliath type. One day some small boys were playing with a ball in the lane, and during the game they lost it on a roof. Having exhausted their efforts to recover it, they were giving up hope of seeing it again, when one small youth seemed struck with a brilliant idea. He went round to Mrs. Brown and said:

"Please, Mrs. Brown, we have lost our ball on a roof, and I have come to see if you can lend us your lodger, so that we can get it."—Sent in by James Wallace, Durham.

PAX!

An American and an Irishman had had a quarrel, and decided to settle the matter by fighting. The Irishman was told that when he had had enough he was to say "Sufficient!"

When the contest had been in progress about twenty minutes, the American asked Pat when he was going to cry "Sufficient!"

"Shure," ejaculated the son of Erin, "that's the wurrd Oi've bin tryin' to think of this last eighteen minutes!"—Sent in by G. Shefford, Willesden.

THE OLD ORDER CHANGETH.

There was a very large congregation in the parish church, and, the church itself being large, there was a baptismal font at each end. One day the preacher was reading out the notices, and stated:

"The christening will take place this afternoon, and as the number of children is rather more than usual, the babies will be christened at both ends."—Sent in by W. E. Cragg, Southport.

RATHER HIGH.

The local grocer was noted for his cheeses. One day a crusty old gent called in for some very strong cheese. After tasting nearly all the cheeses they had in stock, he calmly asked:

"Have you no stronger?"

The grocer then turned to his assistant, and said:

"George, unchain number nine!"—Sent in by W. Nicholls, Porthcawl.

MONEY PRIZES OFFERED.

Readers are invited to send ON A POSTCARD Storyettes or Short Interesting Paragraphs for this page. For every contribution used the sender will receive a Money Prize.

ALL POSTCARDS MUST BE ADDRESSED—The Editor, "The Gem" Library, Gough House, Gough Square, Fleet Street, London, E.C.

THIS OFFER IS OPEN TO READERS IN ALL PARTS OF THE WORLD.

No correspondence can be entered into with regard to this competition, and all contributions enclosed in letters, or sent in otherwise than on postcards, will be disregarded.

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FROM THE FIRING-LINE!

A Series of Letters of Enthralling Interest received direct from Corporal Charles, of his Majesty's —th Dragoons, who is an old reader of "The Gem" Library, and is now on active service on the Continent with the British Expeditionary Force.

(Exclusive to "The Gem" Library.)

No. 6.— GERMAN FUNK!

I don't suppose you've heard the story of the little French boy with the toy-gun. It's altogether too insignificant to find its way into British newspapers, yet to a few of us, and for little Pierre's father, it was of vital importance.

It occurred near Arras. I'm betraying no secrets when I tell you that this town is of importance to the British and the French because it is a big railway junction, thus providing a quick road to Paris and the coast ports, whither we can meet the transports for receiving troops, for transferring wounded, and for maintaining supplies.

The colonel sent for me one morning.

"We've reason to believe there are German spies in the neighbourhood, corporal," said the dear old chap, as I saluted. "What their precise game is we don't know. It's more than likely it has something to do with communications. Take a dozen lads, and see what you can do to stop their mischief. Don't forget that they're experts at disguising themselves, and are up to all the tricks on the board."

I could have danced with joy. For days an artillery duel had been going on between our entrenched Tommies and the Kaiser's barbarians. The King's Dragoons were "fed up" with the enforced idleness, and longed to be in the saddle and chasing the enemy.

"Very good, sir," I replied. "We'll endeavour to show 'em a few tricks they haven't reckoned on—if we can only get on their track."

As I expected, our boys were keen on accompanying me. The whole squadron—what was left of 'em—wanted to saddle-up.

The incessant tap, tap of the rifles, the screech of shrapnel, and the boom of the bursting Jack Johnsons mingled with the cheers of our lads as we galloped away.

The firing became only a distant echo. We were soon in the region of the little rural villages that had been burned and ruined in the retreat of the Berlin butchers. Here and there, however, cottages and farmhouses were still standing, and the plucky peasants had returned to their shattered homes.

They welcomed us everywhere. Though they had suffered so severely, though their homes had been plundered and savagely destroyed, yet they offered us food, wine, cigarettes—all they had.

It was difficult to refuse the good folk, but we had to. We were not out for a joy-ride. To our inquiries for any suspicious persons in the neighbourhood, for any sign of spies, they could give us no information.

The best part of a day went in passing from village to village without success, when on reaching a little town, the name of which doesn't matter, we came upon a rakish-looking motor-car, in which four French officers were seated.

A patrol of French chasseurs were holding them up at the cross-roads while they examined their papers.

"Come along, man!" grunted one of them impatiently, in rather guttural French it seemed to me at the time, though the wet weather had given most of us husky throats. "We're on important business."

The young lieutenant of chasseurs was fingering his chin thoughtfully. He was evidently puzzled at something. Still, he gave back the papers, and the motor-car, with powerful engine, quickly leapt out of sight.

"What I can't understand is, why those officers have come here from Verdun," he said to me as we fraternised. "It's more than two hundred miles from here. Their papers were all right."

I had no suggestion to offer, and after a short, friendly chat, we rode down the valley into the town. On the outskirts a big, excited crowd was gathered about the porch of a little whitewashed cottage.

The clatter of our horses' hoofs had a wonderful effect upon them. The crowd turned and ran towards us with uplifted hands.

"L'Anglais!" they cried. "Ze brave Anglais! Zey will help us! Zey will avenge ze pere of little Pierre!"

They were round us in a jiffy. Eager faces, appealing arms were held towards us, whilst a jabber of tongues almost bewildered us.

"What is the matter?" I asked in French.

For answer a tall, bearded peasant stepped to the side of my mare. In his arms was a tiny curly-haired boy of about five. I've never seen a prettier child. In his chubby hands he still gripped a toy gun—one of the sixpenny-halfpenny sort I used to play soldiers with myself when I was about his age.

"Look, m'sieu!" cried Pierre's father, pointing to the child's breast.

I was wondering why the chubby, round cheeks had such a waxy appearance. Then I saw and understood. On the white front of the cheap tunic was a grim, dark stain. Little Pierre had been shot in the heart.

"It was so, m'sieu," said the peasant, in a dull, strained voice. "The motor-car come to the door. 'Give us of the food and drink,' they said. We gave them the best we had. Then as they were departing little Pierre ran to the porch with his gun.

"'Vive la France!' he cried, in his shrill, sweet voice. 'Vive l'Angleterre!'

"He put his toy popgun to his shoulder, m'sieu, and laughed as he pulled the trigger. Ah, mercy, my tongue refuses to speak it! One of the men in the motor-car whipped out his revolver. Little Pierre fell. His poor mother is prostrate. Ah, m'sieu, they are murderers of children!"

It was silly and childish of me, of course, but though poor Pierre's father's grief was too great for tears, I could not keep back my own for a moment or two.

"Why did you give food to the Germans?" I managed to gulp out.

"They were not Germans, m'sieu!" the crowd answered me. "They were the French—the officers in our own army; unless they were the spies—the hated Bosches!"

"They were German spies!" I cried. "Quick, tell me what they looked like! What was the colour of the motor-car? What was the make? Which road did they go?"

From the answers I received I had no doubt that the four officers I had seen in the car at the cross-roads were the men I wanted.

"We'll do what we can," I assured them. "Right about turn—at the gallop!"

Few of my troopers had any but a smattering of the French patois, and as we thudded along I explained what had happened. You should have heard their angry shouts! More than one of them had children at home in England of about little Pierre's age. They said least, but their grim, set faces betokened ill for the spies if we had the good fortune to collar them.

At the junction of the roads we met the lieutenant of chasseurs, and gave him the news. The officer stared at us incredibly.

"And I let the Prussian hogs slip through my fingers!" he gasped.

I told him to telephone and telegraph everywhere, giving a description of the car and its occupants, and then led my boys out into the country. For a couple of hours we continued on their track, going from village to village they had passed through, until dusk began to fall.

"What's the good of following 'em, corporal?" said one

(Continued on next page.)

FROM THE FIRING-LINE!

(Continued from page iii of Cover.)

of the troopers. "We'll never catch 'em up. And we're getting farther and farther away from our quarters."

Strangely enough, that obvious and commonplace remark gave me the clue to the situation at once—told me as plain as if I had seen it in print what was the spies' object.

If the Germans were up to any mischief at all—and it was certain they were not masquerading in French officers' uniforms without having some big job on hand—they were out to put a serious obstacle in the path of the British troops. I suddenly remembered we were expecting a huge and magnificent contingent of troops from India. Only a day or two before I had heard they had landed safely at Marseilles.

There were also tremendously important flanking movements going on. The Germans were trying all they knew to prevent us turning them. I trembled as I realised what terrible damage those four spies could do in that district. I wondered what I should do if I was in their shoes, and as fiendishly-minded as they.

Of course, I should attempt to blow up the railway-lines at some important centre; or, easier still, destroy one of the bridges over which the troops must march.

"Ted, you'll take six troopers and make for the opposite bank," I said to my chum. "Look out for snipers' shots, and pay particular attention to the neighbourhood of bridges. We'll follow along this side."

We waited till Ted and the boys had disappeared across the bridge in the gloom and mist that shrouded the river-banks before we went on at a jog-trot. We were, of course, in a friendly country. There were no Uhlan patrols to terrify old people and children. Our only fear was that the German motorists might lie hidden in ambush, and pot us off before we could say "Knife."

Night fell, cold, dark, and dismal, and yet we still kept on, an occasional whistle assuring us that Ted and the boys were all right. Nobody was about now. We called in at a few farmhouses, but they could tell us nothing.

I was beginning to think that little Pierre's murderers had got clean away, when of a sudden, as we walked our horses in the dip of a valley, a resounding dull boom echoed through the keen air.

"Explosion—bomb!" I cried. "We're on the track! Buck up, lads!"

Sure enough, as we climbed a slope, and gave our horses a breather, down below in the marsh beside the dully-gleaming river we saw a motor-car. Its engine-throbs came up to us on the breeze. We could only surmise it was the car we were after. Twenty yards behind them was the combined railway and foot bridge.

"Follow as quietly as poss!" I warned the boys, and sent a signal across to Ted and the troopers.

Five minutes later I gave the charge of the horses to a trooper, while the rest of us moved silently on to the tow-path. For a few seconds we lay amidst some bushes watching the movements of the motorists.

When two of them moved off towards the bridge, carefully carrying a canvas bag, I gave the signal to make a combined attack. Three troopers were sent off to capture the car. I and the remaining trooper dashed headlong for the others.

We were not to have any luck. Whilst we were yet a dozen yards from the spies with the canvas bag, one of them stumbled. There was a terrific explosion, which seemed to shake the earth. An acrid smoke rushed into our faces. When it cleared away there was only a six-foot hole in the ground and fragments of scorched uniforms about to show what had become of the masqueraders.

In the excitement the motorists got clean away—or, at any rate, they escaped the boys I sent to stop them. But it was only for a time—less than a quarter of an hour.

As the motor-car shot up into the main road and made for the way we had come—the only way open to them—we regained our horses, and galloped in pursuit, Ted's troopers crossing the bridge and following hot on our heels.

Before we knew where we were we pulled up on the brink of the shattered bridge—as narrow a squeak as any of us have had of plunging headlong over the ruins into the rock-bound stream fifty feet below.

We had come back to the bridge the Germans had destroyed. Fate had led them to perish by their own treacherous work. In the darkness and their mad haste they had not seen the yawning chasm before them. Anyway, their object failed. Our gallant troops from India, as you doubtless know, got to the front without a mishap.

The colonel was delighted when I told him. I shall never look again into a toyshop without thinking of little Pierre.

THE END.