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Marie came quietly towards Gore. To the great relief of the masters, he simply stared at her dully. "Come with me, Gore," said Marie, in her sweet, soft voice. "Where's Talbot?" muttered Gore confusedly. "Talbot can get me out of this—I'm in awful trouble." (See Chapter 5.)

CHAPTER 1. Missing!

CLANG! Clang! - Clang!
The rising-bell was ringing out at St. Jim's in the clear spring morning.
Tom Merry sat up in bed in the Shell dormitory in the School House.

"Yaw-aw-aw!"
That was Tom Merry's first remark.
Clang! Clang!

"Blessed if I don't believe that beast Taggles gets up

earlier and earlier every morning!" grumbled Monty Lowther.

"Yaw-aw-aw!" remarked Manners.

Tom Merry jumped out of bed.

"Oh, turn out, you slackers!" he said cheerily. "Talbot's down already!"

Lowther and Manners glanced towards the bed that belonged to Talbot of the Shell. It was empty.

"Must have got up before light, I should think," said Lowther. "He usually gives us a call when he turns out early."

Next Wednesday:

"GRUNDY OF THE SHELL!" AND "OFFICER AND TROOPER!"

"We'll find him in the quad," said Tom Merry, proceeding to splash in cold water. "Are you turning out, or do you want this sponge down your necks?"

"Goo! I'm turning out!" said Lowther.

The rising-bell ceased to clang, and the Shell fellows all turned out, with one exception. Gore of the Shell lay sleeping soundly, deaf to the clang of the rising-bell and to the voices of his Form fellows. Gore was a bit of a slacker, and Monty Lowther picked up a wet sponge to help Gore to awaken.

"Hold on, Monty," said Tom Merry.

"I'm going to wake him up. He'll be late for brekker."

Tom Merry jerked away the sponge.

"Don't swamp him; he's been seedy. Call him, you fathead!"

"Oh, all right!"

Monty Lowther proceeded to call Gore. But Monty Lowther could not help being humorous. He bent over the sleeping junior, put his mouth very close to Gore's unconscious ear, and roared:

"Gore!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Gore started suddenly out of his deep sleep, and leaped up in bed, with the result that his head came into violent contact with Lowther's nose before he could get out of range.

There was a fiendish yell from Monty Lowther.

"Yurrrrr! Oh, crumbs! Oh, you idiot! Ow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Monty Lowther staggered back and sat on a bed, clapping his nose with both hands. His eyes streamed with water. He was hurt. Gore sat up and rubbed his head and blinked at him sleepily.

"Hallo!" he said, in a dazed sort of way. "Wharrer marrer? What?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, by dose!" groaned Monty Lowther, in anguish. "Oh, grubs! Gooch! Oh, you silly fatted! Yow!" Gore blinked at him.

"Serve you jolly well right, you silly owl. What did you yell at me for?"

"Oh, dear! Yow! I was waking you up, you rodden slagger! Yow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Monty Lowther extracted a handkerchief from his jacket and dabbed his injured nose. The handkerchief came away very red. Monty Lowther was not feeling in the least humorous now. He could not see anything to laugh at. But the rest of the Shell could, and they roared. The sight of Lowther's nose was enough for them. Like many great humorists, Monty found his sense of humour fail him when the joke was turned against himself.

He looked quite cross as he proceeded with his toilet.

Gore had not turned out; he still sat in bed, rubbing his eyes. He seemed sleepy that morning.

"You'd better back up, Gore!" called out Tom Merry. "Going to stay in bed all the morning?"

"I'm sleepy," mumbled Gore.

Monty Lowther sniffed.

"Been out on the tiles, I suppose!" he remarked sarcastically.

Breaking bounds at night was not wholly unknown to George Gore, the black sheep of the Shell. Some of the juniors glanced at him very curiously. Certainly he did not look like a fellow who had had a good night's rest. His face was pale, almost haggard in expression, and his eyes had dark circles under them, and he seemed almost overcome with sleep.

Without taking any notice of Lowther's remark, Gore dragged himself from his bed with a visible effort.

"Feel seedy?" asked Kangaroo of the Shell good-naturedly. Gore had been very much off colour the last few days.

"Eh? Yes; a bit," mumbled Gore. "I didn't get much sleep. I haven't been out!" he added, with a glare at the Cornstalk schoolboy.

"Well, I didn't say you had," said Noble cheerfully. "Keep your wool on, my son!"

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Gore granted. Apparently he was not in a good temper that morning.

"Talbot gone down?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes; he was down before rising-bell," said Tom Merry.

"Before rising-bell?" said Gore, evidently surprised.

"What the dickens did he get up before the bell for?"

"Early to bed, early to rise, is the way to keep fit and to grow a good size," said Manners.

"But he wasn't early to bed," said Gore.

"Eh? He came to bed last night with the rest of us, didn't he?"

"Yes; but—"

Gore stopped suddenly, and began to splash his face with cold water.

"But what?" asked Tom Merry.

"Nothing."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Tom, a little angrily. As Talbot's best chum, Tom Merry did not like Gore's remark. "If you mean to hint that Talbot has been out of the dorm, Gore—"

"I didn't say so!" growled Gore.

"Well, you meant that."

"Oh, rats!"

Gore refused to say another word. Tom Merry, remembering that Gore had been seedy of late, forbore to make the remarks that rose to his lips. Any word derogatory to Talbot was enough to put Tom Merry's back up at any time. Talbot's peculiar past was a somewhat sore subject with his chums.

The Terrible Three finished dressing and left the dormitory. Tom Merry's brows were knitted.

"Smile, O King!" murmured Monty Lowther. "Gore couldn't have meant any harm—especially after what old Talbot's done for him lately. Anyway, Gore doesn't matter."

"No; blow him, he doesn't!" agreed Tom. "Let's look for Talbot."

The chums of the Shell were first out in the quad that morning. The big door had not been opened when they got down, so soon were they after rising-bell. When it was opened, and they went into the quad, they looked, and felt, mystified. Talbot had evidently gone down before rising-bell, but the door was not open.

"Must have got out of a window," hazarded Manners.

"Let's find him."

But the Terrible Three sought up and down the old quadrangle in vain. Up and down and round about they went; but there was nothing to be seen of Talbot of the Shell. It was pretty plain that he was not out of the house.

"Can't have gone out for an awfully early walk, surely?" said Lowther, puzzled.

"Not likely! Why should he?"

"Where is he, then?"

"Blessed if I know!"

"Try the Head's garden," grinned Lowther, as a new thought came into his mind. "Perhaps Miss Marie is an early riser, too!"

They tried the Head's garden, but the garden was drawn blank. They came back to the School House in a very puzzled mood. All the Shell were down now, excepting Gore, who was still dawdling in the dormitory.

"Seen anything of Talbot about the house?" Tom Merry asked.

"No," said Kangaroo. "Isn't he in the quad?"

"No."

"Must have gone out," said Manners. "Bunked over the wall, then; the gates aren't open yet."

That seemed to be the only explanation, but the juniors could not help feeling puzzled. Talbot was on such intimate terms with the Terrible Three that it was very odd that he should cut off like this without a word. However, it was plain enough that he was not within the school walls.

So they gave it up and punted about a footer till breakfast time. They expected to see Talbot at the breakfast-table.

But when the juniors swarmed into the dining-room in the School House, Talbot of the Shell did not come in with them. His place at the table next to Tom Merry

remained unoccupied. The Terrible Three were thoroughly puzzled by this time, all the more as Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell, who took the head of the table, made no remark upon Talbot's absence. They noted that he looked a little graver than usual, and they began to feel apprehensive. Something or other had happened to Talbot, but what could have happened to him? Tom Merry resolved to inquire.

"Isn't Talbot coming to breakfast, sir?" he asked.

Mr. Linton shook his head.

"No, Merry."

"He isn't ill, sir?" exclaimed Tom. The school sanatorium was a place where the juniors had not thought of seeking their chum.

"No, he is not ill."

"Has—has anything happened, sir?" asked Tom, in dismay. Mr. Linton's grave manner sent a chill to his heart.

"The Head will speak to you after breakfast, Merry. You may go to his study," said Mr. Linton.

The master of the Shell plainly did not intend to say any more. Indeed, his expression seemed to indicate that he was somewhat perplexed himself.

Tom Merry had to be content with that. He waited with what patience he could muster till breakfast was over. He was glad enough when the juniors left the dining-room.

CHAPTER 2.

Without a Word.

WHAT had happened to Talbot? That question hammered in Tom Merry's mind.

That something had happened was only too clear, though no one seemed to know what it was. Mr. Linton himself apparently being in the dark.

Had Talbot been an ordinary St. Jim's fellow, like Tom Merry himself, Tom would not have felt that keen anxiety.

But Talbot, the "Toff" of old days, was not quite like the rest. The strange, dark past of the handsome Shell fellow had almost been forgotten in the school. But it was always there, and it came back grimly into Tom Merry's mind now. The Toff, once the prince of cracksmen, who had paid so dearly for his reform, who was now the soul of honour, the straightest fellow at St. Jim's—was it possible that some shadow out of the black past had fallen across his life again? That was what Tom Merry dreaded.

Lowther and Manners shared his apprehension. They paused in the passage before going to the Head's study, and exchanged glum looks.

"Something's up," said Lowther.

"I can't understand it," said Tom Merry, clenching his hands. "There can't be anything wrong. We know how Talbot was suspected once, because of his past, but—but it's impossible that that can have happened again."

"I should say so. But—"

"Let's get to the Head."

George Gore came quickly down the passage, and stopped them. Gore's face was white as a sheet, and there was a look of startled terror in his eyes. His expression made the chums of the Shell stare at him.

"Where's Talbot?" exclaimed Gore. "Do you know? Has anything happened to him?"

"We don't know yet," said Tom shortly. "We're going to the Head to find out. You can come with us if you like."

Gore shuddered.

"I won't come. I'll wait here for you."

"Look here, Gore, do you know anything about this?" demanded Tom.

"What should I know?"

"You said something in the dorm—something about Talbot being up in the night, or late to bed, anyway. Do you know what's happened?"

"I—I don't. I—I thought Talbot was in bed with the rest when I went to sleep," groaned Gore. "If he went out again I didn't know anything about it. I can't imagine why he should have gone."

"If he went out again!" repeated Tom Merry. "Do

you mean to say that he went out once, then, after we were asleep?"

Gore drew a deep, quivering breath.

"It's no good asking me questions," he said. "Go and ask the Head; perhaps it's all right after all. Don't waste time."

"Come on!" said Manners.

Tom Merry nodded, and they went to the Head's study. Tom knocked, and the three juniors went in. Dr. Holmes was there, and the juniors' anxiety deepened as they saw his face. The good old doctor was looking grave and troubled.

"What is it, Merry? Ah, you have come to ask me—"

Dr. Holmes drummed uneasily on his table with his hand.

"He has left the school, Merry."

Tom Merry almost staggered.

"Left St. Jim's, sir?"

"Yes."

"But—but when, sir?"

"Last night."

"But—but he's coming back, sir?" exclaimed Manners.

Dr. Holmes shook his head.

"Not coming back!" said Tom Merry dazedly. "Talbot not coming back! He's left the school for good, sir?"

"Yes."

"I—I don't understand, sir. He went to bed as usual last night. He wasn't in the dorm this morning, and we thought he had come down early. There wasn't anything said about his leaving yesterday, sir. Talbot didn't say a word."

"Probably he did not know then."

The Terrible Three were aghast. There was a mystery here; they knew that, but they could see that the Head did not intend to explain.

"But—but may we know why he is gone, sir?" stammered Tom Merry.

"Circumstances have made it necessary for him to leave, Merry. I am sorry that I cannot tell you more than that. As I understand that he was a great friend of yours, I am sorry. But he has left the school, and he will not be returning, and I recommend you to banish him from your mind."

Tom Merry smiled bitterly. It was not so easy to banish a chum from his mind.

"What has he done, sir?"

"It is not a question of that."

"If—if he is suspected of anything—"

"He is not suspected."

"Not suspected!" said Tom Merry dazedly. "He isn't accused—"

"No accusation has been made against him," said the Head.

The chums of the Shell looked utterly blank. If Talbot had been sent away in disgrace, on the suspicion of having fallen back into the old ways of the "Toff," they could have understood it. They would have been prepared to stick to their chum through thick and thin, to fight for his honour as for their own. It had happened before, and justice had been done at last.

But it was not that.

Why, then, had Talbot gone? Why could not the Head tell them?

Dr. Holmes rose.

"You may go," he said. "It is nearly time for prayers."

"Excuse me, sir, but—but this knocks us over," stammered Tom Merry. "I know that Talbot didn't want to leave the school. You have sent him away, sir?"

Dr. Holmes paused. He could feel for the junior; the dismay and trouble in Tom Merry's face would have touched a harder heart than his.

"I have sent him away," he said at last. "But Talbot was not sent against his will; he fully agreed that he had better go."

"And—and we're not to know why, sir?"

"I have told you all that is possible," said the Head.

"You may be assured that Talbot has not gone, as he went before, under a false suspicion, alone and

friendless. I have not lost my regard for him, and he will keep me informed of his movements. He is in no danger of falling into want. His future depends on himself, and may be happy and prosperous if he cares to make it so. He is in no danger; he is not in need, but he will not return here. That is all I can tell you."

The Head made a gesture of dismissal, and the three chums left the study. They went like fellows in a dream. It was utterly amazing to them.

Gore was waiting for them in the passage. His face was chalky white, and he was trembling.

"Well, what—what?" he muttered, catching Tom Merry by the arm.

"Talbot's gone!"

"Gone!" muttered Gore.

"He's left St. Jim's for good."

"Is he—is he arrested?" faltered Gore.

"Arrested! No! There's nothing against him. The Head says he isn't suspected of anything."

"Suspected!" said Gore huskily. "Suspected! No, not suspected!"

"He's not in danger, and not in want. He's simply gone. I can't understand it. There's something behind it the Head won't tell us," said Tom Merry.

"Something must have happened last night," said Monty Lowther quietly, "and Gore knows something about it. No use denying that, Gore. You knew that Talbot had been out of the dorm. What was he doing?"

"I—I—I can't tell you anything," muttered Gore.

He leaned heavily against the wall of the passage, the perspiration thick on his forehead. Troubled as they were themselves, the Terrible Three could not help feeling sorry for the wretched black sheep of the Shell. They knew of the trouble he had been in of late, from which Talbot had saved him.

Gore had nothing to say. The juniors could not help suspecting that he knew something of the unknown, mysterious happenings of the night. But he would not speak—or could not—and he was in no state to be forced. The chums of the Shell went on down the passage and left him.

By the time morning lessons commenced all St. Jim's knew that Talbot of the Shell had left the school, without an explanation, and from the Sixth Form to the Second there was wonder and surmise on the subject.

CHAPTER 3.

The Outcast!

TALBOT of the Shell, where was he?

While the St. Jim's fellows were going into their Form-room that morning Talbot of the Shell leaned upon a stile, in a leafy lane, under the bright sunshine, ten miles or more from the old school.

The outcast of St. Jim's was resting after a long, long tramp. His wallet lay on the ground, his overcoat was hung on the top bar of the stile. Talbot of the Shell leaned there, with the pleasant, smiling Sussex landscape before his eyes—green fields and wide meadows, backed by low, green hills, here and there smoke rising from a prosperous-looking farmstead.

It was a scene to delight the eye, but the junior of St. Jim's hardly saw it, his gaze was bent on the sunny landscape unseeingly.

His brow was dark.

There were bitter thoughts in his mind, bitter feelings in his breast. The Toff was an outcast once more.

It was for another's sake! For the sake of a fellow who had little claim upon him, but who was "down," and whom he had promised to help, whose wretched secret he had promised to keep.

And the Toff's word was his bond; when the crisis came he had not hesitated. And now it was all over!

Yesterday he had been a happy, careless schoolboy; his chief thoughts had been of the coming cricket season, of playing in Tom Merry's eleven—of the coming match with Greyfriars!

He thought bitterly of it now.

St. Jim's was behind him now—as much in the past as his old life, his old career as the Toff! The old Form-room

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at St. Jim's had followed the rookery at Angel Alley into the past, which could not return. It seemed that he was born to be the sport of Fortune.

It had all seemed plain sailing at last! His position had been secure. His old associates, who had tried to drag him back into crime, had left him at peace at last. John Rivers the Professor was in the new Army, fighting in Flanders for his King and country. Hookey Walter, the cracksmen, was on his way to a new land, to lead a new life. The old gang was broken up. There had not been a cloud on his horizon till, in the generosity of his heart, he had helped Gore of the Shell out of his scrape, and had ruined himself in doing so.

It was too late for regrets. If he could have foreseen; but he could not. He had saved Gore from the clutches of Tickey Tapp the sharper; he had saved him from becoming a thief—and he had paid the penalty himself! What was Tom Merry thinking of him now? What was Marie thinking—Marie, the cracksmen's daughter, whose home was now at St. Jim's?

A deep sigh escaped Talbot. It was bitter that it should all be over, and by no fault of his own. What was before him now?

The wide world lay open to his footsteps; he was his own master now. He had money in his pockets; he was in no danger of want for some time to come. It was not as if it had been when he had been cast out of St. Jim's on a false suspicion; when he had frozen and starved, and Tom Merry had found him only in time to save his life. It was not like that now. But what was before him? The old life was dead and done with, and St. Jim's was closed to him for ever.

He felt a pang as he thought of the Head—the kind old man, who had been so good a friend to him; and who now believed that he had been base and ungrateful. He could not blame the Head. He had been found at the safe, the door open, banknotes in his hand, and he could not tell Dr. Holmes that he was there to replace what George Gore had taken! He had risked it all to save Gore, and Fortune had failed him. He could not explain, and the Head could only believe what he had seen. It was a blow for him to lose faith in Talbot, the junior knew that. That was the hardest of all to bear.

Through that weary night, which seemed like an evil dream now that he looked back upon it, he had tramped on, hardly knowing or caring whither he went. In the sunny spring morning he stopped to rest, to consider his future movements. But he found it difficult to think clearly. His thoughts wandered back to St. Jim's—to Tom Merry, to Marie, to the playing-fields, and the study and the Form-room. Even at this moment the fellows would be going in to morning lessons, and wondering what had become of him. The Head had promised to say nothing; they would not know that he had left in disgrace. That was a relief! But what would they think?

He had saved Gore. Perhaps the wretched fellow would go straight after this. His old skill as the prince of cracksmen had saved Gore, and ruined himself!

He had compelled Tickey Tapp to clear off—the rascally sharper who had led the black sheep of the Shell into folly, and who was the cause of all the trouble. The rascal's little game at St. Jim's was finished with. After all, he had done some good there.

Hours had passed since he had halted at the stile. It seemed to the boy that he could go no further. He hardly felt fatigue; he was hard as nails and thoroughly fit. But his heart and his thoughts were with the friends he had left in the old school, and he lacked resolution to tear himself away.

Ten long miles lay between him and St. Jim's—the old school he was never to see again. Even now his fate was in his own hands. He had but to return; to tell the Head why he had been at the safe. Gore, even if he denied, would never be able to sustain his denial. But the thought hardly entered his mind. Dearly he would have liked to return; but honour and faith came first.

How long the boy would have rested there, thinking—thinking over what was irretrievable—he never knew. His black thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a cry from the field behind him.



"Jest the legs!" murmured Captain Coke. "Always takes me like that! 'Ead as clear as anything, young gentleman, but it sticks to the legs longest. 'Strrordinary, ain't it?" "Very extraordinary," said Talbot, half laughing and half vexed, as the captain made a terrific plunge, and threw both his arms wildly round the junior's neck to save himself from a fall. (See Chapter 6.)

"'Elp!"

Talbot started, and looked round quickly over the stile. To his left was a grove of young trees, with thickets growing between, and it was from the grove that the cry came. He could see nothing; the trees and leaves hid from his sight what was passing there. The cry was repeated.

"'Elp! Ah, would yer! Oh! 'Elp!"

Talbot did not hesitate. His own troubles were forgotten in a moment. He put his hands on the stile and vaulted over.

There was a sound of a struggle among the trees. Talbot dashed through the thickets and came suddenly upon a startling scene.

A stumpy, thick-set man was down in the ferns and grass; he had evidently been sleeping there the night before. An empty bottle lay in the grass, and the stumpy man's face showed that he had been drinking heavily over night. He was still partly under the

influence of liquor, though he had slept off the worst of his intoxication.

A man dressed in "loud" checks, which seemed familiar to Talbot, was kneeling on him, pinning him down.

"Hand it over!" he was saying, as Talbot burst on the scene. "I know you've got it! Hand it over!"

"'Elp!"

"Who's to help you here, you fool? Come, now, you were splashing quids about in the Black Bull last night, and you can spare a few to help a gentleman in distress. I've just lost a good lay, I 'ave, and I'm 'ard up! I'll let you off for a fiver. I dessay you'll get some more at the circus, if the lions don't chaw you up! Now, no rot, or I shall put the screw on!"

"Tickey Tapp!" exclaimed Talbot.

The man in checks swung round in surprise. Talbot knew him now; it was Tickey Tapp, the card-sharper, THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 378.

whom he had driven away from Rylcombe. Tickey Tapp was astonished to see him there.

"The Toff!" he ejaculated.

"At your old game, you scoundrel!" exclaimed Talbot. "Let that man alone at once!"

"Eip!" panted the prostrate man. "He's trying to rob me! Tried to pick my pocket while I was asleep, the scum!"

Tickey Tapp ground his teeth.

"What are you doin' 'ere, Toff? This ain't your business. You 'ook it!"

"Will you let that man alone?"

"No, I won't!" yelled Tickey Tapp furiously. "And you can't make me!"

Talbot did not trouble to reply; but he ran straight at the sharper. Tickey Tapp had just time to leap to his feet to defend himself.

The next moment they were fighting furiously.

The stumpy man sat up in the grass, blinking dazedly and gasping. He was in no condition to render aid. But Talbot did not require aid.

Boy as he was against a man, he was more than a match for the flabby, ill-conditioned card-sharper. And he had unbounded pluck—a quality in which Mr. Tapp was somewhat lacking. Talbot was "all over" him at once, hitting out right and left. Tickey Tapp fought hard for a couple of minutes, but he gave ground before the St. Jim's fellow's whirlwind attack, and, at last, his foot caught in a root, and he fell heavily.

"Ow!" groaned Tickey Tapp—"Ow!"

Talbot looked down on him with blazing eyes. 'This was the rascal who was the real cause of his own disgrace and ruin, and he would have been glad to give Tickey Tapp the hiding of his life. But Tickey Tapp had had enough. He blinked up at Talbot through half-closed eyes.

"So that's 'ow you 'andle an old pal, Toff?" he mumbled.

"Get out of this!"

"You want the feller's quids yourself, Toff—wot?" sneered the sharper.

Talbot did not answer, but he began to use his boots on Tickey Tapp, and the rascal picked himself up and ran, pouring out a stream of oaths as he went.

Talbot turned back to the man in the grass. He was still sitting there in a dazed state, blinking.

"Are you hurt?" asked Talbot.

"'Urt!" said the stumpy man. "Yes, I'm 'urt! Clean winded! The villain! Chummin' up with me like anything in the Black Bull last night he was! Trying to see whether I was well lined all the time—wot? The 'ound! Is there anything in that bottle?"

"There isn't," said Talbot; "and you'd be better without it if there were."

The stumpy man did not seem offended by that remark. He nodded his head sagely.

"Right yar!" he agreed. "The boss says the same. He says the lions will chaw me up some of these nights when I've been oiling. Serve me right if they do, the boss says."

"The lions?" said Talbot, looking at him keenly.

Gentlemen in the condition of the stumpy man at that moment were prone to see rats and snakes and lizards, but lions were not generally included in the list of the "horrors."

"Oh, I ain't got 'em!" said the stumpy man.

"Got what?"

"The 'orrors—the 'oly 'orrors! I've 'ad 'em!" The stumpy man shuddered. "I ain't got 'em now. Sure there ain't nothing in that bottle?"

"Quite sure."

"Hair of the dog, you know. I'm much obliged to you for 'elping me like this 'ere," the stumpy man added, as an afterthought. "That rascally Prooshian was going to rob me; he saw my quids last night in the Black Bull. I'm Captain Coke."

"Captain Coke!" said Talbot, beginning to be amused. The beery and dilapidated gentleman did not look much like a captain.

"Yes. My little bit's lion-taming."

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"Oh, I see?"

"At the circus, you know," explained Captain Coke. "I 'ad some pay last night, and I played the silly idjit. I'm a born idjit!" said Captain Coke, in a burst of confidence.

Talbot laughed.

"But where's the circus now?" groaned Captain Coker. "Fur it's plain enough to me that I missed my way coming from the Black Bull las' night. 'Cause why? 'Ere I am! I must 'ave slep' 'ere," added Captain Coke, with conviction.

"I think you must have," agreed Talbot, smiling.

"And that rascally Prooshian 'unted me out," said the captain, "arter picking me pocket while I was snoozing. But I woke up. Why, I'd 'ave knocked 'im into a cocked 'at if I'd been sober! Unfortunate moment, young gentleman, because I'm a teetotaler, really!"

"Oh!"

"Signed the pledge four times since last Christmas," said Captain Coke. "Every time I get the 'orrors I sign the pledge arter. But, look 'ere, 'ow am I to get to the circus?"

"Where is it?" asked Talbot.

"Same place as the Black Bull—Fernbrook. I must 'ave taken the wrong turning arter I left the Black Bull, and walked out into the country."

"You walked about a mile," said Talbot. "I passed through there last night. It's a mile from here."

Captain Coker groaned deeply.

"A mile! A blessed, blessed mile! Why, I couldn't walk a 'undred steps!" he said pathetically. "Ow! I'll sign the pledge ag'in after this! I s'pose a swell young gentleman like you wouldn't give a man a 'and on his way?"

Talbot paused. He certainly did not relish the prospect of walking a mile with a man in the worthy captain's condition. To guide the faltering steps of a drunkard would be a new experience for the Toff, strange and varied as his many experiences had been. But he felt that he could not leave the poor wretch in his present state. It was possible, too, that Tickey Tapp was hanging about, and might be looking for another chance after the Toff was gone.

"I'll help you," said Talbot. "Wait a minute till I get my bag and coat."

"Right yar!"

Talbot hurried back to the stile. He had not thought of his bag and coat when he ran to the rescue. He thought of them too late now. The stile was bare; bag and coat were gone. Talbot compressed his lips with anger. He had little doubt where they were gone. Tickey Tapp had not departed empty-handed, after all.

He glanced about him, without much hope, for a sign of the rogue, but Tickey Tapp had long disappeared. Pursuit was hopeless. The rascal had vanished, and it could not be guessed even in which direction.

"The hound!" muttered Talbot, in helpless anger.

He returned to the grove with slow steps. Captain Coke was on his feet now, examining the empty bottle. He dropped it, with a guilty look, as Talbot appeared.

"Ready, sir?" he stammered.

"Yes," said Talbot shortly.

"Got yer things?"

"That rascal has stolen them."

"Oh, by gum!" said Captain Coke, in dismay. "That's 'ard lines, that is. Collared 'em while you was looking arter me—wot? The rascally Prooshian! Young gentleman, I've got five quids! I'll go 'arves!"

"It's all right. My money wasn't in the bag," said Talbot. "Never mind your five quids. Let's get off."

"I s'pose there ain't no pub near 'ere?"

"No."

"I want some—some water," said Captain Coke. "You're sure there ain't a pub, young gentleman, not in sight?"

"Quite sure. There's a spring a little distance. Looks like clean water."

"Oh, never mind—never mind!" said Captain Coke hurriedly. "Let's get 'orf."

Talbot smiled, and took the stumpy man's shaking arm, and they got 'orf."

CHAPTER 4.

Struck Down!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY snorted. It was an unaccustomed proceeding on the part of Arthur Augustus, the swell of St. Jim's, the glass of fashion and the model of form in the School House.

But he did it.

He was evidently very much perturbed.

Tom Merry & Co. were in the quadrangle after morning lessons. They were discussing the disappearance of Talbot. Blake and Herries and Digby of the Fourth were with the Terrible Three. They were equally concerned about the mysterious departure of the Shell fellow, and they equally failed to make anything of it. It was as he joined the group of juniors in the quad that Arthur Augustus snorted.

"Wotten!" he said.

"Hallo! What's biting you?" said Monty Lowther.

"Nothin' is bitin' me, Lowtah, and I wegard the question as ridiculous, and, in fact, watah coarse. I have been to see the Head."

"What on earth for?" demanded Blake.

"To ask him about Talbot, of course."

"Fathead!"

"I refuse to be called a fathead. I was undah the impression that the Head might explain the mattah to me."

"He wouldn't explain it to us," growled Tom Merry.

"I am quite awah of that."

"Well, ass, do you think he would explain it to you when he wouldn't to us?"

"Yaas," said Arthur Augustus calmly; "I was undah that impression. You see, it is undoubtedly a vewy sewious mattah, and the Head feels that he cannot tell you kids all about it. But, as a fellow of tact and judgment, I—"

"Oh, bow-wow!"

"I do not wegard that remark as even intelligent, Blake!"

"Well, did he explain to you?" demanded Herries.

"He did not! In fact, he was vewy short and sharp," said Arthur Augustus. "He requested me to wetah from his studay at once. He said there was nothin' to be said on the mattah, and requested me to wetah. I was beginnin' to argue, and he weached for his cane; so I thought that pewwaps it would be bettah to go."

"Perhaps it was," grinned Blake.

"Howevah, I wegard it as vewy wotten of the Head. I am considerably disappointed in him. But the mattah does not west heah. Talbot has gone."

"Go hon!"

"Without a word of good-bye—without even tellin' me he was goin', or asking my advice what he's goin' to do. There's somethin' w'ong," said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head seriously.

"Has that just dawned on your mighty brain?" asked Lowther.

"There is somethin' vewy w'ong. Talbot didn't want to go; I know that. He didn't know yestaday that he was goin'; he wasn't the kind of a chap to keep it seewet from his chums if he knew. He has been turned out. But why? We all know vewy well that he hasn't done anythin' wotten."

"Of course we do!" growled Tom Merry. "But the Head must think he has. But he said that Talbot wasn't accused of anything or suspected of anything. Simply that circumstances made it better for him to go."

"Yaas; and those circumstances are what is w'ong. The Head is undah some kind of a misapprehension. We are goin' to set it wight."

"How?"

"By findin' out those extwemely mysterious cires."

"And how are we going to do that?"

"That will wequial some thinkin' out, of course. But you can leave it to me. I will have a big think."

"What with?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

The Terrible Three strolled away. They did not feel sufficient confidence in Arthur Augustus's mighty intellectual powers to leave the matter to him. But what they were to do themselves puzzled them.

There was no opening for an investigation. If Talbot had been accused of something, however bad, they would have had some ground to work on. But he was not accused! If he had been suspected—but he was not suspected! If they had known why he went—but the Head alone knew, and he would not tell them. Talbot had not gone willingly, they were sure of that! Whatever it was that had happened, it had been a blow to Dr. Holmes. They were able to read that in his face. The mystery was utterly baffling. There was nothing to begin upon—nothing to give them a clue.

Yet to let the matter rest where it was—to lose their chum, and to resign themselves to that, without asking questions—that was impossible. Tom Merry felt as if his head would turn round as he tried to think it out.

"If we only knew where he was now," said Tom, for the tenth time, "if he'd only tell us himself why he went—why can't he? I know he's done nothing wrong. Why can't he tell us why he's gone?"

"It beats me!" said Manners.

"Here's Miss Marie!" said Monty Lowther, in a low voice.

The three juniors raised their caps, as the girl came hurrying up to them. Miss Marie's sweet face was very pale. They understood that she had heard the news too. And they knew how she would miss her old chum—as badly as they missed him themselves.

"You've heard, Miss Marie?" said Tom.

"Yes, yes; and I have seen the Head! He will tell me nothing," exclaimed Marie Rivers, in an agitated voice.

"Why has Talbot gone?"

"Nobody knows!"

"But—but it is terrible!" exclaimed Marie. "Did he say nothing to you before he went?"

"Nothing; we were asleep. He went last night."

"He will write—he must write," said Marie. "There is not time yet. I heard it from Wally this morning, and I could not understand! It is strange that the Head does not explain. He knows what old friends the Toff and I are." Marie coloured a little. The Head and the Terrible Three were the only ones at St. Jim's who knew that Marie was the daughter of the reformed cracksmen, John Rivers—now Private Brown in Kitchener's Army. Marie, the "Little Sister of the Poor," the devoted nurse whom all St. Jim's loved and respected, had been the Toff's comrade in the days that were long past.

"Yes, he will write," said Tom Merry. "But if the Head does not tell us, will Talbot tell us?"

"You do not know any reason—whether he has seen anybody he knew—before he came here—"

Tom Merry started a little.

"Tickey Tapp!" he said.

"Who is that?"

"A rotten card-sharper. He had a fellow in our Form in his clutches, and made him sign some papers," said Tom. "He was holding them over the poor rotter's head. Talbot got the chap I'm speaking of out of that. He knew something about Tickey Tapp that he could be sent to prison for, and he made the man give up the I O U's and clear off. But Tickey Tapp can't have anything to do with this."

Marie shook her head.

"I do not see that he could! I cannot understand it! But the Toff will write—he is sure to write!" Marie hurried away towards the sanatorium, and the Terrible Three strolled moodily through the quadrangle.

"Tickey Tapp can't have anything to do with it," said Tom. "Even if the Head knew that Talbot had spoken with him, he couldn't send him away for that. Yet it's odd. It was only last evening that Talbot made the brute give up Gore's I O U's and clear off. When we came back to the school Talbot had no idea that this was going to happen—I'm sure of that! Gore's mixed up in it in some way! He's as good as admitted that he knows something about it. I'd jolly well make him tell us, too—Tom clenched his hands—but he's seedy—he looks such a wreck—a fellow can't rag him!"

"What the dickens is the matter with him now?" said Manners. "He's safe enough, now that Talbot's got his papers back from that rascal. It was that that was worrying him, but that's all over."

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"He knows something about why Talbot's been turned out," said Tom with conviction. "He was looking like a ghost in the Form-room this morning. Linton noticed it, and was light on him. He looks as if he's going to be ill. If he was well, we'd jolly well rag him till he owned up what he knew. But now—"

"Let's ask him," said Manners. "We've asked him once, but—"

Tom Merry nodded. There did not seem much chance of extracting information from Gore, but there was nothing else to do. They looked for the black sheep of the Shell. Kangaroo informed them that he had seen Gore going up to his study, looking like a ghost. Gore's condition was the talk of the house, and it was the general opinion that the best place for him was the sanatorium. The Terrible Three went up to the Shell passage. They found Skimpole, Gore's study-mate, outside the study, with a look of alarm on his face. Skimpole blinked at them through his spectacles.

"I'm glad you fellows have come up," he said. "Gore quite alarms me—I really think he is going to be ill."

"What's the matter with him now?" said Tom Merry gruffly.

"He is talking so strangely," said Skimpole. "Do you fellows think that I look like a policeman?"

"Wha-a-at!" The Terrible Three stared blankly at Skimpole.

"No you do not?" said Skimpole blinking.

"Well, hardly," said Lowther. "You look more like a specimen out of the British Museum than anything else, Skimmy."

"Well, then, why should Gore take me for a policeman?"

"Eh?"

"Perhaps he was joking," said Skimpole. "But he looks very earnest and very frightened. And he is talking very strangely. Listen!"

A voice that was hardly recognisable as Gore's came from the study in wild, loud tones, that gave the juniors a chill as they heard them.

"Ha, ha! I don't care—I don't care! What can you prove? That's what I want to know. What can you prove? I didn't do it—I wasn't there! Safe as houses—safe as houses!"

"Good heavens! What's the matter with him?" exclaimed Tom Merry.

He flung open the door and rushed into the study.

CHAPTER 5.

The Little Sister is Wanted.

GEOERGE GORE was standing by the table.

His hand rested on the table, and he was shaking from head to foot. His face was like chalk, his eyes burning with a wild light. He burst into a laugh as the Shell fellows ran in, a delirious laugh that made their flesh creep.

"Gore! What's the matter?"

"Are you ill?"

Gore stared at them, making a visible effort to pull himself together. It was painful to see how the wretched fellow was trying to control the delirium that mastered him in spite of himself.

"Ill?" he muttered huskily. "No, I'm not ill! Who said I was ill? Talbot? Talbot's gone! He won't come back! He won't say anything! I sha'n't say anything!" His tongue was babbling now; the effort at self-control had passed. "Send for the police! I don't care! Why should I care?"

"Quiet, old chap—"

"Keep it quiet—keep it quiet!" babbled Gore, catching at the word. "Keep it quiet! Talbot won't talk—he's not that sort! Besides, he's a cracksmen—ha, ha! Cracking the 'ead's safe in the middle of the night! Ha, ha!"

Tom Merry felt his very blood run cold.

The junior was delirious—the trouble that had been driving him hard for days had culminated in this at last! He had broken down under the strain. But what did his wild words about Talbot mean?

"Send him to prison!" went on Gore, in the same wild tone. "Send him to prison—the Poff's a cracksmen—send him to prison! Where's the police!"

"Better call the Housemaster," whispered Lowther.

There was a crowd outside the study now. The juniors looked in with awed and wondering faces. Gore did not see them. He was unconscious now of the fellows in the study. His tongue ran on wildly, with unconnected words.

Lowther ran hurriedly down the passage. It was only too evident now that Gore was ill—seriously ill—and that he needed care.

"What on earth's the matter, deah boys?" asked Arthur Augustus, in a scared voice.

"He's delirious," said Tom.

"But—but what—why—"

"Goodness knows!"

"Tickey Tapp!" muttered Gore. "Tickey Tapp! Tickey Tapp! Make your game, gentlemen, I've lost! All my money gone! I'll give you an I O U! Ha, ha!"

"My hat!" said Kangaroo, "that shows what the poor brute's got on his mind!"

"Poor wottah!"

"I say, if the Housemaster hears that, Gore will get into awful trouble!" muttered Blake uneasily.

"Can't be helped," said Tom. "He can't be left like this. He's got to be taken care of."

"Tickey Tapp! Tickey Tapp!" Gore went on. "Marked cards! Talbot knows he swindled me. Fifteen pounds! I can't crack a safe like the Toff. Talbot's cracking the Head's safe! Ha, ha!"

"W-w-what does he mean?" gasped Blake. "It—it can't be possible, that—that— He could not finish."

"Of course it can't," said Tom Merry roughly. "He's delirious—he don't know anything that he's saying."

"But—but it must be in his mind—"

"He's been thinking about Talbot going, and got that into his head, I suppose," said Tom.

"Here comes the Housemaster," said Glyn, from the passage.

The juniors made way for Mr. Carrington to enter the study. The Housemaster was looking very disturbed.

"What does this mean?" he exclaimed. "Lowther tells me that—Gore, what is the matter with you?"

"Keep him away!"

"What?"

"Keep him away!" screamed Gore. "I—I won't go! They sha'n't take me! Talbot—where's Talbot? Talbot will stand by a fellow when he's down. Talbot's worth the whole lot of you! He won't turn up his nose at a fellow when he's in trouble. Lot of cads—that's what you are! Talbot's worth the whole bunch!"

"What ever can be the cause of this?" exclaimed Mr. Carrington, greatly distressed. "The boy is quite delirious. He must be taken to the sanatorium at once."

"Keep him away!" shrieked Gore, as the Housemaster made a movement towards him. "I won't be taken!"

"Gore, my dear boy—"

"I'm not a thief! I'm not—I'm not!"

"What can the unhappy boy be in his mind?" gasped Mr. Carrington. "Surely no one has suspected him of theft?"

"No, sir."

"Yet something must have caused this; it is amazing. He must be taken away at once. Blake, will you go to the sanatorium and ask Miss Pinch to prepare for him?"

Jack Blake cut away at once.

"Now, Gore, my dear boy, come with me," said Mr. Carrington gently.

Gore sprang away as the Housemaster advanced towards him, screaming. Mr. Carrington stopped. The unfortunate junior was evidently quite out of his senses.

"This is dreadful!" exclaimed the Housemaster. "Gore, calm yourself. No one will hurt you. My dear boy—"

Gore laughed wildly.

"Where's Talbot? Talbot will help me out. Talbot will stand by a fellow when all those cads turn up their noses. I'm in awful trouble—awful!"

"Yes, yes, my dear boy; we will take care of you," said Mr. Carrington, almost at his wits' end.

"Perhaps Miss Marie could persuade him, sir," said Manners. "She's awfully clever with invalids."

"Perhaps so. Please ask her to come here, if she will be so kind."

Mr. Carrington made no further attempt to approach the boy. Gore had retreated into a corner of the study, still muttering and mumbling, but at a sign of being touched he seemed to grow frenzied. There was a rustle of a gown in the passage, and the Head stepped in.

"What is it, Mr. Carrington?"

"Gore is ill, sir—delirious. I cannot understand it. He is talking in the wildest way. Manners has gone to fetch the nurse, who may be able to deal with him."

"Gore!" said the Head gently.

Gore stared at him with burning eyes, but did not answer. It was only too clear that he did not recognise Dr. Holmes. The Head made a sign to the startled juniors crowded round the doorway, and they disappeared, wondering greatly. Gore had been so strange in his manner the last few days that more than one fellow had remarked that he seemed to be going "off his rocker." It had evidently happened at last.

"Do you not know me, my boy?" said the Head. "I am your headmaster."

Gore muttered incoherently.

"Come with me, Gore," said the Head, advancing a step.

Gore uttered a shriek.

"Leave me alone! I won't go! It wasn't I—I wasn't there! It was Tickey Tapp—let them take him! Tickey Tapp! Tickey Tapp!"

The Head started.

"What does this mean?" he said, in a low voice. "That is the name of the rascally character whom D'Arcy—"

"Tickey Tapp! Tickey Tapp!" mumbled Gore. "I don't know him—I don't know the man! I'm not a thief! Who dares to say that I am a thief? I tell you I won't do it—I can't! And I won't! All right, old chap; I'll tell you all about it," went on the wretched boy, sinking his voice to a whisper. "You'll help me, I know—you'll stand by me, Talbot—you will! Where's Talbot? Where's Talbot gone?"

"Was this boy very friendly with Talbot, do you know, Mr. Carrington?" asked the Head, as Gore's voice died away in incoherent mumbling.

"He was his study mate—I don't know more than that," said Mr. Carrington. "But Talbot was very popular—everyone liked him. Surely it cannot be simply Talbot's going away that has had this terrible effect on Gore! Surely that is impossible!"

Gore was muttering again.

"Go home? I daren't go home! You don't know what my father's like! If I'm sacked I'll drown myself! You know that pond—the pond on the moor? I thought of it when I was in trouble—" His voice died away again.

There was a light step in the passage, and Miss Marie entered. The Head and the Housemaster turned to her with great relief.

"The boy is delirious," said the Head. "Perhaps you can do something with him, my child. He must be got to the sanatorium."

"I will try, sir."

"He is very excited," said the Housemaster.

Marie came quietly towards Gore. To the great relief of the masters, he simply stared at her dully.

"Come with me, Gore," said Marie, in her sweet, soft voice.

"Where's Talbot?" muttered Gore confusedly. "Talbot can get me out of this! I'm in awful trouble!"

"Let me take care of you," said Marie. "Talbot shall come later. Come!" Her cool hand took Gore's hot and feverish one, and he stumbled blindly as she led him from the study. Somehow the sweet, kind face had calmed him.

From doorways and corners scared faces watched Gore as he went with the Little Sister. He was muttering incessantly as he went, and Marie soothed him, and always the burden of his mutterings was that he wanted Talbot, and that he was in awful trouble.

Ten minutes later Gore was safe in the sanatorium, under the care of Miss Pinch, and tossing restlessly from side to side in his bed, and muttering, muttering without pause wild and incoherent words. The wretched boy, who had perhaps been more sinned against than sinning, had found a heavy punishment.

CHAPTER 6.

Fallen Among Friends.

"T'S jest the legs!" said Captain Coke.

Talbot was very patient. It was very like Talbot to forget his own troubles and preoccupations in helping a helpless stranger. But more than once, as he piloted Captain Coke along the leafy lane, he almost regretted his good nature.

The worthy captain zigzagged dreadfully as he progressed. His potations at the Black Bull overnight and the bottle he had apparently finished while reposing under the trees had completely knocked him over. He explained almost pathetically that his head was clear as a bell, but that he was "drunk in the legs"—and certainly his legs were acting in a totally irresponsible manner. If the gallant captain had been upon roller-skates he could hardly have made wilder plunges.

"Jest the legs!" he murmured. "Always takes me like that! 'Ead as clear as anything, young gentleman; but it sticks to the legs longest. 'Stordinary, ain't it?"

"Very extraordinary," said Talbot, half laughing and half vexed, as the captain made a terrific plunge and threw both his arms wildly round the junior's neck to save himself from a fall.

"This'll be the death of me," said Captain Coke, as they got going again. "If I may make so bold, seeing as you are so kind to a man, I'd give you a word of advice, young gentleman. Don't you never go near a Black Bull, nor a Red Lion, nor yet a Dun Cow. You give 'em a wide berth."

"I intend to," said Talbot.

"That's right," said the captain sagely. "If I'd had the sense to do that I might 'ave been at the top of the tree by now—I might. But if you can't keep away from it, young gentleman, then I gives you another tip—never mix your drinks."

"Oh, come on!" said Talbot. That valuable advice was really superfluous in Talbot's case.

"Never mix your drinks," repeated the captain, determined that his kind young friend should derive full benefit from his painful experiences. "If you begins on rum, you finish on rum. If you begins on whisky, you finish on whisky. But if you takes a rum and then a whisky, and so on—rum and whisky—you'll feel the effects of it in the morning."

"I rather think I should, even without mixing them," agreed Talbot. "Do come on!"

"Right yar! I'm coming!"

That mile to Fernbrook seemed the longest mile to Talbot that he had ever traversed. People who passed them in the lane stared and smiled and laughed. The handsome junior in Etons, and the seedy, dilapidated old roysterer, certainly looked very ill-assorted. An old lady stopped to tell Talbot that it was good of him to take care of his father like that—praise that made Talbot wince. Twice before the village was reached Talbot had hard work to keep the captain from committing assault and battery upon passers-by who smiled too broadly.

But Fernbrook was reached at last, and the captain zigzagged towards the common outside the village, where the circus was pitched.

Talbot gave a start as he came in sight of a big marquee, upon which, in staring letters, was the announcement:

"CHUMGUM'S CELEBRATED CIRCUS!"

"By Jove!" said Talbot. "Is that it?"

"That's it, my kind young friend."

"Chumgum's Circus!" said Talbot. "Why, you were performing near St. Jim's some weeks ago—I know some of the people. Captain Coke—I remember your name now; it was on the bills. My hat!"

Talbot paused irresolutely.

He knew Chumgum's Circus very well—he had paid more than one visit to it with Tom Merry & Co. when it was in the neighbourhood of St. Jim's. The chums were acquainted with some of the performers—Tiny Tony, the clown, and Samsonio, the strong man, and the genial Mr. Charley Chumgum himself.

At any other time Talbot would have been glad to see his acquaintance there, for he liked the breezy, free and easy circus folk.

But now it was different. They would know at once that he was a St. Jim's fellow; they would wonder what he was doing away from his school. He did not want to excite curiosity. Still, he could not desert the shipwrecked captain so close to port. He resolved to pilot Captain Coke home, and take his leave immediately.

"Ere we are agin," said Captain Coke, zigzagging over the rough common. "Ere's some of the boys."

Mr. Chumgum had come out of the tent, and he was staring at them. Tiny Tony, the clown—not in his circus attire now, but in baggy trousers and an ancient Norfolk jacket—came out of a caravan. He burst into a chuckle at the sight of the plunging captain.

"He's come 'ome," remarked Tiny Tony.

Mr. Chumgum frowned.

"So here you are!" he snapped, as the captain was brought to an unsteady halt at last.

Captain Coke blinked and nodded.

"Ere I am," he said. "This young gentleman has seen me 'ome. I lost my way last night, bccs. My sufferings has been something cruel."

"Serve you right!" said Mr. Chumgum.

"I've nearly been robbed and murdered," said the captain. "This young gent saved my life, and brought me 'ome."

"I saved him from having his pocket picked," said Talbot.

"And the rascally Prooshian stole his bag and coat while he was a-doing of it," added the captain.

"That's hard lines," said Mr. Chumgum, looking very curiously at Talbot. "It was very good of you to take care of that worthless idiot, sir. Haven't I seen you before somewhere?"

Talbot nodded.

"I came to the circus with my friends at Wayland," he said. "At Friardale, too."

"Thought I remembered. You belong to the school—St. Jim's?"

"Yes."

"Holiday now?" asked Mr. Chumgum.

Talbot coloured.

"No; I have left. Now Captain Coke is safe, I'll be getting along."

"Don't run away like that," said Mr. Chumgum. "You're among friends here, you know. You're out early. Where did you pick up that baggage?"

"In a wood about a mile from here."

"And you've carted him home," said Mr. Chumgum. "It was very good of you. Better have chucked him in the nearest pond; but it was very kind of you, Master Talbot. I think I remember your name."

"Yes."

"Kindness itself, he was," mumbled the captain. "Stopped that Prooshian who was robbing me, and lost his own bag and coat, he did."

"Tony, yank that boozy brute into his van," said Mr. Chumgum; and the grinning clown dragged the captain away. "I'm sorry you should have lost your things in looking after my lion-tamer, Master Talbot."

"That's all right. It couldn't be helped."

"Going home now?"

"Not exactly."

Talbot could see plainly enough that Mr. Chumgum was surprised and curious. He had said that he had left St. Jim's; but Mr. Chumgum knew, of course, that a fellow who had left his school was very unlikely to be tramping across country with a bag at an early hour in the morning. The circus-master's plump face showed very plainly his suspicion that the junior had run away from school.

"Had your breakfast?" asked Mr. Chumgum.

"No, but—"

"Nor ain't I," said Mr. Chumgum. "You'll stay and have breakfast with me, Master Talbot."

"I—I think—"

"Unless you're too proud to feed along with circus folks—what?"

"Hardly that," said Talbot, with a smile. He could scarcely refuse after that remark, and he realised, too, that the keen country air had sharpened his appetite, and he was quite ready for breakfast. "I'll stay with pleasure."

"Good egg!" said Mr. Chumgum. "This here is my tent. Trot right in."

A little later Talbot of the Shell was seated at the breakfast-table with the stout showman, in a tent from which a wide expanse of the green common and the fields beyond could be seen. When he sat down to breakfast, the Toff realised that he was both hungry and tired, and he was glad of the rest and the meal. The meal was plentiful. Chumgum's Celebrated Circus was doing good business, and at such times Mr. Charley Chumgum & Company "did themselves" remarkably well.

"Tuck in!" said Mr. Chumgum hospitably. "How's all the boys at home—Tom Merry, and Master D'Arcy, and that fine feller Figgins?"

"I left them all well," said Talbot.

Mr. Chumgum looked very thoughtful as he chatted to Talbot during breakfast. The Toff made an excellent meal, and felt much better for it. It was not till it was finished that Mr. Chumgum came to the subject that was chiefly in his mind. He lighted a big black cigar, early as it was, and blew out a tremendous whiff of smoke.

"Now, you won't think me inquisitive, Master Talbot," he said. "I ain't one for asking questions about what ain't my business. But you're a boy, and I'm old enough to be your father. So you'll excuse me."

Talbot nodded without speaking. He knew what was coming, and there was no avoiding it. The genial circus-master meant kindly.

"Not to put too fine a point on it, you've run away from school," said Mr. Chumgum bluntly.

"No."

"No?" said Mr. Chumgum, in surprise.

"Not at all."

"Oh!"

"I've left rather suddenly," said Talbot; "but I have not run away. There was a little misunderstanding with the Head, that was all; but I left with his full knowledge and consent."

"Oh!" said Mr. Chumgum, considerably taken aback. "I'm off the track, then?"

"Yes," smiled Talbot.

"But, excuse me, there's something up, and I can see that. Say the word, and I'll close up like an oyster, and mind my own business," said Mr. Chumgum frankly. "But you've done that idiot of mine a very good turn, and you've lost you're things through it. I don't feel as I ought to let you go away like this. You've said that you're not going home, so I take it you're in a fix."

"Well, yes."

"S'pose you take my advice—which is to go straight home?" suggested Mr. Chumgum.

Talbot coloured painfully.

"I have no home," he said. "I—I used to be connected with some people, but have nothing to do with them now. I was at St. Jim's on a scholarship. I have no people."

"My word! That's hard luck," said Mr. Chumgum. "Might I ask, as a friend, mind you, what you're after now?"

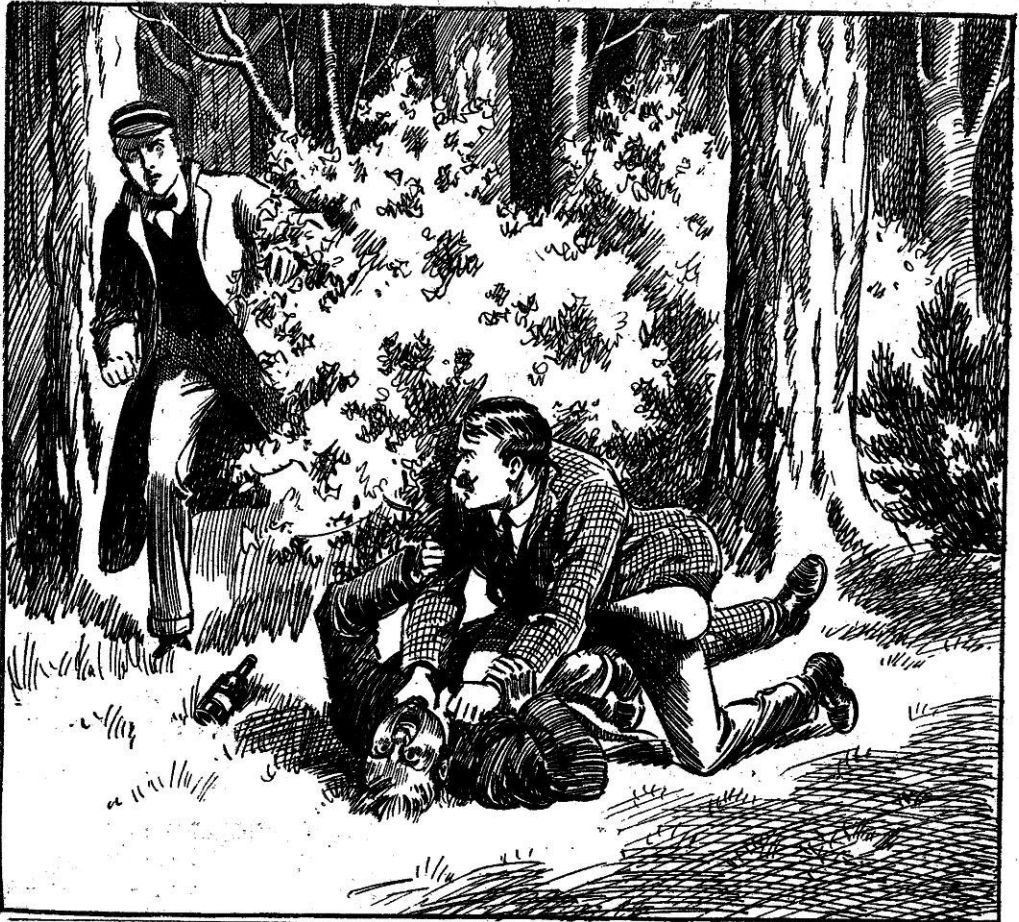
"I shall go to London and get work."

"Pshaw! And how's the money market? Mind you, I'm asking this as a friend."

"Set fair!" said Talbot, with a smile. "I have quite enough money for a long time to come."

"Well, that's lucky—very lucky," said Mr. Chumgum. "But you're a young kid to be going out into the wide world all on your lonely own. I won't ask you any questions about why you left your school, Master Talbot, but I'll say this—ain't it possible for the thing to be arranged?"

"Quite impossible."



The man in checkers swung round in surprise. Talbot knew him now—it was Tickey Tapp, the card-sharper whom he had driven away from Rylocombe. Tickey Tapp was astounded to see him there. "The Toff!" he ejaculated. "At your old game, you scoundrel!" exclaimed Talbot. "Let that man alone at once!" (See Chapter 8.)

"Then let that drop. I take your word that you ain't run away; and I think I'm a judge of faces, and know that you ain't done anything wrong."

"That is quite true."

"Well, then," said Mr. Chungum, "ere you are, a kid, going out to conquer the world and set the Thames on fire—what!"

Talbot laughed.

"Not quite that," he said. "If I get a decent place where I can work for my living, I shall be satisfied."

"What can you do?" asked Mr. Chungum. "I dessay I can give you a bit of advice—if you wouldn't be above taking it. I've been through it myself, you know."

"Well, I can do some things," said Talbot.

"Cricket and football?" grinned Mr. Chungum.

"Yes, certainly."

"I'm afraid they're a drug in the market. Latin and such, I suppose?"

"Pretty fair."

"Werry valuable things," agreed Mr. Chungum. "But there ain't no money in them. Do you know anything about horses?"

"Horses?" said Talbot.

"Yes. Can you ride?"

"Yes, rather!" Talbot was a little puzzled by the question. "I hardly think I have much prospect of getting in that line, however."

"That depends," said Mr. Chungum, with a beaming

smile. "You might come across a man who's willing to give you a few days on trial, and take you on if you are worth your salt—what? Man like me."

"Like you!" said Talbot.

"That's the idea," said Mr. Chungum. "That's it. You stay with the circus a few days—see how you like it, you know. You stay as a guest, and pick up the ways of the place, and the kind of work that's to be done, you know. It'll give you time to think over what you're going to do. And if you like the idea, there's room for an extra rider in Chungum's Circus—fellow who can ride, and is willing to make himself useful. Small pay to begin, of course—a little pocket-money—but you get your keep and your outfit. What do you say?"

Talbot looked blankly at the genial showman. He had been far from expecting anything of the kind.

But he liked the idea.

The life of a circus rider was not exactly what had been in his dreams of the future. But he was not in a position now to pick and choose.

It was quite as good as anything he could hope to find by going to London and joining the crowd of unemployed there.

Indeed, it was very much better. It would enable him to husband his little stock of money, at least, while he was thinking out plans for the future. At present he was totally without plans, excepting that he knew he must find work to keep himself in life and health.

"You are very kind," he said at last. "I hadn't the least idea—"

"Of course you hadn't," said Mr. Chumgum. "But don't run away with the idea that there's any call for gratitude over this. If you're any good you'll be more than worth your keep in the circus. If you turn out well it may be a good thing for you and for me too. And then, if your little trouble should blow over at the school, there you are—you can go back any time."

"That is out of the question."

"Well, then, taking it that you stick to us," said Mr. Chumgum, "you might do worse."

"I might do very much worse," said Talbot. "I don't know how to thank you, Mr. Chumgum."

"Not at all. You've lost your things through helping one of our crowd—worthless, boozing brute, too. You take a week or two to think it over, and during that time you're my guest," said Chumgum.

"No, no! If I stay I work," said Talbot. "I'm not idle, and I don't want to eat the bread of idleness."

"Well, just as you like; I'm an accommodating gent," smiled the showman.

"One word. Are you going near St. Jim's again?" asked Talbot. "I don't want to fall in with any of the fellows there."

"We're making for the coast now; we've thoroughly done that district," said Mr. Chumgum. "Sha'n't be in that neighbourhood again for years, most like."

"Then it's a go, and I'm awfully obliged," said Talbot. "You'll take me on trial, and if I'm worth my keep you'll tell me so."

"Done!" said Mr. Chumgum. And Talbot stayed.

CHAPTER 7. A Baffling Mystery.

"BETTER go on with your prep, Tom!" Tom Merry came out of a gloomy reverie.

The Terrible Three were in their study, and Tom Merry was silent and glum. The long, long day had passed without any news of Talbot, and Tom was not likely so soon to forget his chum.

"No good moping," went on Lowther. "We shall hear from old Talbot sooner or later, Tom—sure to. The Head can't have forbidden him to write."

Tom gave a sigh.

"If a fellow only knew what was up," he said, "but to be mystified like this—it's too rotten. Where can Talbot be now?"

"Goodness knows. But the Head said that he won't be in want, Tom; it won't be like last time."

"If it were I'd go and look for him, Head or no Head," growled Tom Merry. "I suppose we've got to work. Hang the prep!"

The chums of the Shell settled down with their books. They were all feeling gloomy enough, and worried enough, but preparation had to be done.

There was a sudden startled exclamation from Tom Merry as he opened his Latin grammar. It was the first time that day he had opened it.

"What's that? My hat!" A sheet of paper had slipped out on the table.

"Talbot's fist!" "Great Scott!"

Tom Merry caught up the letter. "He must have put that in the book before he left last night!" he exclaimed breathlessly.

"What does he say?"

The three juniors read the note together. Talbot, after all, had not gone away without a word. He had slipped that note into the Latin grammar, where he knew that Tom Merry must find it sooner or later. It was but a few lines, hastily written.

"Dear Tom,—I'm leaving St. Jim's to-night, and I can't even say good-bye to you and the other fellows. I can't tell you why I'm going; it's due to circumstances that simply can't be helped. But I don't think I need tell you that I have done nothing I should be ashamed to tell you. Honour bright, I have done nothing to be

blamed for, unless it was in being reckless. But don't blame the Head either; he was kindness itself to me, and I know it grieved him to see me go. It's just rotten bad luck, and it can't be helped.

"Don't worry about me. I have enough money, and I am not in any danger. It is nothing like it was last time. I may see you again some day perhaps; I hope so. I shall always remember you, and what a brick you've been. Good-bye, old chap!—REGINALD TALBOT."

Tom Merry read the brief letter through thrice, his brows wrinkled. It bore out what he had been certain of—that Talbot had left the school with his honour unstained. Tom Merry would have staked his life on that. But what did it mean? What were the "circumstances" that had driven Talbot away from the school he loved, away from his chums, away from his hope of the future, and made him an outcast?

"It beats me," said Monty Lowther. "Not a word as to why he's gone. Why can't he tell us—his pals?"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Something happened last night," he said—"something with Gore mixed up in it. I'm certain of that. But what it was beats me."

"And there's no getting anything out of Gore, now he's in the sanatorium," said Manners.

"He won't own up," said Tom. "He's afraid to, for some reason. Blessed if I can guess why. But Gore's been moping and queer for days. We thought it was simply the hold that villain Tickey Tapp had over him, but there must have been more than that in it. Talbot's going was the last straw, and Gore seems to have gone fairly off his chump. Talbot was helping him in some way; you remember those things he was babbling. But—"

"But Gore's trouble, whatever it was, that can't have made Talbot go," said Manners. "What can the connection be?"

"I give it up, but it's plain enough that there is a connection," Tom Merry started. "Gore may have done something, and Talbot got the blame for it."

"But the Head said he wasn't accused of anything."

"Or suspected," said Lowther.

"Oh, I give it up! I can't make it out," said Tom Merry, in despair. "Still, there's one thing jolly certain—old Talbot is square as a die, and he's not done anything to deserve this."

Somewhat comforted by Talbot's letter, mysterious as it was, the chum of the Shell settled down to their preparation. But their absent chum was in their minds all the time.

The fellows were still talking over Talbot's strange departure and Gore's illness when the Shell went up to their dormitory.

It was a nine days' wonder in the school; the topic was not likely to be soon forgotten. One or two fellows hinted, that the Toff had been bowled out in something shady, and turned out, but the majority scouted that idea. Crooke of the Shell held that opinion, but he found it unpopular. And when Crooke proceeded to air his opinion in the dormitory he found himself in trouble promptly.

"You heard what Gore was babbling," said Crooke argumentatively, addressing nobody in particular. "Something about Talbot cracking cribs. My idea is that Gore knows all about it, and he's keeping it dark, you know; he was Talbot's study-mate, and he seemed to think a lot of the fellow. I think it's a jolly good thing for the school that he's gone. Something would have come out sooner or later. Leopards don't change their spots, you know, nor giddy Ethiopians their skins, and I never believed in the fellow at all."

"Oh, shut up!" said Kangaroo gruffly.

"I suppose I'm entitled to my opinion," said Crooke. "Talbot was turned out in the middle of the night. Well, then, he must have gone down in the night, mustn't he? Then something happened, and he was kicked out. What could have happened—eh?"

"Oh, rats!"

"Caught in the act, that's what he was," said Crooke sagely, "and the Head let him go instead of sending for

the police. I'd have sent for the police. I don't believe in going easy with thieves."

Tom Merry's patience was exhausted. He strode towards the cad of the Shell with his eyes blazing.

"What are you calling Talbot?" he demanded.

Crooke backed away a little.

"I've got my own opinion," he said, with a sneer.

"You can keep it to yourself, then," said Tom Merry savagely. "Put up your hands, you cad!"

"I— Oh!"

Crooke's hands went up in a hurry as the captain of the Shell hit out right and left.

The next three minutes seemed like an earthquake to Crooke. He was knocked across a bed at last, and lay there gasping.

"Stop that rowing!" said Kildare, coming into the dormitory to see lights out. "Why aren't you in bed?"

"Ow, ow!" howled Crooke. "That beast—"

"Merry!"

"He's slandering Talbot," said Tom Merry, between his teeth. "Why, I'll smash him! The cad! The backbiter!"

"I said he's been kicked out as a thief, and so he has!" yelled Crooke, feeling safe in the presence of a prefect.

But he was mistaken; he was not safe. Tom Merry was on him in a moment, hitting his hardest, and Crooke yelled with anguish.

"Ow, ow! Help!"

Kildare grasped Tom Merry by the shoulder and jerked him away.

"Get to bed!" he said. "As for you, Crooke, you're a beastly little cad, and you deserve all you've got! You'll take two hundred lines!"

"What!" stuttered Crooke.

"And if I ever hear you say anything of that kind again, I'll give you such a licking myself that you'll remember it!" said the captain of St. Jim's. "Now, hold your caddish tongue, and turn in!"

Crooke groaned, and turned in. He was groaning for some time after lights out, but he did not venture to make any more unpopular remarks about Talbot.

CHAPTER 8.

In Direst Peril!

TALBOT had found a warm welcome in the circus.

That afternoon the circus was "on the road" again, and the Shell fellow of St. Jim's travelled with it towards the coast.

The Toff had the gift of making friends, and, after a few hours in the company, he felt that he would be very comfortable with Mr. Chumgum and Tiny Tony, and Captain Coke and Texas Bill, the Broncho Buster, and the rest. Texas Bill—otherwise William Flaherty of Tipperary, whose accent was not at all that of Texas—had given him a trial with his horses, and many words of commendation. The Toff was a good horseman, and, though probably he would not "witch the world with noble horsemanship," still he would be a good and reliable "hand" in the ring. For a time, at least, Talbot made up his mind to remain with his new friends.

When the circus started from Fernbrook Talbot was riding, and leading a couple of horses. It was a new and curious experience for the Shell fellow. He had changed out of his Etons into rough clothes he had purchased in the village, and the change they made in his appearance was great. Captain Coke, who had taken a great fancy to his rescuer, had offered him quarters in his caravan—an offer that Talbot had hesitated at first to accept. But he finally decided to do so, and he put the captain's van into a little better order for him. Captain Coke, when he came back from a final visit to the Black Bull, was astonished by the improvement.

"You're a good lad!" he told Talbot, with affectionate and somewhat incoherent speech. "A goo' lad! I'll look after you, my goo' lad. I'll take care of you. I'll be a father to you. I'll bring you up in the way you should go. If I'd had a goo' friend to set me 'xample, might have been better man. I'll set you goo' 'xample."

And, perhaps by way of setting Talbot a good example, Captain Coke rolled on the floor and went to sleep.

Chumgum's Celebrated Circus stopped at another village for the night, and the big tent was pitched on the common. Talbot found that there was plenty of work to do. Even the majestic Mr. Charley Chumgum himself turned to, and was laborious. It was fortunate that Talbot had no desire to eat the bread of idleness. There was no room for idlers in Chumgum's Circus.

But Talbot was not idle. He worked hard enough, and helped in every way he could, and made himself generally useful. Texas Bill had informed the "boss" that Talbot was quite equal to appearing in the ring on a horse, and Talbot was told that he could take part in a Red Indian act which was superintended by Mr. Flaherty. In the dressing-tent the junior grinned at his reflection in the glass, in fringed leggings and war-paint, with half a dozen other "hands" who were to play the part of Redskins in Texas Bill's turn. It was hard for him to realise that only the day before he had been a St. Jim's fellow.

He did not feel nervous about his first appearance. The part given him was so exceedingly "super" that there was nothing to feel nervous about. He simply had to stick on his horse and yell. When the performance was going on, as soon as the turn came, he rode into the ring with the rest, and went through his modest part with perfect success. After the turn he had nothing to do but kill time, until the rest of the performance was over; but he went into Captain Coke's van to see how the lion-tamer was getting on.

Talbot had taken rather a liking to the worthy captain, who was a thoroughly good-natured and good-tempered fellow. His wretched vice of drunkenness made the junior feel compassionate towards him. He was anxious about him too. The captain's potations were undermining his health, and, considering that he had to appear in a somewhat dangerous performance, were the worst possible preparation he could make for it.

Talbot found the captain already in fleshings, looking exceedingly plump and stumpy in his professional attire. There was a clink of a bottle and a glass as Talbot came in, and the lion-tamer looked round rather guiltily.

"Oh, it's you, kid!" he said. "Thought it was old Chumgum. Old Chummy is a worry."

The spirit gurgled out of the bottle.

Talbot looked at him gravely.

"Is that safe, when you're going to appear with the lions?" he said.

"It's a bad habit," agreed Captain Coke at once. "Don't you ever get into it, my boy. A low, rascally bad 'abit!"

"Then why do you do it?" asked Talbot.

"Must!" said the captain dolorously. "You see, I've got no nerves left. If I didn't take a pick-me-up before I go on, I'd never be able to 'andle the lions. I have to get up my nerve."

"It won't pay in the long run."

"It's breaking me up," said Captain Coke. "But I'm a victim—an un'appy victim! If I'd 'ad a experienced friend to give me good advice when I was your age I'd never 'ave touched it. Never! Old Charley threatens to sack me every week. I shall die in the workhouse, and serve me right!"

And, having made that frank confession, the captain proceeded to take a gulp of the potent liquor.

"For goodness' sake don't overdo it!" said Talbot. "Do you do this every time before a performance?"

"'Ave to, or I shouldn't 'ave any nerve," said the captain, with a sigh. "I'm an un'appy victim! Don't you ever touch it. It's your worst enemy. The sale of intoxicating liquors," proceeded the captain sagely, "ought to be prohibited. It's disgusting. Man drops into the 'abit without thinking, and then the 'abit gets too strong for him and he can't break it, and he's a victim like me. If I 'ad my free choice, my young friend, I'd never drink anything but milk—pure milk fresh from the cow. Where's that bottle?"

Talbot eyed him uneasily. If this was the captain's usual method of preparing for a performance, it was useless to comment; and, besides, he had no right to give advice to a man old enough to be his father. But he could not help feeling that Captain Coke was over-doing it.

"I suppose the lions are pretty tame?" he remarked. "The lioness is a daisy," said the captain, "but her mate—he's a corker. I've to keep him in, and, I can tell you. Some day when I've 'ad a drop too much he'll 'ave me into ribbons, and serve me right!"

The spirit gurgled again. "For goodness' sake, don't take any more!" exclaimed Talbot, moving to interfere. "You'll have an accident in the cage!"

The captain lurched against the side of the van. Talbot put the bottle and glass into the locker and closed it. Captain Coke blinked at him. Then he made his way unsteadily from the van.

Talbot followed him uneasily. If this was the captain's custom there was probably nothing to feel alarmed about; but the boy could not help feeling alarmed. Mr. Chumgum's voice could be heard calling:

"Where's Captain Coke? Don't he know we're waiting for him? Where is he?"

"Here yar, boss!" "You've been at it again!" roared Mr. Chumgum, as he caught a potent whiff of the lion-tamer.

"Just a drop—a mere drop—as the young gentleman will tell you."

"You leave this circus on Saturday!" Captain Coke drew himself up with dignity, resting his hand on Talbot's shoulder to do so.

"If my services ain't required in this yar circus," he said, "I'll go! I shall take the public with me. I warn you of that, Mr. Charley Chumgum!"

"Is the fool too drunk to go on, do you think, Bill?" asked Mr. Chumgum, not paying the slightest attention to the captain's dignified retort.

Texas Bill shrugged his shoulders. "Not more squiffy than usual, boss—not much more, anyway, bedad!"

Mr. Chumgum eyed the captain anxiously. Captain Coke was a sore trial to the circus master. He was too good-natured to carry out his constant threats of sacking the captain; and, besides, the lions were a great draw in the circus when the captain did his turn creditably.

"Oh, you ass—you hass!" said Mr. Chumgum emphatically. "You remember you were nearly tore to rags at Friardale, and you can't stop playing the fool like this!" "I was drunk that time," protested the captain.

"And what are you now, you brute?" "Fit as a fiddle, boss—fit as a fiddle. You'll see." "Well, you've got to go," said Mr. Chumgum. "They're waiting for you, and they must be getting fed-up with Tony's gags by this time. Get on, and walk as straight as you can, you idiot!"

Captain Coke made an effort and pulled himself together, and went into the ring. The circus-master

watched him anxiously from the opening in the tent, and so did Talbot. The big cage, containing a lion and a lioness, was already in the arena, and Tiny Tony had been keeping the audience in good humour, while they waited for the lion-tamer, by cracking a succession of ancient chestnuts, which were probably new to the unsophisticated inhabitants of Westwood.

"They'll be trouble sooner or later," Mr. Chumgum growled. "I shall have to sack him for his own sake. It'll come to that. He's squiffer than usual this evening. And after what happened before, when he had to be dragged out of the cage—" Mr. Chumgum finished with an angry snort.

He proceeded to ascertain that the assistants with the hot irons were ready, in case of trouble with the lions. That was a precaution Mr. Chumgum never neglected. Talbot stood watching the lions' cage. Captain Coke had walked fairly straight till he reached it. But the junior could see that he was in no state to deal with lions, unless

they were very tame indeed. The captain opened the cage door and entered, closing the door after him.

There was a murmur of applause from the audience. Talbot noted that the captain had not fastened the iron door, and that it had swung several inches open again after him. He continued to watch uneasily.

The captain held on to a bar of the cage as he cracked his whip. Mr. Chumgum went into the ring, resplendent in his white shirt and diamond studs and silk hat. He approached the cage, and spoke to the lion-tamer through the bars.

"Coke, you idiot, if you can't do your work, come off. What's the good of hanging on to that bar and cracking your silly whip?"

Captain Coke blinked at him. He looked as if he would fall down if he let go the upright. The lion was growling.

"Come out of that cage!" said Mr. Chumgum. "I'll cut the turn, and tell 'em in front that you're ill."

"I ain't ill," said the captain. "No, you're tipsy, you brute!" said Mr. Chumgum, in deep disgust. "Come out, I tell you. I don't like the looks of that animal. He knows you can't handle him."

"You see!" Captain Coke flicked the lion with his whip. There was a thunderous roar from the great beast, and he crouched, as if for a spring. By some instinct he had realised that the tamer was not in a condition to subdue him. Captain Coke blinked at him, the whip falling from his hand without his even noticing it. Some sense of his danger came to his confused, liquor-soaked brain, and he backed unsteadily to the door of the cage, the lion growling furiously as he watched him. Talbot came quickly into the ring. His heart was thumping with anxiety for the captain now. But the wretched man succeeded in backing out of the cage.

He reeled towards Mr. Chumgum, and caught hold of him, almost dragging him down.

"You've left the door open, you fool!" panted the circus-master, trying to free himself from the captain's clasp. The lion door of the cage was wide open. The lion had observed it at once, and he stalked towards it, his tail lashing. There was a buzz and a yell among the audience, who could see that there was something wrong now. In a few seconds more the lion would have been out of the cage, and there would have been panic.

Talbot, without stopping to think, ran towards the door to close it. The great head, with its bristling mane, had already emerged, when Talbot slammed the door. It slammed on the muzzle of the lion and drove him back, and a fearful roar reverberated through the circus. Talbot secured the iron bolt just in time, and sprang back as a huge claw came lashing through the bars of the cage. The bars were too close to allow the paw to pass through, or the junior would have been badly clawed.

There were wild cries and trampling of feet among the audience, and a crashing of overturned benches as they struggled for the exit. Mr. Chumgum threw off the captain, who pitched helplessly into the tan, and shouted desperately:

"Ladies and gentlemen! Take your seats! Take your seats! It is only the performance—simply the performance! No cause for alarm!"

Tiny Tony, with great presence of mind, started a hornpipe, dancing round and over the captain as he lay in the tan. The commencing panic was stilled; the circus-master's veracious statement banished the fears of the people "in front." The good folk of Westwood, looking considerably sheepish, scrambled back to their seats. The lion's cage was at once wheeled out of the arena.

"Ladies and gentlemen," pursued Mr. Chumgum, who had certainly not been brought up at the feet of George

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Marie was standing by the patient's bed as the Head entered the little ward. The subdued light showed Gore's pale, feverish face. His eyes were wide open, but had no recognition in them. He was staring blankly at the ceiling. He made no sign as the Head approached the bedside. It was evident that he did not recognise him—did not know that he was there. (See Chapter 11.)

Washington, "I regret that alarm has unintentionally been caused by the new act—the thrilling scene just introduced to your notice. Pray keep your seats—no cause whatever for alarm."

"Brave-ho!"

"My only hat!" murmured Talbot, astonished by Mr. Chumgum's quickness of wit and reckless disregard for the facts.

Captain Coke staggered to his feet, and Mr. Chumgum, Tiny Tony, and Talbot, immediately seized him, whipped him up, and carried him struggling out of the ring, amid shouts of laughter from the audience, who took that for part of the performance, too.

Rab Rabbi, the Indian juggler, immediately went on, and Tiny Tony somersaulted back into the ring. Mr. Chumgum wiped the perspiration from his brow when he was safe out of the view of the audience. Samsonio, the Strong Man, picked up the captain as if he had been an infant, and carried him to his van.

"My word!" gasped Mr. Chumgum. "My word! If—if that lion had got out—oh, my word! It would have been the ruin of Chumgum's Circus! Why, they'd have tramped one another to death if the panic had fair

started! It would have been in all the papers! It'd have been ruin!"

Talbot smiled a little. If the lion had escaped, there would certainly have been a terrible ending to the evening performance. Even if the brute had not touched the struggling crowd, there would have been many injured, and perhaps killed, in the panic-stricken rush to escape. The worthy showman was evidently thinking chiefly of the harm that would have been done to his circus, however.

"And you stopped him, kid," went on Mr. Chumgum. "Where did you get your nerve from? Why, his blessed head was nearly touching you when you slammed the door on him. You might have been—might have been—" Charley Chumgum faltered. "You've saved some lives this night, young 'un, and saved Chumgum's Circus!"

"Lucky I got it shut in time," said Talbot cheerily. "Lucky," repeated the circus-master with a shudder. "I don't dare to think of what would have happened. It must have been Providence that brought you to the circus to-day, young 'un. Thank goodness you were there. My word!"

Mr. Chumgum gasped, almost overcome.

"As for that drunken brute, he shall never give another performance in my circus," he exclaimed. "He can go, and take his blessed lions with him, hang him."

And Mr. Chumgum meant it this time.

Talbot, feeling rather sorry for the unfortunate captain, much to blame as he had been, went away to the van to see how he was getting on. Captain Coke lay on the floor of the van, snoring. Talbot made him as comfortable as he could, and left him.

CHAPTER 9.

A New Leaf.

HUMGUM'S Circus travelled on by easy stages to the coast during the next few days.

Every evening Talbot took his little part in the programme—a part that was growing bigger now, as Texas Bill's riding performance was extended. The lion-taming act had been cut out, and the boss had not yet filled the place with another turn.

Talbot soon grew to like his work; and his general willingness to lend a hand, and his courageous act on his first night in the circus, had made him very popular.

He still shared Captain Coke's van, for the captain, though sacked, and not sharing in the performances, remained with the circus.

Mr. Chumgum had made up his mind—the lion-tamer was not to appear again. Talbot could not doubt the justice and wisdom of that decision, but he was very sorry for the captain, who found his means of livelihood gone. His contract with the boss had long ago run out, and Mr. Chumgum had wisely refused to renew it. The captain was the owner of the lions and of the van he travelled in. Every morning the boss invited him to take himself off—but the captain dispiritedly travelled along with the circus, perhaps hoping that Charley Chumgum would relent.

"It's all my own fault," he told Talbot a dozen times. "It serves me right. I'm a victim, but it serves me right."

"It does," agreed Talbot at last.

"Oh!" said the captain, somewhat taken aback by this assent. "Course, it wouldn't 'appen again, you know."

Talbot shook his head.

"I'm one of them fellers as is nobody's enemy but their own," said the captain pathetically. "I never 'ad anybody to give me good advice when I was your age, young 'un! Don't you never touch a drop!"

"I won't!" said Talbot, smiling. "You can depend on that."

"The boss is 'ard-earted," sighed the captain. "I've offered to sign the pledge agin—that'll be for the fifth time since Christmas. And it 'olds good for a year, you know. He knows I can't get taken on anywhere else—they'd think I was a regular boozer, you know. Properly speakin', I'm a teetotaller."

"Why don't you become a teetotaller really?" urged Talbot. "A man in your line of business is simply dotty to drink at all."

"Don't I know it?" groaned the captain. "But I'm an un'appy victim. I has to take it to get up my nerve for the performance."

"But you're not performing now."

"Well, I—I—hum!" said the captain, taken aback by that argument. "But the boss will come round, you know, and then—I shall be a victim agin."

"Now, look here," said Talbot, "you've given me a lot of good advice, captain."

"I 'ave," said Captain Coke, "and I 'ope you'll benefit by it, my boy."

"I hope so," assented Talbot; "but one good turn deserves another, and now I'm going to give you some advice."

"Go 'ead," said the captain. "Somebody's allers giving me advice, and why shouldn't you 'ave your turn?"

"You know what might have happened the other night," said Talbot. "You might have had human lives to answer for."

"Don't I know it? If you 'adn't been there, and brave as a lion yourself, young 'un—"

"Never mind that! There might have been serious injuries and any amount of loss for Mr. Chumgum, who's been a good boss to you!"

"I knows it."

"Well, then, for your own sake, and for his, it's up to you to chuck up this rot," said Talbot.

"I've told him I'm willing to sign the pledge ag'in," said the captain disconsolately. "I'd sign it twice over, if he asked me, that I would!"

"Never mind the pledge. The four you've signed are enough in that line. Make up your mind, and stick to it, and let me help you."

"Ow can you help me?"

"I'll remind you of your resolve whenever you begin playing the giddy goat," said Talbot. "So long as I'm with you, I'll see that there's never any of that muck in the van."

"Will you really?" murmured the captain, not very heartily.

"I will, really! You see, you only take it to keep up your nerve for the performance."

"Course I do! I'm an 'appy victim!"

"So, now you're not performing, you've got a first-class chance of getting out of the habit."

"So I 'ave."

"And if the boss saw you going steady for a few weeks, he'd come round very likely. He doesn't want to part with you."

"You—you think so?"

"I'm sure of it!"

"Blessed if I don't try!" exclaimed the captain, with a burst of energy. "It's ruin—that's what it is! Puttin' an enemy into your mouth, you know, to steal away your brains. Why, the very dorgs and 'orses 'ave too much sense to touch it. You show whisky to a dog, and see him skip off—he's got too much sense. Kid, I'll do it, and p'r'aps the boss will come round. Mind, arter this, not a drop! Not a smell of it! You ever see any liquor in this van, you pour it away."

"I will!"

"Promise me!" said the captain, evidently very determined—for the moment, at least.

"Honour bright!" grinned Talbot.

"Good! Now I feel easier in my mind," said the captain. "Why, I feel a new man already! Why, this means a new life to me, kid! I'll jest take one drink to the new life, and it's the last drop as'll pass my lips."

He opened the locker, and Talbot reached out the bottle and pitched it out of the window. Captain Coke uttered a wild yell.

"Whatever you doing?"

"Keeping my promise."

"Oh, by gum! I—I didn't exactly mean— Oh, dear! Do you know that bottle of whisky cost three-and-six?"

"You gave three-and-six for a bottle of whisky at a time when a lot of poor people are hard up through the war!" said Talbot severely. "Next time you've got three-and-six to spare, spend it on socks for the soldiers!"

"Oh!"

"You are thirsty?"

"Dry as a limekin!" groaned the captain.

"I'll get you some water."

"Oh! D-d-don't trouble! I ain't so very thirsty, now I come to think of it."

Talbot left him looking very dispirited. To the wretched man's constitution, soaked with liquor, the poison had become a necessity. But there was no doubt that he was better without it. Indeed, after a few days, during which he kept his resolve, the captain's improved state of health surprised himself.

On the strength of a week's sobriety, he urged the boss to give him another chance. Mr. Chumgum was adamant.

"When you've been steady sober for a month, we'll see," he replied. "If you don't like that, travel off, and a good riddance to you! You can drink yourself to death outside my circus!"

But the unfortunate captain did not care to travel off.

His brain was clearer after a few days without his favourite poison, and every day he repeated to Talbot his stern resolve to keep steady. He found a great deal of help in Talbot. When he wandered away in the direction of a Black Bull or a Red Lion the junior called him to order and argued with him. He really had a regard for the weak, good-natured captain, and would have been very glad to see him reinstated in Mr. Chumgum's good books.

The companionship of the healthy schoolboy, too, had a good effect upon the captain. He began to feel ashamed of the smell of liquor that clung lovingly about his breath, and of the frowsy slovenliness that was the result of drinking habits. The change that came over the captain was remarked with wonder by Mr. Chumgum.

"You're making a new man of that silly hass, kid," he said. "Keep him up to the mark, and I'll let him have his job again next week."

"Can I tell him so?" asked Talbot cheerily.

"Yes; he'll have his chance as soon as he feels that he doesn't need whisky to steady his nerves for the performance," grinned Mr. Chumgum.

"Good!"

Talbot imparted that information to the captain.

"I'm sticking to it," said Captain Coke determinedly; "I mean business. You keep an eye on me, young 'un. I've weak moments, that's all. I've been a victim for so long—an un'appy victim. You see me go near a Red Lion or a Blue Boar, and you yank me away by my 'air. You promise that?"

"Honest, Injun!"

Talbot made the promise and kept it; but the next time he found the captain heading for a public-house and "yanked" him away there was a warm argument. But the captain gave in.

"You're right, kid!" he said, at last. "It was a blessing for me that you came to the circus. I'm sticking to it."

And a few days later Talbot had the satisfaction of seeing his new friend resume his turn in the circus—without fortifying himself with potent liquors.

Meanwhile, Talbot had settled down to his new life, and his care of his friend the captain helped to keep him from thinking of the past or brooding over it. Already his life at St. Jim's seemed to have faded away behind him, like his former life as the "Toff"—though often the thought of his old friends came sadly enough into his mind. But it was useless to brood, and he tried to drive regrets from his mind, and, at all events, he succeeded in keeping cheerful.

CHAPTER 10.

The Secret.

TOM MERRY & CO., too, were growing used to it. For the first few days the departure of their chum left a blank in their lives, but they grew accustomed to it.

Not that they were likely to forget Talbot.

Tom Merry hoped always that the trouble, whatever it was, would be cleared away, and that his chum would take his old place in the school. He never lost that hope. But, like Talbot, he felt that it was useless to brood, and he went about his usual occupation as cheerfully as he could.

Miss Marie had told him of a letter she had received. The Toff had informed her that he had found friends and work—that was all. He did not tell her where he was, or why he had left the school. It was evidently because he dreaded to be asked for an explanation that he could not give.

But Marie was comforted to know that he was well and not in want. She, too, hoped that the cloud would roll by, and that the Toff would return.

Meanwhile, George Gore was a patient in the sanatorium, under the care of Miss Pinch and the Little Sister.

The unhappy boy's delirium had passed off, but he was in a very weak and low state, and he remained under the care of the nurses till he should be restored to strength.

He was in his right senses, but he lay silent and gloomy, and Marie could guess easily enough that there was a trouble on his mind. But she did not question him. He was in no state to be questioned.

His father had come down to see him—a grim-faced old gentleman, who had stayed a quarter of an hour, and who left the patient in very low spirits.

Gore's illness was a general puzzle, and the Head and the Housemaster were both waiting for him to become stronger, in order to question him about his mysterious references to Tickey Tapp and other matters.

Probably the wretched junior knew that inquiries must follow his recovery, and that had a retarding effect. At all events, he did not improve.

A week had passed since his admission to the sanatorium, and he was worse instead of better, though no longer delirious.

But once or twice, as Marie sat watching him, she heard him beginning to mutter inconsequently a warning of what was to come.

The Little Sister was kindness itself to him.

Tom Merry & Co. frequently came to the sanatorium to ask after Gore. Tom Merry had not lost his conviction that Gore, if he liked, could unveil the mystery of Talbot's disappearance.

But Gore expressed no desire to see any of his Form-fellows.

Marie read to him sometimes, but he hardly listened. Dr. Short was puzzled by the case. He came to the conclusion that the junior had something on his mind.

But Gore said no word.

Only to Marie he gave a hint of the trouble that was in his miserable thoughts.

"Any news of Talbot?" he asked suddenly, while the Little Sister was reading to him.

Marie laid down her book, surprised by the question.

"He is well," she said.

"He's not coming back?" asked Gore.

"I don't know; I hope he will, some day."

"You're awfully good to me, Miss Marie," said the Shell fellow miserably. "You liked Talbot, didn't you?"

"He was my best friend," said Marie quietly.

"He was a splendid chap," said Gore. "He would help a fellow when he was down; he wouldn't turn up his nose and pass on the other side, like a rotten Pharisee. He'd been through things himself, and he'd understand a fellow getting into a fix. You know, some of the fellows were down on him because of what he'd been—when he was called the Toff. I never was! I'm glad of it now. I never thought he'd be such a brick, though. I don't know why he should."

"You miss Talbot?" asked Marie, a little puzzled.

"He wasn't exactly a pal of mine, either," said Gore. "That makes it all the more surprising."

"What is surprising?"

Gore did not answer that question.

"What would you think of a chap who played him a dirty trick, Miss Marie?" he said.

"You have not done anything of that sort, I am sure."

"But suppose I had?"

"Then I am sure you are sorry for it."

Gore gave a groan, and was silent.

His words had puzzled the Little Sister. The thought came into her mind, as into Tom Merry's, that Gore must know something of the reason of Talbot's mysterious departing. It was the following night that she learned more.

Gore had been uneasy and feverish all day, and at night Miss Marie had decided to stay up with him. The hour was growing late, and the Little Sister sat quietly, her kind eyes on the patient. Gore was tossing restlessly, and mumbling and muttering. The delirium was coming on again, but he showed no signs of violence; he was too weak for that. His head moved feebly and restlessly on his pillow, and his eyes, full and heavy, had no consciousness in them. As the night advanced, his mutterings grew louder and more incessant; from feverish, disconnected words, he began to speak more coherently.

The Little Sister watched him patiently, unheeding the strange words that poured from his lips. It was not the first time she had heard the rambling talk of a

fevered patient. She remembered the time when Talbot of the Shell had lain there, after Tom Merry & Co. had rescued him from hunger and cold in London; how he had lain for days and nights, not knowing where he was, not recognising the kind faces round him. She was thinking of that, when she started suddenly at the sound of a sentence from Gore's dry lips.

"I can't let you do it, Talbot! I can't! I'm a coward, a brute; to let you do it! Suppose—suppose you are caught there!"

Marie started violently.

The muttering voice ran on:

"What a good chap you are, Talbot—the only chap that'll help me in this awful scrape! I'm in awful trouble, old man—awful! It means the sack for me, and I daren't go home; you don't know my father! He'd turn me out. I didn't mean to be a thief; you know that, don't you? You see, Linton sent me there; that's how it was. I was to go to the Head to be caned, and was it my fault he had left the safe open? What did the Head leave the safe open for? It was careless. Putting temptation in a chap's way. He didn't know I was so hard up. Where was I to get fifteen pounds from? Tickey Tapp wouldn't let me off. He was going to the Head! That meant the sack! You'll help me, Talbot; lend a fellow a hand when he's down! No, it's too risky—too risky! Suppose the Head should see you there!"

Marie trembled.

Gore's voice died away in low mutterings. Marie sat motionless, her brain in a whirl. What had Gore done? What had Talbot done? Had the Toff—always generous to a fault—got himself into some inextricable scrape for the sake of his study-mate?

Gore's voice came clear and loud again.

"I know you can do it! Mind, it's your own suggestion, but think of the risk! Twelve one-pound notes and twelve for ten bob! Count 'em! My head's no good; I can't count! The Head hasn't missed them yet, I know that. There'd have been a row—an awful row! Then they'd have spotted me. They've all noticed there's something wrong with me. They'd guess at once. I know you can open the safe, but think of the risk! Put 'em back where I found 'em; I never meant to take them. I was quite off my dot. I swear I meant to put them back myself, only the Head wouldn't leave the safe open a second time. I dodged into his study twice to see if it was open, but it wasn't. Fifteen pounds! Tickey Tapp! Put it all back for me, and I shall be square. I'm not a thief! Hush, hush! Suppose some of the fellows wake up; they'll ask you where you're going! Hush!"

Marie clasped her hands together, the tears were running down her cheeks. She began to understand now.

"I sha'n't sleep while you're gone, Talbot. Come back as quick as you can. Think of the risk! Suppose the Head should catch you at the safe! You won't tell him about me, you won't? I'll own up if you're bowled out—I'll own up! It's the sack for me! I'll own up, though—I'll own up! I won't let you get sacked for me, Talbot, I swear I won't! No, I daren't! Mum's the word! My head's going round. I won't say a word! I don't know anything about it, anything at all! Not a word! How can I own up and be sent home? Where's Talbot?"

The wretched boy babbled on without a pause.

CHAPTER 11.

Light at Last.

DR. HOLMES was seated in his study, with a frown upon his brow. His beloved *Æschylus* was before him, but the Greek letters danced before his eyes.

He was thinking.

Somehow or other, the thought of Talbot would come back into his mind. Where was the boy now? Not a word had come from him to the Head since he had left, but the doctor had seen the letter to Marie. That was all the news he had.

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The more the Head thought over the matter the more perplexed he was. He had found Talbot at the safe, the door open, as only the skilful fingers of the Toff could have opened it, the stolen notes in his hand.

He could not doubt the evidence of his eyes.

Talbot had not even attempted an explanation. He had had nothing to say. He was a thief; after so long a struggle he had fallen back into the old ways of the Toff, the comrade of Hookey Walker and the Professor.

Yet the Head knew that the Toff had fought hard to keep from falling back into the old life; he knew that the boy had suffered rather than yield to the persuasions and menaces of his old associates.

He had been free from all that; and then he had fallen, unpersuaded, unmenaced. He had deliberately thrown up everything.

Why?

At times the Head was tempted to ask himself whether there had not been some fearful mistake. Yet how could he doubt what he had seen? There was no room for doubt; yet he still felt kindly towards the unhappy boy. Talbot had done his best to resist evil, even if he had fallen at last; he was sure of that.

The hour was late. Dr. Holmes started from his reverie as a tap came upon his study window. He started to his feet.

Tap!

In great astonishment, the Head advanced to the window and opened it. In the starlit night without he recognised the Little Sister.

Marie's face was pale, her eyes shining with tears.

"My dear child," exclaimed the Head, "what—"

"I saw the light from your window, sir, and I could not get into the house; it was closed," said Marie hurriedly. "Will you come to the sanatorium?"

"Gore—he is worse?"

"He is delirious, and talking. But—but first, before you see him, you will make me a promise, sir?"

"I—I don't understand."

Marie breathed hard.

"It is important that you should know what Gore is saying. But he is my patient, I am his nurse, and I could not betray his secret to harm him. You understand that? Whatever should happen to Talbot, I could not betray the patient under my care."

"To Talbot?" said the Head. "What has Gore to do with Talbot?"

"You will see; but—before you come—you will promise me that Gore shall not suffer. He has suffered enough; you will see that when you listen to him. He has done wrong, but he has suffered for it. And unless his mind is relieved, he will be worse; perhaps the worst will happen. You will promise me that he shall not be sent away from the school."

"Why—why should you think that I would send him away?"

"Promise me."

"But—"

"Or you cannot see him," said Marie resolutely. "I am his nurse, and he is in my charge, and I cannot let harm come to him because of what he has said. It would be treachery."

"I understand you, my dear child," said the Head kindly. "Neither should I feel justified in making use of a discovery made through the poor boy's delirium. You may rest assured that Gore shall not suffer."

Marie gave a little cry of relief.

"Then come, sir, come! I have left him to call you; you will understand then what Talbot did. One word. Did you find Talbot here at your safe that night—the night he went?"

"How can you know?"

"Come to Gore, and you will understand; as soon as you can."

"I will come at once."

Marie flitted away in the starlight.

The doctor turned from the window in great astonishment. What was he to learn now? What did Gore know of Talbot's strange action on that mysterious night? It was impossible that George Gore could tell anything to clear Talbot, for it was not a case of suspicion or accusation. As the Head had told Tom Merry, there was

no accusation against his chum; there was no suspicion. The Head had found him at the open door of the safe in the small hours of the morning. It was a thing that could not be explained away. But the doctor lost no time in hurrying to the sanatorium. He was puzzled and keenly interested. He knew that Marie must have had a powerful reason for thus calling him at nearly midnight.

Marie was standing by the patient's bedside as he entered the little ward. The subdued light showed Gore's pale, feverish face. His eyes were wide open, but had no recognition in them; he was staring blankly at the ceiling, unseeing. He made no sign as the Head approached the bedside. It was evident that he did not recognise him, did not know that he was there.

He was speaking—in tones now low, now raised, speaking almost incessantly, the words tumbling over one another from his lips. Sometimes the wretched boy seemed to fancy that he was speaking to Talbot, sometimes to the Head, sometimes to Tickey Tapp, the rascal who was the cause of all his misery.

Marie did not speak.

She made the Head a sign to listen, and Dr. Holmes stood silent by the bedside while the boy babbled on.

A strange change came over his face. He started in utter amazement at what he heard, and drew a deep, deep breath.

For the torturing thoughts in the sick boy's mind came from his tongue again and again, telling the wretched story over and over.

In half an hour, as he stood by the bedside, without word or motion, the Head learned it all, much that he had half suspected, concerning Gore's dealings with Tickey Tapp, much more that he had never dreamed of, concerning Talbot and the help he had so generously and recklessly given the unhappy victim of the sharper.

How the wretched boy had fallen into the clutches of the card-sharper, how he had, in desperation at his losses, signed I O U's, which Tickey Tapp held against him, which he could not meet, how the sharper had counselled him to help himself from richer fellows in the school, threatening to take his signed papers to the Head if his claims were not met. That he was not a thief, that he would not be a thief, came over and over again from the babbling lips.

The Head, as he listened, could feel nothing but compassion. Gore had done wrong, but he had suffered for it. What he had suffered was more severe than the punishment he had dreaded in case of discovery.

How Mr. Linton had sent him to the Head to be caned, how he had found the study empty, the safe door unlocked, how in a moment of madness he had taken the money he needed to save him from the card-sharper's

threats—it all came babbling from the delirious boy's lips. The Head remembered that day the talk with the Housemaster which had kept him away from his study, forgetful of the safe he had just unlocked; he had found the study empty on his return, and locked up the safe, never dreaming that it had been visited, never missing the money that had been taken. Twelve one-pound notes and twelve for ten shillings—again and again the delirious boy asked Talbot to count them, to make sure they were right, living over again the scene in his study when Talbot had come to his help, to get him out of that dreadful scrape. Again and again he repeated that it was too risky, that he had haunted the Head's study in the hope of finding the safe unlocked again, so that he could restore what he had taken, but he never found it so; again and again he repeated that he was not a thief.

In the wild, wandering, broken sentences, it all came out—how Talbot had offered to save him, using his old skill as a cracksmen to open the safe and replace the stolen notes, how he had regained those papers from Tickey Tapp which the sharper was holding over Gore's head, and had driven the rascal away with threats. The doctor passed his hand over his eyes. That was the explanation, that was why he had found Talbot at the open safe in the dead hours of the night; he had gone there to replace what Gore had taken, to save his study-mate from disgrace and ruin, to save him from being a thief against his will.

And, caught in the act, the generous lad had allowed himself to be believed guilty, rather than betray the weak, wretched culprit who trusted to him, and whom he had promised to save.

The Head understood it all now, and the tears came into his eyes. He realised how he had wronged Talbot; he could not blame himself, since the boy had uttered no explanation, but his heart ached for the lad whom he had sent away. If Gore had come forward and told the truth! The wretched lad's delirious mutterings told how his conscience reproached him for having allowed Talbot to suffer, how he had striven with himself to do what was right, but always his courage had failed him.

He had kept silence, but the burden on his conscience had been too much for him, and he had broken down under the strain. Now, unconsciously, the whole story came from his lips—again and again in broken fragments, with incessant iteration.

The Head drew away from the bedside at last. Gore was still muttering without ceasing, living over again the terrible days he had passed through every incident in the miserable story fleeting through his feverish brain in turn.

But the Head no longer listened. He had heard enough. He turned to the Little Sister. The tears were streaming down Marie's face.

"I am glad that you called me here, my child," said the Head gently. "It was right that I should know this. As for Gore, he has been punished severely enough. Heaven forbid that I should punish him further. He did not mean to steal, the wretched lad; his efforts to replace what he had taken are sufficient proof of that. And Talbot—poor Talbot—it was in trying to save that unhappy boy that he brought disaster upon himself, and he would not speak."

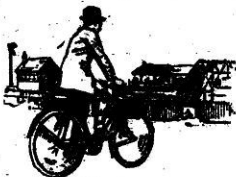
"He could not betray Gore," said Marie. "It was like him. He was always generous—always noble."

"He has been wronged," said the Head. "But it is not too late; the wrong shall be righted. Even when I believed him guilty, I made excuses for him. I believed that it was his early training that had influenced him, in spite of himself, and I had pity for him. Nothing has been said. Nothing will be said. Talbot will return; he shall be found, and he shall return."

Marie's face lighted up.

"When Gore is in his senses again, my dear child, you will tell him that all is known, that I know the truth, and have pardoned him; that he has nothing to fear," said the Head. "I see now what has brought him to this pass, why his illness has been so obstinately prolonged, apparently without cause. When his mind is set at rest he will be better."

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"I am sure of it," said Marie.
 "You are fatigued," said the Head, with a glance of affectionate compassion at the Little Sister.
 "That is nothing. At three o'clock Miss Pinch takes my place."

"I will remain till then."
 The Head sat by the bedside, within sound of the feverish mutterings that hardly ceased for a moment. But silence came at last. Gore fell into a heavy slumber. Save for the rustle of the wind in the trees without there was no sound, but suddenly there was a start from the sick lad, and his voice was heard again.
 "Miss Marie!"

He was not delirious now. His voice was faint and low, but calm. The Little Sister bent towards him.

"Yes?"
 Gore stared up at her.
 "I've been dreaming," he said.
 "You have been asleep," said Marie.
 "Is it late?"
 "Yes; it is not long to morning now."
 "I want to see the Head in the morning," said Gore.
 "Will you ask him to come here. He can't come now, I suppose. But in the morning I must see him. I can't keep it up any longer. I want to tell him about Talbot."
 The Head drew a deep breath. Gore could not see him where he sat near the foot of the bed, and little dreamed that he was there.

"It was through me that Talbot went," said Gore. "I ought to have owned up before, but I was afraid. I shall be sacked. I don't care. I won't go home. I can't face my father. But I won't let Talbot go through it like this, when it's all my fault. I said all along I'd own up if it came to the pinch, but I hadn't the nerve. I'll tell you now—"

"I know," said Marie softly.
 "I've been talking, have I?"
 "Yes."
 "What a rotten cad you must think me!" groaned Gore. "But I'm going to tell the Head. I can't keep it up. He'll sack me, of course, but I won't go home. I'll run away to sea."
 "Do not be afraid," said Marie gently. "The Head will pardon you."

"Oh, no, he won't! You don't know what I did," muttered Gore. "You see, that villain Tickey Tapp was going to show me up, and then the safe was open, and I—I didn't mean to steal, really. I was almost off my chump just then, and I took the notes, and Talbot said he would put them back for me."

"I know—I know, and the Head knows, and he has pardoned you."
 "But he wouldn't—he couldn't—"
 "He has—he has said so," said Marie. "You have nothing to fear. When you are well, you will go back to your Form again, and nothing will be said. It will all be forgotten."

"But—but," panted Gore, "I—I can't believe it. You see—"

Dr. Holmes rose.
 "I know all, Gore," he said. "I know all, and you are forgiven. Nothing more will be said of all this. You have been punished, and the matter is at an end."
 Gore looked dazedly at the Head.

"You—you know, sir?"
 "Everything. Calm yourself; and go to sleep now."
 "I'm not to be sacked?"
 "No, no."
 "But Talbot—"

"He will return."
 "I—I meant to own up," said Gore. "I was afraid. I thought you'd be awfully down on me. I didn't mean to let Talbot go through it for me. He was a splendid chap! He knew I didn't mean to steal; but if I'd had to keep the notes, I should have been a thief whether I wanted to or not, and he tried to get me out of it. There's not many fellows would do what he did."
 "He is a generous lad!" said the Head, in a faltering voice. "He has been wronged, but he will return."

Gore lay silent. He fell asleep a little later, and was sleeping calmly when Miss Pinch came in to relieve Marie. His mind was at rest at last.

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CHAPTER 12.

Tact and Judgment.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY came into the School House with a beaming smile upon his face.

It was several days since Gore's confession, and during those days search and inquiry had been made for Talbot—hitherto without result.

The missing junior had vanished completely.
 Tom Merry & Co. knew nothing of Gore's confession. Not a word on that subject had been said by the Head or the Little Sister.

But they knew that Talbot was to return.
 The morning after his visit to Gore's bedside the Head had called Tom Merry into his study. He had told the captain of the Shell that the misunderstanding concerning Talbot had been cleared up, and that the junior would return to his old place in the school as soon as he could be traced.

It was good news to Tom Merry and his friends.
 Tom did not ask for an explanation; it was evident that the Head would give him none. He was content to wait until he should see Talbot. His heart was light now. Sooner or later his chum would be traced, and would come back.

But the days followed one another, and there was no news of Talbot.

The Head had set inquiry-agents to work, but they had not been able to trace the missing boy. Talbot seemed to have vanished into thin air.

Tom Merry was in the common-room with Manners and Lowther. They were talking about Talbot when Study No. 6 bore down upon them.

"I want you, dear boys," announced Arthur Augustus. "I've got a wippin' idea!"

"Go and bury it!"
 "We are havin' a cah out to go to Chungum's Circus at Shoremouth."

"Well, cut off!" said Tom Merry.
 "We want you thwee chaps to come. There is an aftahnoon performance, and it is weally wippin', you know."

"Thanks, I won't come," said Tom. "Don't feel quite like circuses just now. You fellows go," he added to his chums.

"Wats! It's because you don't feel like it that you ought to come. What's the good of mopin'?"

"I'm not—moping."
 "Then come to the circus, and don't be a beast, you know."

"I'd rather not, really."
 "Miss Mawie will be disappointed if you don't come," said Arthur Augustus reproachfully. "I weally think you might considah Miss Mawie."

"Oh! Is she coming?"
 "Yaas, wathah."

"Well, you fellows can look after her, I suppose?"
 "Yaas; but, as you are old Talbot's best pal, she would like you to come. She has wathah a special wegard for Talbot, I think. Pewwaps you fellows have noticed it?"

"Perhaps we have," grinned Blake.
 "There is nothin' to gwin about, Blake. Now, Tom Mewwy, I trust you are not goin' to neglect Talbot's lady friend in this way."

"I'll come," said Tom Merry, not very cheerfully.
 "That's wight. Get on your best bib and tuckah, as you are coming out with a lady," said Arthur Augustus. And he led Study No. 6 triumphantly away.

"What do you mean by telling Tom Merry that Miss Marie's coming, when you haven't even asked her yet?" demanded Blake, when they were in the quadrangle.

Arthur Augustus smiled the smile of superior wisdom.

"That's tact and judgment, dear boys. Miss Mawie is comin', you'll see. I believe she is in the summah-house. Let's go and look."

The Little Sister was in the summer-house. She greeted the chums of the Fourth with a somewhat pale face. As the days lengthened, and no news came of the Toff, Marie's heart was growing heavier.

Arthur Augustus proceeded to explain the scheme for

the afternoon, adding that the "cah" was at the gates. But Miss Marie shook her head.

"You are very kind," she said, "but I will not come, thank you."

"Wats—excuse me, I mean wubbish! Of course, I quite compwehend that you don't feel vevy chippy. But for Tom Mewwy's sake—" urged Arthur Augustus. "Tom Mewwy is comin'. You see, he was old Talbot's best chum, and he would like you to be in the partay. You weally cannot neglect old Talbot's best chum, you know."

"But—" "Tom Mewwy is lookin' awf'ly down in the mouth lately, you know. I am suah that you would have the effect of cheewin' him up."

Marie hesitated. "In fact, he won't come unless you do," said Arthur Augustus, "and it would do him lots of good, you know. He's mopin'. As a nurse, you know, it's weally your duty to buck a fellow up when he's mopin'—what?"

Miss Marie smiled. "I will come," she said. "That's wight. We're all weady when you are."

Miss Marie went into the house, and Arthur Augustus led his flock away in great triumph. Blake and Herries and Digby looked at their noble chum in great admiration. Arthur Augustus's little scheme had been an eminent success.

"I don't want to bwag, deah boys," said D'Arcy modestly. "But I really think that in a mattah wequirin' tact and judgment you can wely on me. You see, Tom Mewwy's comin' because he thinks Miss Mawie would like him to come, and Miss Mawie is comin' because she thinks Tom Mewwy would like her to come; and they will both be cheehaed up no end, all through the exahcise of a little tact and judgment."

"Gussy, old man, you ought to be in the Cabinet," said Blake, with affectionate admiration. "Tact like that oughtn't to be wasted in the Fourth Form here. I know you'll be a Cabinet Minister when you grow up. You've got all the qualifications—"

"Yaas; I really think—" "All of 'em," said Blake seriously. "Plenty of money—"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Nice manners—"

"Weally—"

"And no brains to speak of."

"You uttah ase!"

"All you need is to learn to prevaricate, old chap, and there's no reason why you shouldn't wind up as Prime Minister."

"I wufuse to wely to your wicidulous wemarks, Blake! Pway come in and get weady for the wun, and ttry to make yourself wathah today."

A quarter of an hour later quite a numerous party boarded the big car and started on that ripping run. A rapid spin through leafy lanes in the bright spring sunshine, and then the sight of the blue sea, had an inspiriting effect upon the whole party, thus more than justifying Arthur Augustus's predictions. Miss Marie was smiling brightly by the time the big car ran into Shoremouth.

And it was quite a merry party that swarmed into Chumgum's Circus for the afternoon performance, and occupied the best seats that money could buy. Arthur Augustus was doing it in style.

CHAPTER 13.

Coming to His Own.

"WATHAH good, what?" The performance was good all through; but it was a Red Indian turn that called forth Arthur Augustus's special admiration. Arthur Augustus was a great judge of the art of horsemanship, and Texas Bill's troop won his noble approval. The buck-jumping act was a great success, and the sham fight between Red Indians and cowboys was followed by loud applause. "Wippin', dear gal—what?" said Arthur Augustus.

Miss Marie did not reply. She was gazing intently at the Redskins who were clear-

ing off the arena, the turn being at an end. Tiny Tony was turning somersaults and playing acrobatic tricks to fill up the interval before Captain Coke appeared with the lions. The expression upon Miss Marie's face astonished her companions.

"Did you see him?" the girl exclaimed breathlessly.

"Texas Bill? Yaas—"

"No, no! One of the Indians—a boy made up as an Indian?"

"Yaas; I noticed one who wode wathah well," said Arthur Augustus. "Chap who's just widin' out. Wathah athletic-lookin' chap."

"Yes, yes; that is the one. Look at him again. Does he not seem familiar?"

"Weally, I do not wemembah havin' seen him before," said Arthur Augustus. "He was not in the troop when it performed at Wayland."

"Was he not like Talbot?"

"Talbot!" ejaculated D'Arcy.

"Yes, yes. His face was so painted it could not be recognised; but there was something about him—he seemed like—like the Toff—I mean, Talbot," said Marie, with a catch in her breath. "Of course, it is impossible."

"I'm afraid it is, wathah," said Arthur Augustus, with a slight smile. "We are not likely to find old Talbot here playin' twicks as a Wed Indian."

"By Jove, though, I thought there was something familiar about him!" exclaimed Tom Merry, his eyes gleaming. "He's just Talbot's height, too, and the same build. Of course, it can't be."

"We'll see him aftah the performance. Of course, we shall have to go wound and speak to our old fwriends," said Arthur Augustus.

"If it were Talbot—it can't be—he'd have come and spoken to us," said Blake. "I saw that chap looking towards this box."

"He would not," said Marie. "He would be afraid we should ask him why he left the school—and he cannot tell us. I am sure—I am sure I saw him looking; I am sure that it is he."

"But—but how could he be in this giddy circus?" said Monty Lowther doubtfully.

"I am sure of it, all the same."

"We'll see him afterwards, anyway," said Tom Merry.

"We're bound to go and have a chat with Mr. Chumgum."

"Yaas, wathah!"

The juniors were anxious for the show to be over now. Marie's strange idea that she had recognised Talbot of the Shell under the guise of a Red Indian performer made them very curious to see him. If they should, by that strange chance, have found Talbot! Tom Merry's heart beat at the thought. Was he to find his old chum again, owing to Arthur Augustus's ripping idea of a run that afternoon down to the coast?

The lion-taming act went off with applause. Captain Coke was looking much better than the juniors remembered him when they had seen him before, when the circus had been at Friardale, and when Figgins of the New House had distinguished himself by helping to rescue the intoxicated lion-tamer from the cage. The captain was keen and alert, and his turn was a great success, and the juniors cheered him heartily.

The performance ended at last. Before the end, Tiny Tony and Mr. Chumgum had both spotted the party in the box. When the ring was cleared, and the people began to go out, Texas Bill presented himself in the box with a message from Mr. Chumgum, asking his young friends to come to tea behind the scenes—an invitation which Tom Merry & Co. accepted with a great deal of pleasure.

Miss Marie was almost trembling with eagerness. The idea was fixed in her mind now that she had recognised the Toff in the circus Indian.

Charley Chumgum greeted his "young friends" in his hearty, genial manner. He was evidently glad to see them. A well-spread table greeted their eyes; but they were not thinking about tea for the moment. Tom Merry caught Marie's glance, and, as soon as he could interrupt Mr. Chumgum's flowing speech, he asked the question he had been longing to ask.

"There was a chap in the Red Indian act, Mr. Chumgum."

Charley Chumgum started a little, and looked rather peculiar. Mr. Chumgum had supposed that Talbot would be glad to see his old friends. But the Toff had begged him not to mention that he was in the circus, and he kept out of sight when Tom Merry & Co. came behind the scenes. The circus-master was in a difficulty.

"You—you mean Texas Bill?" he asked.
"No; one of the troop—a young fellow made up as an Indian," said Tom Merry. "We thought we knew him. He's new in the troop, isn't he?"

"Well, yes."
"Would you mind telling us his name?"
"His—his name?" stammered Chumgum.
"Yes," said Tom, surprised by the genial gentleman's confusion. "The fact is, we think he looked like a chap we know. Is his name Talbot?"

Mr. Chumgum coughed. He was fairly caught.
"I think I understand," said Miss Marie quietly. "It is Talbot, and he asked Mr. Chumgum not to tell us that he is here."

"You—you see——" stammered Mr. Chumgum.
"Will you tell him, if he is Talbot, that the misunderstanding is cleared up now, and the Head wishes him to return to the school?" said Miss Marie.

Mr. Chumgum brightened up.
"My word! Is that so? I'll tell him that!"
Mr. Chumgum disappeared, and returned in a few minutes with a lad still in Indian costume, but whose face had been cleaned of the make-up. Talbot's handsome face looked at the juniors above the leggings and blanket of the Red Indian. Marie gave a cry.

"Toff! I knew it was you!"
"Talbot!" exclaimed Tom Merry.
Talbot held out his hands.
"I'm jolly glad to see you," he said. "But—but——"
"It's all right now, old chap!"
"You're coming back!"

"The Head says so!"
"Yaas, wathah!"
"Give us your fist!"
"Where have you been hiding yourself all this time, you bouncer?"

"What did you clear off for, you dufer?"

Talbot smiled. His heart was light. The message that had been sent to him could only mean that George Gore had confessed, and that the Head knew the truth.

"You are to come back, Toff," said Miss Marie softly. "The Head knows all now, and I also; but—but there is no need for anything to be said, because—because for someone else's sake."

Talbot nodded.
"I'm jolly glad!" he said.
"I've been all right here, but I shall be glad to come back. And the Head wants me to come? You're sure of that?"

Tom Merry laughed.
"There have been detectives searching for you for a week past," he said. "The Head is as anxious as we are to see you back, you old dufer."

"Just fancy finding him in the giddy circus!" said Blake. "We ought to pass a vote of thanks to Gussy! It was Gussy's idea to come."

"Yaas, wathah! Pewhaps you fellows will admit now

that it was a nobbay ideah—what?" chirruped Arthur Augustus.

It was a cheerful party that sat down to tea in Mr. Chumgum's tent. Charley Chumgum was sorry to lose his new recruit, as he said frankly; but he was glad that matters had been set right for him at the school, so, as he cheerfully remarked, he was more glad than sorry. Captain Coke was sorry, too, and he told the juniors what Talbot had done for him over tea, pathetically that he was a victim—an un'appy victim—but that Talbot had rescued him, and he was a victim no longer.

When the St. Jim's party boarded the car to return—Talbot going with them—nearly all the circus turned out to give them a cheer at parting, and Mr. Chumgum waved his silk hat after the car.

Talbot sat very silent as the car glided away swiftly homeward.

"And you won't tell us why you cleared off?" Tom Merry asked, breaking a happy silence at last. He could hardly believe that his chum was really there, sitting by his side, going to St. Jim's with him. It seemed too good to be true.

Talbot's face glowed a little.
"I can't," he said. "There was a misunderstanding, and now it's set right; but I can't tell you without giving somebody else away. You wouldn't want me to do that. Let's forget all about it!"

"It's a giddy mystery," said Tom Merry. "I know it's something to do with Gore, and that you got yourself into trouble helping him. I've guessed that much. But we won't ask you questions. Gore's back in the Shell now; he's all right again, only jolly quiet. We won't ask questions; we're too glad to have you back."

"Yaas, wathah! Pewhaps, howevah, Talbot might considah it judicious to confide the whole mattah to me, as a fellow of tact and judgment!"

Talbot laughed.
"Least said soonest mended," he remarked. "It's all over now. I say, it's jolly to be going back with you fellows!"

It was indeed jolly. And when the car buzzed up to the school in the dusk there was a shout as Talbot was spotted, and the crowd of fellows gathered round to welcome him. Talbot went in to the Head's study at once; and when he came out his handsome face was very bright.

That evening there was a first-class celebration in Tom Merry's study. The prodigal had returned, as Lowther expressed it, and it was up to them to kill the fatted calf. The celebration was extensive and joyous. Miss Marie, of course, was there, and as many fellows as could be crowded into the study, not to mention an overflow meeting in the passage. George Gore was there, much more subdued than of old, but looking very happy. And the hero of the hour, of course, was Talbot of the Shell—once the Outcast of St. Jim's!

THE END.

(Next Wednesday's grand, long, complete story of St. Jim's, entitled "Grundy of the Shell!" will create a great sensation. Every "Gemite" should ensure getting his or her copy by ordering it from the newsagent at once!)

CASH PRIZES FOR "GEM" READERS!

On the opposite page is a miniature reproduction of pages 3 and 14 of a recent issue of "The Boys' Friend." On our next page you will find miniature pages 4 and 13 of the same issue: In the "Magnet" Library, No. 378, now on sale, pages 1, 2, 15, and 16 appear in the same way. The "Gem" Library, on sale next Wednesday, will contain pages 7, 8, 9, and 10; and the "Magnet" Library No. 379, out on Monday next, will contain pages 5, 6, 11, and 12; thus forming a complete miniature number of "The Boys' Friend."

When the whole of this miniature number has appeared, competitors will be asked to detach each set of midget pages, fold over, and bind up, thus making a real miniature issue of our popular companion paper. To the reader who sends in the neatest and cleanest effort,

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SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS INSTALMENTS.

Bob Hall, a fine, strapping young fellow, succeeds in joining a famous Hussar regiment, known as the Die Hards. After Bob has been in the regiment for some time his ne'er-do-well cousin, Captain Lascelles, joins also. Bob finds that, so far from being friendly, Lascelles is constantly endeavouring to get him into trouble, with the object of having him dismissed from the Service in disgrace. It transpires that Bob is heir to a large fortune, which Lascelles, in default of Bob, being able to prove that he is the son of his father, intends to claim. After plotting the downfall of two other officers in the regiment, Lascelles is compelled to send in his papers and resign his commission. Some time after, Bob is greatly astonished at being told that his father, whom everyone had believed to be dead, is still alive. Lascelles, now that his villainy has been exposed, flees to a hiding-place in Rotherhithe, taking the proofs of Bob's parentage with him. Hall and an old friend of his father's named O'Rafferty set out in search of Lascelles before he is arrested by the police.

(Now go on with the story.)

Lascelles is Run to Earth.

"Yer lives wouldn't have been worth five minutes' purchase if y'd stumbled in accidental like," Rudyard replied grimly; "but, coming along of me, there were no questions asked, of course. Like as not they thought y'd taken to our way of earning a living. Anyhow, they knew they were safe. Down that street yonder! It's touch an' go whether we'll be in time."

As Rudyard spoke he pushed open a door, crossed the hall, walked through a room at the back, and out through a second door into a yard behind.

Crossing this, he entered a stable, pulled back a large stone by a ring in the centre, and descended a ladder. Without demur his companions followed, and saw him entering an underground dungeon.

That such a hiding-place could be in the heart of London filled Bob and O'Rafferty with amazement; but there are many such and some even more remarkable, as the police know well.

Pressing after their guide, they heard a muffled cry, and Bob recognised Lascelles's voice. Next moment the three were standing facing him. He was lying on a rude couch, and had been dozing. He sprang to his feet, and stared agonisingly around.

"How did you get here?" he faltered.

"This man showed us the way," Bob replied sternly, indicating Rudyard. "When I allowed you to slink off from Curzon Street to-night I did not know that you held the proofs of my parentage and of my father's fortune. The police called immediately after you left, and—"

"I know. I just managed to avoid them!" the coward gasped.

"Then you must know, too, that before long they'll track you down," the lad continued. "Surrender those papers, and you can go if you're able to manage it. Perhaps I should hand you over to the law; but the chief offence of which I'm aware is that you tried to kidnap my father, though, of course, there are many of which I could accuse you if I liked, and there are more unknown than will probably ever

come to light. My father is not vindictive, and he doesn't want you punished, and no more do I; but we are determined to have those documents, and if you don't give them up we'll see that you don't escape. If, on the other hand, you surrender them to us, then we'll do something to help you to live a decent life, provided that you keep out of England. Now, which is it to be?"

Fear and greed struggled for a mastery in the villain's face.

"The property is mine!" he hissed. "The Court has given it to me! Still, I'll make a bargain. If you help me to escape, I'll sign a deed allowing you half. If not, you can get me sent to quod; but when I come out, I can still claim what belongs to me."

"Rot!" Bob retorted. "The property is not yours, and when the judge hears the truth he'll quash his judgment. I may not be able to prove that it belongs to me, but my father will prove his case!"

A cunning leer came into Lascelles' face. "Then let him prove it now!" he jeered. "If it is as you say, why should he come to me?"

"Then you won't surrender the documents? All right. We'll haul you out of this, and hand you over to the first bobby we can find. Those papers prove our case, at all events, and we'll take jolly good care that you don't escape with them. I'm not having any humbug, so just you come along!"

As Bob spoke he sprang forward and grasped Lascelles by the coat-collar. The villain tried to shake him off, but the muscular young sergeant, whose blood was up, easily flung him on his back, and held him down.

"Get a rope somewhere, O'Rafferty, and we'll bind his arms," he remarked quietly. "Then we'll have less difficulty with the cur. He's coming to gaol now, for a cert. I've stood as much as I can!"

At that moment the tramping of feet was heard overhead, and Rudyard clutched Bob by the shoulder.

"Too late!" he whispered. "The blokes are after him! Listen to their footfalls! There's a dozen of 'em at least, and they mean to wipe him out!"

Lascelles uttered a choked cry of terror.

"Save me—save me!" he gasped. "I want to live! I'm afraid to die! I want to make amends for my crimes! If these ruffians get hold of me they'll—"

"Hand over the papers!" Bob demanded.

The coward dashed to the couch. Pushing his hand underneath, he extracted a long envelope, full of legal documents, as Bob could see in the hurried glance he gave. The lad shoved the envelope into his pocket, and buttoned his coat.

"We'd have done our best to save your miserable life, of course," he muttered. "We'll do more now, though, if we have half a chance. Now, O'Rafferty, get ready for a shindy. Rudyard, do you mean to take our side, or stand against us? If you stick by us, I'll help you later on, provided that you chuck your villainy and try to live like a man!"

"I'll stand by you, sir," Rudyard replied earnestly. "What's more, if we ever get out of this alive, I'll prove as I can run straight when I get the chance; but it's a touch-and-go with us now. I know these blokes, and—"

"We'll soon bowl 'em over!" the young sergeant scoffed. "They're cowards, all of 'em! Now, doctor, are you ready? Here they come!"

O'Rafferty's face was flushed with the light of battle, and he gripped his stick and gave a war-whoop.

"Tare an' ages! I'm ready for the rapsallions!" he shouted. "Let 'em all come! The more the merrier!"

A couple of men had stumbled down the ladder, and now rushed into the dungeon. Bob caught the first-comer a terrific blow on the jaw, which sent him to the ground, and before O'Rafferty could tackle the second the young soldier had dealt with him, too. More came rushing along the passage, though, and whilst the first hesitated, gazing in surprise and some fear at the groups in the dungeon, those behind, pressing forward, literally pushed them headlong into the room.

In an instant there was a wild melee, and Bob, with soldierly instinct taking in the situation, yelled to O'Rafferty and Rudyard to close up. The three fought to rejoin one another, and then backed together to a wall, keeping Lascelles behind them. The coward was so unstrung, and the attack was so clearly directed towards his capture, that it was necessary at all costs to shield him.

And now the thieves were baffled. O'Rafferty, like all Irishmen, was at home with a stick in his hand. His thrusts and parries, if a trifle unscientific, were deadly in their effectiveness, and his blows fell impartially on all who dared to face him. Bob's superb science as a boxer soon cleared a space; none risked a second of his sledge-hammer blows; and Rudyard, taking heart every second, as he saw how gamely his companions were turning the tide, fought with bulldog courage, and wrestled like a fiend.

Then the young soldier suddenly changed his tactics.

"O'Rafferty and Rudyard, make for the door!" he shouted. "Lascelles, follow them! I'll keep behind and drive these curs back!"

Such skill had Bob shown, and such confidence in his leadership had he inspired, that his command was obeyed at once. Before their attackers could pull themselves together and form an opposing body, O'Rafferty and Rudyard made a rush, with Lascelles following them, out beyond the door, and Bob, retreating backwards, knocked over every ruffian who dared to close with him.

Overhead the light became obscured for some seconds as each of the fugitives popped through the trapdoor at the top. Then Bob's turn came to ascend the ladder. Instead of turning, he dashed straight forward, drove his enemies helter-skelter into the dungeon, then wheeled round, jumped to the centre of the ladder, was caught by the shoulder by O'Rafferty and Rudyard and hauled out as his antagonists, with hoarse yells and imprecations, rushed to intercept his flight and avenge themselves for the gallant rescue of Lascelles. Already they were at the foot of the ladder, when the stone was shot back into its place and they were entrapped.

"Old Barber will let 'em out in time enough," Rudyard growled. "'Twill do 'em no harm to remain underground for a spell. They'll have time to cool down, anyhow."

Bob and O'Rafferty strode across the yard and out into the street, where pedlars were selling their wares, and costers were trundling their barrows in complete ignorance of the desperate struggle that had taken place in their immediate vicinity. In the East End virtue and vice are always close together, yet respectable people are there as elsewhere.

Lascelles stumbled out into the street, and gazed round with a shudder.

"I'm homeless!" he gasped. "I'm ruined and disgraced! I must spend my life amongst surroundings like these. I can never hope to raise my head again. What a fool I've been! I see it now, and—"

"You'll have a chance to reform; my father and I will see to that," replied Bob gravely. "Yes, you've been worse than a fool; but all men can win back the position they've lost if they only try. You must clear out of England; but the world is large, and in a new country you can start a new life. We'll help you away, and if the reports we get about you are satisfactory we'll assist you in the future."

"How can I get away? If I'm caught—"

"I'll manage that for Bob Hall," O'Rafferty kind-heartedly intervened. "I've got pals on a ship that sails in a couple of days. The doctor aboard her is a friend of mine since our student days, and he'll help."

"Rudyard, will you go, too?" Bob asked.

"Yes, sir, and I'll be glad of the chance."

"All right, I'll see to 'em both," the latter chuckled. "Come along, the pair of you, and we'll get out of this whilst we have the chance. Bob, you'd better jump into a taxi and drive back to the hotel. This is the first night you'll have the chance of a chat with your father, and I guess it ought to be a jolly one."

Lieutenant Robert Hall.

Six months passed, and the Die-Hards were still in Edinburgh. It was guest night at the barracks, and the officers

were flocking to the ante-room. The colonel was already there, and with him stood old Alec Hall, the adjutant, and Haines.

"Yes, he's got a splendid record since he joined us," the colonel was saying. "We've had some troublesome times, too, as is bound to be the case now and then. An old soldier like you, Hall, is of course aware of that. Your son came through everything splendidly though."

"He's earned his promotion," Hamshaw remarked earnestly. "There's no man I know, whom I'll be more glad to welcome to the mess. Soldiering is a tough experience, and shows up a fellow in his true light. Your son has proved himself a man, sir. What more can anyone do?"

"It's kind of you to speak so well of him," Alec Hall replied fervently. "I'm proud of him, and I feel sure he'll also prove his fitness as an officer."

"We're all certain of that," Haines laughed. "The chaps are so keen to show that he's welcome that they've all cancelled their engagements, and there won't be a vacant seat when the trumpet calls us to dinner."

Meantime, Bob was in the sergeants' mess, and the door was closed. His old chums were seated around the table, and the sergeant-major was standing at the top. He held a gold watch and chain in his hand, which was to be presented to Bob. On the back of the watch was a suitable engraving. The worthy sergeant-major's face was flushed, and he was speaking with some emotion.

"He's earned his promotion, and that's about the last word I'll say," the sergeant-major was stating. "Since he joined the Die-Hards he's been a credit to the regiment, and now that he's leaving the sergeants' mess to become one of the commissioned officers, he goes amongst his new pals with the good wishes and the everlasting friendship of those with whom he has served so well. Comrades, I ask you to drink to the toast of Lieutenant Robert Hall!"

Round after round of applause followed the sergeant-major's truly eloquent speech. Rising from their seats, Bob's old comrades, with glasses raised on high, burst into that old and soul-stirring refrain which accompanies a heartfelt toast, and told Bob in ringing tones that he was "a jolly good fellow."

When at last they ceased and resumed their seats, he rose, almost unmanned by their enthusiasm, thanked them huskily, and then, walking round the room, wrung each of them by the hand. For a moment he paused; then, casting one last look round the room, he moved towards the door.

But they were too quick for him. They were out on the barrack square, and had drawn up in two lines, through which he must pass as he emerged, resolved to pay him the highest compliment possible. Till now, he had been their equal; from this on, he would be their superior officer. The old days had gone for ever, and they had seized the first opportunity to prove that they welcomed him in his new position.

They stood rigid and at attention, every hand to the salute. Bob paused on the threshold and gazed at the sphinx-like faces. His face flushed and his hand trembled as he grasped the pommel of his new sword. Truly, here were his lifelong friends, come weal or woe.

"Good-bye, chaps, and thanks awfully!" he said, with twitching lips.

"Good-bye, sir!"

That was all. It meant everything. It was the trust and most manly compliment that had ever been paid in the Service.

Bob walked down the line and across the square. The sergeants watched him disappear into the officers' quarters. They stood still and listened.

After hearing the loud clapping of hands, they turned proudly and looked at one another.

"They've welcomed old Bob in the right way!" one cried.

"Hark at 'em, lads! There they go again!"

"Heaven bless him!" said another fervently. "But were the poorer, chaps; we've lost a pal!"

"What matter?" a third cried. "Doesn't he belong to us still? Ay, boys, mark my words, when the trumpet calls the charge he'll lead us straight to glory!"

THE END.

All Gemites who have followed the varying fortunes of Mr. Beverley Kent's soldier-hero through the course of the grand tale which has just come to a close, should look out for the first chapters of OUR NEW SERIAL, equally fine, which will appear in next Wednesday's GEM. Do not fail to order your copy in advance, or your newsgate will probably be sold out, and you be compelled to miss the opening instalment. There will be a big demand for next week's number!

A Cash Prize for Every Contributor to this Page.



Our Weekly Prize Page.

LOOK OUT FOR YOUR WINNING STORYETTE.

GOING, GOING, GONE!

"To-day, for the first time, I was really glad to hear my next-door neighbour's piano going."

"Something worth listening to, I suppose?"
 "I should rather say so. I heard the hire-purchase men taking it away!"—Sent in by Leonard Whitehouse, West Bromwich.

NO PUMPING!

A small Scottish boy was summoned to give evidence against his father, who had been causing a disturbance in the street. Said the magistrate to him:

"Come, my bairn, speak the truth, and let's know all ye ken about this affair."

"Weel, sir," said the lad, "d'ye ken Inverness Street?"

"I do, laddie," replied his worship
 "Well, ye gang along it, an' turn into the square, cross the square, and when ye gang across the square, ye turn to the right, and into High Street, and keep on till ye come to a pump."

"Yes, yes, my boy! I ken the old pump."
 "Weel," said the boy, with infantile simplicity, "ye may gang along an' pump it, for ye'll no' pump me!"—Sent in by F. Wadsworth, Burton-on-Trent.

SLIGHTLY MIXED.

"A fathom," explained a school-teacher to her class, "is a nautical word used in defining distance. It means six feet."

Silence of complete understanding from the class:
 "Now," went on the teacher, "I want someone to give me a sentence using the word 'fathom.'"

Instantly a hand shot up.
 "Well, Reggie, what is your sentence?"
 "The reason flies can walk on the ceiling is that they have got a fathom," replied Reggie.—Sent in by W. Bannell, Bermondsey; S.E.

FATEFUL.

A party of Germans who had been taken prisoners at Dixmude were being held in the rear of the Allies' line, pending their removal to a more distant base.

They were permitted to hold a sort of informal "sing-song" one evening, and the flow of Teutonic melody was finally wound up by the whole bunch singing their famous war song, "Deutschland uber Alles."

"Bill," said one of the British guards, turning to his companion, "do you know what that means in English?"
 "That's easy," replied Bill.
 "It means it's all over with Germany!"—Sent in by Richard Jennings, Walthamstow, N.E.

RATHER CONFUSING.

Weary Cyclist: "How far is the village of Sloshington from here?"

Yokel: "It's ten moiles 't'other way."

Weary Cyclist: "But the last sign-post I passed said it was this way."

Yokel: "Ah, but we turned it round to mislead them bloomina' Zeppelins, you see!"
 —Sent in by John Lowrey, Newcastle-on-Tyne

LITTLE JACK HORNER—1915 Version.

Master John, the youthful and diminutive scion of the distinguished House of Horner, had one day deposited himself in an angle formed by two of the vertical planes which constituted the boundaries of his apartment.

He was temporarily engaged in transferring to his internal regions a palatable comestible usually concocted with especial reference to the annual mid-winter festival. Dexterously he introduced into its interior recesses the two jointed digits which form so valuable an auxiliary to the other phalanges by which the upper limbs are terminated.

With extreme satisfaction the youthful explorer extracted therefrom a fruit which is deemed indispensable to culinary concoctions popular at the festive season to which reference has been made.

Master John then made a remark which combined the simplicity and ingenuousness of youth with the introspection and perspicacity usually attributable to riper years. It was to the following effect:

"To what a remarkable extent is my individuality characterized by a degree of virtue, to which I take this appropriate opportunity of doing definite and adequate justice."—Sent in by M. E. Brewer, Tottenham.

A MEAN TRICK.

An Irishman, in New York, seeing an advertisement in a paper for a man wanted, applied at the address given, and found it was nearly at the top of a skyscraper.

When he arrived, he didn't notice the lift, but laboriously dragged himself up the many flights of stairs, and at last saw the "boss," and applied for the job.

The wages were mentioned, but did not seem quite to Pat's liking, so he took up his hat and left. Absent-mindedly, he stepped into the vacant lift-shaft, and soon arrived at the bottom of the building.

When they sympathetically picked him up, he murmured: "Begorra, that was a dirty thrick; because I wouldn't take the job, they pulled the stairs away when I came out!"—Sent in by Kenneth Adams, Edinburgh.

NOTHING DOING.

Lord Kitchener was dining with a civilian friend, and the talk ranged over a wide variety of topics—every topic except the one the civilian was itching to mention.

He screwed his courage up to the sticking-point, however, on the club steps as they were about to depart.

"And how about the war?" he asked.

Lord Kitchener smiled.
 "Ah, the war!" he said.
 "Capital idea! Let's buy an evening paper!"—Sent in by E. Richards, West Bromwich, Staffs.

WORSE.

Two Scotsmen accidentally knocked their heads together, so Donald, rubbing the damaged place, said to the other:

"Oh, Sandy, you've made ma head ring awfu' bad!"

"That's a sign it's empty," said the other;

"Ah, well," said Donald, "doesna' yours ring?"

"Nae."
 "Then it's a sign it's crackit!"—Sent in by W. H. Hill, Reading.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 378.

As the "GEM" Storyette Competition has proved so popular, it has been decided to run this novel feature in conjunction with our new Companion Paper,

THE BOYS' FRIEND, 1d.,
 Published every Monday,
 in order to give more of our readers a chance of winning one of our useful Money Prizes.

If you know a really funny joke, or a short, interesting paragraph, send it along (on a post-card) before you forget it, and address it to: The Editor, THE BOYS' FRIEND and GEM, Gough House, Gough Square, Fleet Street, E.C.

Look out for YOUR Prize Storyette in next week's GEM or BOYS' FRIEND.



THIS WEEK'S CHAT



Whom to Write to —
EDITOR "THE GEM" LIBRARY.
 THE FLEETWAY HOUSE, FARRINGTON ST. LONDON, E.C.
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"THE MAGNET" · THE "PENNY" · CHUCKLES.
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FROM A BRITISH TOMMY.

I have pleasure in publishing the following letter, written in praise of the good work which is being accomplished by one of my girl chums in distributing copies of the companion papers to wounded British soldiers:

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