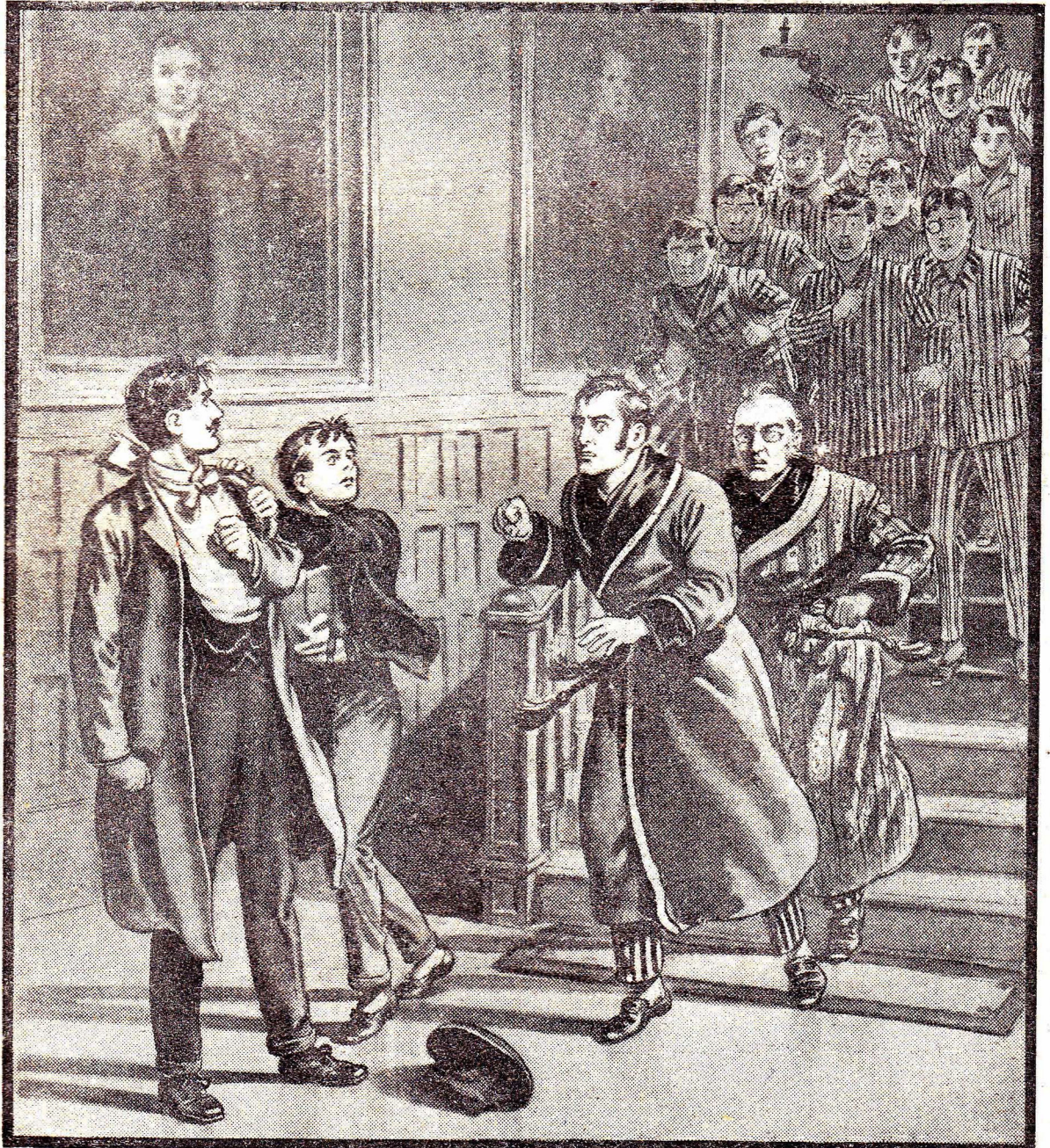
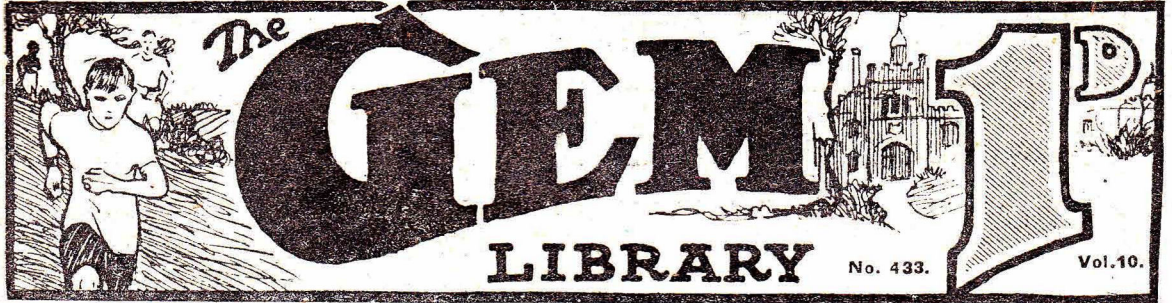


TRUE TO HIMSELF!

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete Tale of School Life at St. Jim's.



TALBOT HOLDS UP THE CRACKSMAN!

(An Exciting Scene in the Magnificent Long, Complete School Tale in this issue.)

A Cash Prize for Every Contributor to this Page.



Our Weekly Prize Page.

LOOK OUT FOR YOUR WINNING STORYETTE.

THE BARBER'S LAMENT.

"Time was when I could not comply
With all my clients' needs, sir,
Although I slaved and stropped and shaved,
And cut with all my speed, sir.

"With 'Next gent, please!' I'd ease the squeeze—
'Your beard is getting strong, sir.
A dry shampoo? Your hair cut, too?
Step in. Sha'n't keep you long, sir!'

"Then dapper 'knuts' for fancy cuts
Were in and out all day, sir;
And some would crave a hairless shave—
I think they liked the spray, sir.

"That halcyon day has passed away;
The game no longer pays, sir;
My razor will not raise the rent;
The blame is on the Kaiser!"

—Sent in by S. Matthews, Chelmsford.

THE REASON!

"Have you enjoyed your strawberry feast, boys?"
"Oh, yes, sir!"

"Then," said the teacher, seeking to append a moral, "if you had slipped into my garden, and picked those strawberries without my leave, would they have tasted so good as they did?"

Every boy in that stained and sticky company shrieked:
"No, sir!"

"Why not?"

"Cause," said little Thomas, with the cheerfulness of conscious virtue, "then we shouldn't have had any sugar and cream with them!"—Sent in by Miss Dorothy Dixon, Stoke Newington, N.

QUITE ANOTHER MATTER.

Irate Customer: "Look here, young man, I bought this hair tonic from you, and it is absolutely worthless."
Drug Clerk: "We can't help that, sir."
Irate Customer: "But you said that every bottle was guaranteed."
Drug Clerk: "Exactly, sir. But that didn't apply to the tonic!"—Sent in by E. Cleave, Portland, Dorset.

MORE ECONOMY.

Sandy (entering nursery garden): "Have ye a nice cucumber?"
—Gardener: "Yes. Here is one. You can have it for five-pence."
Sandy: "Hey, mon, that's a wee too much. Have ye no' one for tuppence?"
Gardener: "Yes. There's a small one growing here which you can have for tuppence."
Sandy: "All right. Here's the money. Don't cut it off. I'll be calling for it in about a fortnight."—Sent in by C. B. Walton, Oxford.

HORSEPLAY.

Father: "Bobby, come here. Your nose is bruised, your coat is torn, and you have a black eye. How many more times am I tell you not to play with that rough, Brown's boy?"

Bobby: "Gracious, dad, do I look as if I'd been playing with him?"—Sent in by F. Southward, Miles Platting, Manchester.

AN EXTRA TURN.

At a rest camp somewhere in France the men of a certain famous Scotch regiment were holding an impromptu concert.

Presently there drifted into the tent, lured by the sounds of revelry, a sturdy Cockney motor-driver of the A.S.C. For some time he listened appreciatively to the music, then he suggested that he could oblige with a Scottish song.

He was promptly conducted to the platform, and great was the applause when the pianist, after a whispered conversation, commenced to play a well-known Scotch tune.

Advancing to the edge of the platform, the A.S.C. man, with the inimitable Cockney accent, sang:

"Scots wha hae on porridge fed,
Scots wha's hair is awfu red,
Scots wha suffer fra sweided head—
Gang and wash yer knees!"

He made his escape in good time, and so far has not been caught; but a whole regiment of kilties, mad with rage, are still on his trail.—Sent in by J. Williamson, S. Norwood.

A SIGN OF THE TIMES!

A North-country pitman was just starting off from home to go to his work the other morning, when his next-door neighbour called to him:

"Had ye somebody poorly in your house during the night? I heard a lot of running up and down stairs."

"Oh, no!" said the pitman. "It was only my wife. She's signed on as a tram-conductor, you know, so she thought she'd better put in a bit of practice."—Sent in by Jack Scott, Thornaby-on-Tees.

ADDING INSULT TO INJURY.

Seeing a notice-board hanging outside a large school with the words, "Ring Bell for Caretaker" written across it, a nigger, after mumbling indignantly to himself, rang the bell violently.

In a short time a man appeared, and as the nigger seemed in no hurry to state his business, he asked:

"Well, what the deuce did you ring the bell for?"

"If that's the way you speak to people who oblige you by ringing the bell, you'd best ring your own bell in future, Massa Caretaker!" said the nigger, in an injured tone.—Sent in by W. D. Griffiths, Liverpool.

"PUDDING" IT NICELY.

Flossie was a flighty young thing until she met Algy, and then she settled down to learn housekeeping in about two weeks. She went to a school of cookery; and soon after they were married she was awarded a certificate. So, to commemorate the event, she determined to make a special dish for her husband.

"How do you like the pudding, dear?" she asked him that evening at dinner. "I received a lovely certificate today from the cookery school, printed on sheepskin parchment, with a beautiful seal in red wax, and I made this pudding in honour of the occasion. You'd never guess what it is made of, would you?"

Algy chewed with vicious energy for a time.

"Er—I suppose it isn't the certificate?" he ventured at last.—Sent in by C. Beard, Walthamstow.

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,

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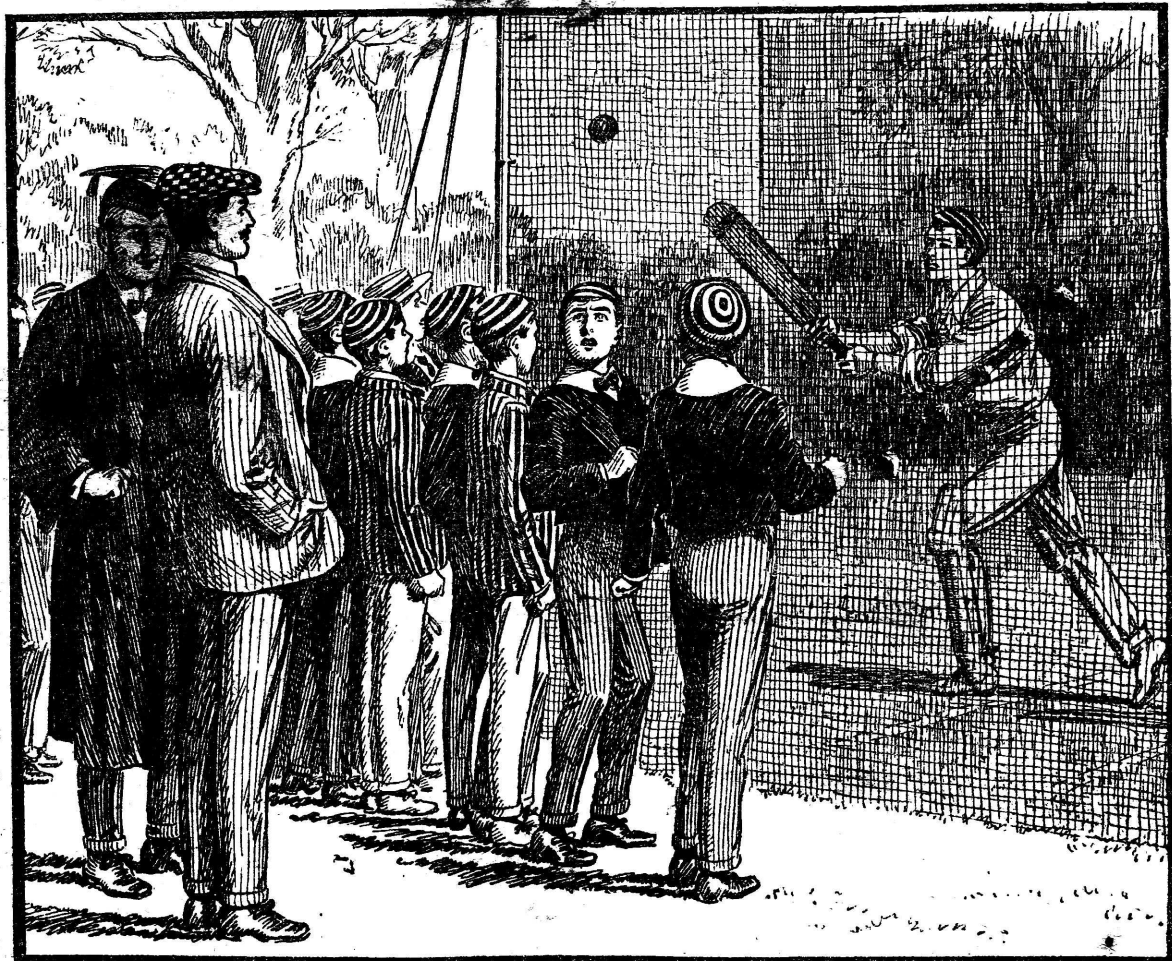
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A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's.
By **MARTIN CLIFFORD.**



The House-master and his companion had stopped just behind the juniors, and were looking at the cricket. Talbot's eyes fixed themselves upon Captain Bertie. Every trace of colour had fled from his face, leaving him as pale as death. (See Chapter 2.)

CHAPTER 1.

A Face From the Past.

"**S**ISTER ANNE, do you see that fathead Talbot coming?"

Monty Lowther asked the question.

Tom Merry was looking out of the old gateway of St. Jim's, down the road towards Rylcombe.

The Terrible Three were waiting at the gate for Talbot of the Shell. They were getting a little impatient.

Tea was ready in Tom Merry's study. As Talbot was coming to tea, the chums of the Shell did not want to begin without him. Talbot had gone down to the village, and should have been back before tea-time.

But he had not arrived.

Talbot was usually punctuality itself. But he was late for once. And Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther grumbled a little as they waited. For the rashers were done, the toast was keeping warm in the grate, and the spread, which was unusually excellent and plentiful, was in danger of spoiling.

Manners and Lowther found a little harmless amusement in chipping Taggles, the porter, and Tom Merry watched the road.

"Blow!" said Manners. "Talbot's had ample time to call for his bat, or a dozen bats. I think we'd better begin. The toast will be dried up."

"And the rashers," said Lowther. "Think of the rashers, Tommy! We don't always have gammon rashers in these hard times."

Next Wednesday.

"THE MAN FROM THE FRONT!" AND "INTO THE UNKNOWN!"

No. 423. (New Series.) Vol. 40.

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"Oh, give him another minute or two," said Tom Merry. "Here comes somebody, at any rate."

A tall, slim gentleman was coming up the road from the village. The juniors glanced at him idly. He was a handsome, well-dressed man, with rather a distinguished air, and very keen, dark-brown eyes. He paused at the school gate and gave the Shell fellows a pleasant nod.

"Is this St. Jim's?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," said Tom politely.

"Thank you."

The stranger came in at the gates, and glanced round the green old quadrangle. Then he addressed the juniors again:

"Which is the Head's house, please?"

Tom Merry pointed out the Head's house, adjoining the School House, and the gentleman, with another nod, strode away across the quadrangle.

"Visitor for the Head, I suppose," said Lowther, with a yawn. "Now I come to think of it, I heard that a chap was coming. Trimble said so. Trimble knows everything. Looks rather a decent chap. What's the matter with his fin?"

The juniors noticed that the stranger's left arm was carried stiffly, as if the use of it were gone.

"That's an easy one," said Manners sagely. "He's been wounded. You can see he's been in the Army by the way he keeps his napper up. Chap from the Front."

"Looks like it," agreed Tom Merry.

The Terrible Three looked after the tall stranger with considerable interest. A man who had been wounded at the Front was, naturally, interesting to them.

"That's it," said Lowther, with a nod. "I remember Trimble said a Captain Bertie was coming. He heard the Head tell Railton so. That's the merchant. But where is that fathead Talbot?"

Tom Merry looked out of the gates again, but there was no sign of Talbot of the Shell on the road.

"Not coming yet," said Tom. "Blessed if I know what can be keeping him—unless he's got into a row with the Grammarians."

"Bless the Grammarians, and bless Talbot!" said Lowther. "I'm going in to tea. Come on!"

"Come on, Tom!" said Manners.

Tom Merry hesitated.

"I'll follow you," he said.

"Well, you'd better buck up, or you'll find all the rashers gone!" said Lowther warningly.

Lowther and Manners sauntered away, leaving the captain of the Shell at the gates.

Tom Merry left the gates and strolled down the road to meet Talbot on the way. A few minutes later he caught sight of him.

"Hallo! There you are, you boulder!" exclaimed Tom.

He hurried towards his chum.

Talbot did not see him.

The handsome Shell fellow was walking slowly, with his hands driven deep into his pockets, and his eyes on the ground. He was plunged in thought, and the clouded expression on his face showed that his thoughts were gloomy ones.

He did not see Tom until he was quite close. Then he looked up with a start.

His face flushed a little under Tom's curious gaze.

"You're jolly late!" said Tom.

"Am I?"

"Yes. Where's your bat?"

"My—my bat?"

"Yes," said Tom, in wonder. "You went down to Rylcombe for your bat. Haven't you brought it?"

"I forgot."

"My hat!" exclaimed Tom, his wonder increasing. "You went down specially for your bat, and you're half an hour late, and you've forgotten it! What the dickens have you been doing, then?"

Talbot opened his lips, and closed them again. Tom's expression became more grave as he noted the lines in Talbot's face, the deep cloud of troubled thought on his brow. He dropped his hand on his chum's shoulder.

"Talbot, old chap, anything happened?"

"Yes," muttered Talbot.

"Something wrong?"

"Yes, I think so—I'm sure so. Tom"—Talbot had halted in the lane, his handsome face deeply troubled—"I—I've seen somebody."

"Somebody you know?"

"Somebody I knew," said Talbot, in a low voice. "Tom, we—we never speak of the past, but you haven't forgotten it, and I haven't. Nobody reminds me now that I was once called the 'Toff'; that I was brought up as a kid among a gang of crackmen; that I was called the prince of crackmen myself." Talbot's look became hard and bitter. "It's all thrown behind long ago. I always try not to think about it. But—but—"

"Don't think about it," said Tom. "It's better not to

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think about some things, old fellow. Everybody knows that you weren't much to blame. It was rotten circumstances. You chucked it over as soon as you understood things. What's the good of thinking about that now?"

"I don't—hardly ever, now. But—but I've just seen somebody—"

Talbot's voice faltered. "I've seen a man—"

Tom Merry understood.

"A man you knew in the old days?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You've spoken to him?"

"No, no! I just saw him leaving the station, by chance. I hadn't seen him for years, but I knew him at once. A man who used to come to the Rookery in Angel Alley sometimes—a cracksmen. I never knew his name, but he was called Gentleman Jim. He's in clover now, to judge by his looks. It—it gave me a shock to see him. What's he doing in a quiet little village place like Rylcombe, Tom? And—and he came in this direction from the village."

Tom Merry was silent for a moment. He understood the crowd of bitter recollections that must have risen in the Toff's mind at the sight of the old acquaintance of the old, black days of his early boyhood. Firmly as he was set upon the new path, liked and esteemed by all St. Jim's, the Toff could not forget what once he had been, though of late the remembrance had been growing dim.

"You—you see, I don't know what I ought to do," said Talbot falteringly. "Don't think the man was a pal of mine—I don't suppose I've spoken to him—but I knew him well by sight. He's down here on the road. I know that. I don't know whether I ought to speak—but to say anything, drags up again everything that I want to forget."

"I don't suppose you'll see him again," said Tom, after a pause.

"I suppose I'm full of nerves on that subject," said Talbot, with a faint smile. "He left the village in this direction, and—and I thought—I suppose you haven't seen anybody here?"

Tom Merry smiled.

"He must have turned off the road," he said. "Nobody's passed the school for the last half-hour."

Talbot drew a breath of relief.

"You've seen nobody, then?"

"Only a chap who came into the school," said Tom. "A visitor for the Head—chap from the Front, I believe. Put it out of your mind, old son. You'll never see the fellow again. And you're late for tea."

Talbot nodded, and the two juniors walked on to St. Jim's. But Talbot's face was still clouded. His fear, that Gentleman Jim's visit to Rylcombe might have had some connection with the school, seemed ungrounded. But it was not easy to dismiss from his mind the bitter recollections the sight of the man had called up.

CHAPTER 2.

A Startling Recognition.

"JUST in time," said Monty Lowther severely, as Tom Merry came into the study in the Shell passage with Talbot. "Just going to toss up with Manners for the last rasher."

Talbot did not smile.

"Penny for 'em," added Lowther, looking curiously at the Toff. "Wherefore that worried look, old scout?"

Talbot coloured a little.

"Nothing. I'm sorry I'm late."

"All serene! It's your loss," said Lowther. "You've missed the eggs, but we've really left you a rasher each. Pile in! I'll make some more tea."

"Been ragging with the Grammar School chaps?" asked Manners, as he pulled up a chair to the table for the guest.

"Oh, no!"

"You look as if you'd gone out to hunt for trouble and found it."

"Bow-wow!" said Tom Merry. "Buck up with the tea. We're hungry. And we've arranged a four-pair mill in Study No. 6 after tea, and they'll be expecting us."

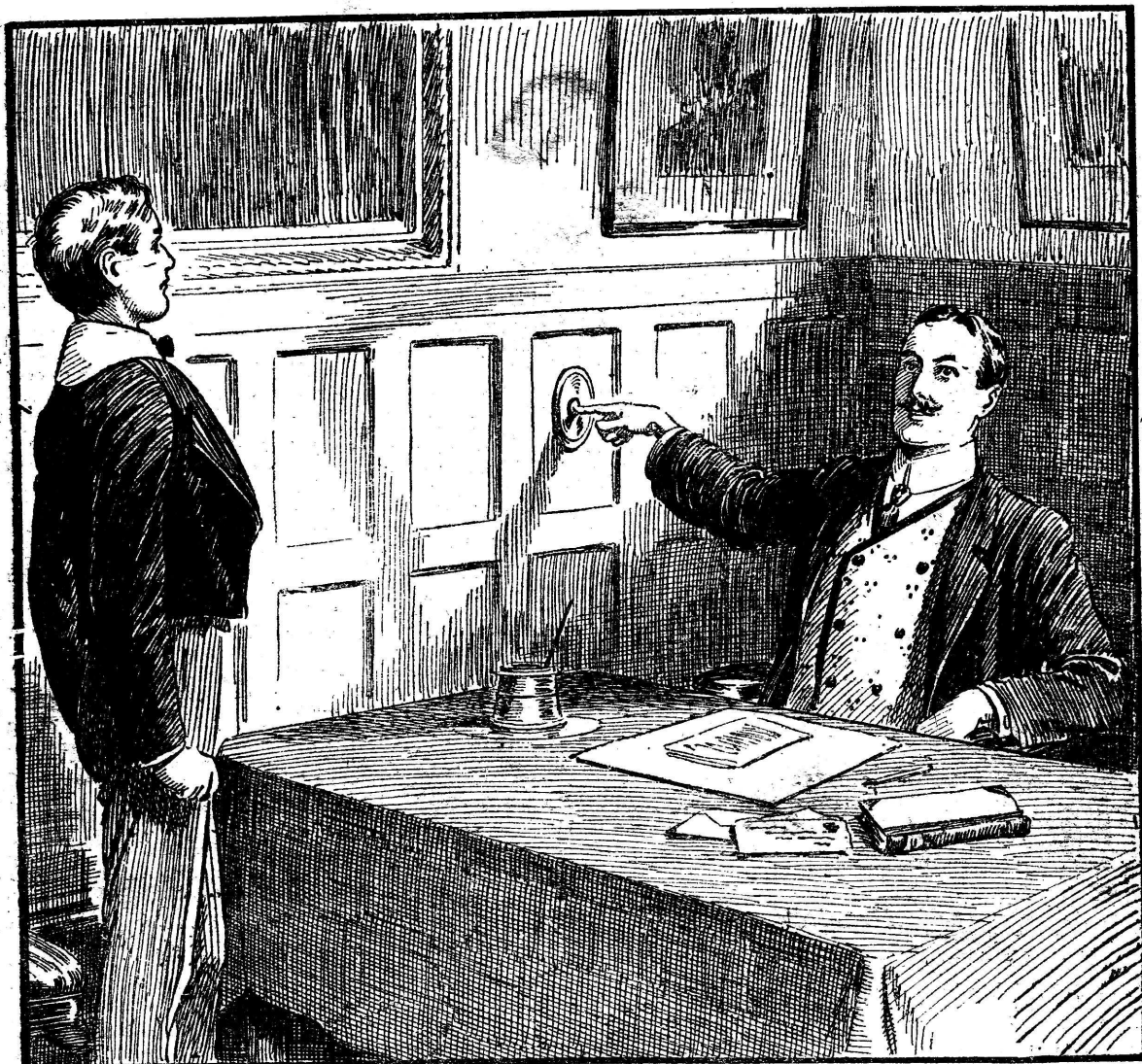
"Gussy's looked in once already," said Lowther. "Here's the tea. Pile in, and buck up! Hallo, here's the one and only again!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth looked into the study, eyeglass in eye.

"Waitin' for you, deah boys," he said. "We've cleahed all the furniture back, and Blake has the gloves weady. By the way, have you seen the captain?"

"The Head's visitor, do you mean?"

"Yaas, Captain Bertie," said D'Arcy. "Wathah a distinguished-lookin' chap. I heah he's been at the Fwont and got winged. I've just seen him; Mr. Wailton's takin' him wound the school, and he's lookin' at the place. He can't use his left arm, I heah. Winged by a Hun bullet, you



If Talbot expected the Captain to blanch, he was disappointed. He smiled, and pressed the bell. There was a short, grim silence. Talbot knew that he had failed, for the crackman was game to the last. (See Chapter 7.)

know. I wish I were a few yabs oldah, deah boys. Whenevah I see a wounded soldiah I wish I were a few yabs oldah. Chap would like to have a go at the Huns, you know."

"Your eyeglass would be dangerous at the Front," remarked Lowther. "I can see the Huns running—in my mind's eyes. And if your monocle didn't make them run, you could start your accent on them—"

"Pway don't be an ass, Lowthah. I've been thinkin' that if the captain stays at St. Jim's for a few days we might ask him to tea in the studay. Do you think he would wogard it as a feahful cheek?"

"Very likely; but that needn't stop you," said Tom Merry cheerily. "I rather like the chap's looks. What is he doing at St. Jim's?"

"Only visitin' the Head, I suppose. Twimble knows all about him—listenin', as usual," said Arthur Augustus, with a curl of the lip. "I have wefused to allow Twimble to tell me anythin'. Inquisitive beast!"

"Look here, you know," said a fat voice in the passage, and Baggie Trimble of the Fourth looked in, "don't you run a fellow down behind his back, D'Arcy!"

"Why, you wottah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus wrathfully. "I have often called you an inquisitive beast to your face, and I wepeat the wemark now. You are an inquisitive beast, Twimble!"

"All serene!" said Trimble calmly. "You fellows having tea? I don't mind if I join you."

"But we do!" said Monty Lowther politely.

"That chap Bertie's staying at the school for a few days," went on Trimble unabashed. "I heard the Head tell Mr. Railton so. Rather hard lines on him."

"Why, fathead?"

"He's crocked, you see," explained Trimble. "He's come down here to see if the Head can do anything for him. He's done with khaki. Looking for a tutorship, or something, and Dr. Holmes is going to help him out. He's done his bit, and he can't do any more, and now he's lookin' for a job. He was left for dead at Loos, or somewhere, but managed to crawl off. Was actually reported killed, but turned up alive afterwards; lots of 'em do. Do you mind if I try the cake?"

"Yes."

"Thanks! Then I will."

"I mean, we do mind."

"Well, I don't," said Trimble, helping himself to the cake. "This is rather good. Yaroooh! What are you kicking me for, Lowther, you beast? That hurts!"

"That's why I'm kicking you," said Monty Lowther cheerily.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The fat junior rolled hurriedly out of the study, with his mouth full of cake.

"Well, we're finished," said Tom Merry. "Now we're ready, Gussy. Come on, Talbot!"

Talbot rose from the table. He had hardly spoken a word during tea, and though he tried to clear his face, the clouded expression would return. Tom Merry knew that he was still

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NEXT
WEDNESDAY:

"THE MAN FROM THE FRONT!"

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Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

thinking of that chance encounter in Rylcombe, and he was anxious to drive the remembrance from his chum's head.

"I'll give the boxing match a miss, if you don't mind," said Talbot. "I'm rather tired. I think I'll take a turn in the quad."

"Yaas, you won't be any good for boxin' if you're tired," remarked Arthur Augustus. "But now we shall be an odd numbah."

"That's all right," said Tom. "I'll go out with Talbot." "Vewy well."

Lowther and Manners went along to Study No. 6 with D'Arcy, where Blake and Herries and Dig were waiting for them. The boxing match, with three pairs instead of four, was soon going strong, with plenty of noise and a good deal of bumping of furniture.

Tom Merry and Talbot went downstairs, and sauntered out of the School House, in the direction of the cricket-field. Cricket practice was still going on in the summer sunset.

"Cheer-ho, old fellow!" said Tom. "Can't you chuck it out of your mind? You'll never see the man again."

Talbot smiled faintly.

"It gave me a shock," he said. "But it's all right. I won't think about it any longer. After all, I shall never see Gentleman Jim again, as you say. Let's go and have a look at the cricket. Kildare's batting."

"That's better," said Tom approvingly.

The two Shell fellows strolled down to Big Side, where Kildare was at the wicket, and Monteith of the New House was bowling to him. The captain of St. Jim's was in great form, and a good many fellows had gathered to look on.

Tom was glad to see that Talbot's handsome face had cleared. With an effort of will the Toff banished from his mind the troublesome thoughts that had haunted him.

Figgins of the New House nodded to the Shell fellows as they stopped on the field.

"Kildare's keeping it up," he remarked. "But old Monteith's in good form. I rather think we shall win the next House match—what?"

"Rats!" said Tom.

"Seen the giddy guest?" asked Figgins. "Your Housemaster's showing him round. Captain in the Army, I hear. Left off khaki because his fin's winged."

"Here he comes," said Kerr.

Talbot was looking at the cricket, and he did not turn his head. Mr. Railton's deep and pleasant voice was heard behind the juniors.

"This is the senior side—Big Side, as we call it. That is Kildare at the wicket—the captain of the school. You will be able to see a House match while you are here, Captain Bertie."

"I shall be glad to have that pleasure," said another voice, very pleasant in tone.

Talbot had not turned his head as he heard Mr. Railton's voice. But as the second voice struck upon his ears he spun round as if he had received an electric shock.

The Housemaster and his companion had stopped just behind the juniors, and were looking at the cricket.

Talbot's eyes fixed themselves upon Captain Bertie.

Every trace of colour had fled from his face, leaving him as pale as death.

The captain did not glance at him. Probably he did not observe Talbot among the crowd of juniors. He was looking at Kildare.

Talbot seemed transfixed.

Tom Merry could not help observing it. The deadly pallor in his chum's face struck him with a shock, and he followed Talbot's glance to the handsome profile of the Head's visitor.

It was evidently the sight of Captain Bertie that caused Talbot's strange emotion.

Tom pressed his chum's arm.

"Talbot!" he whispered.

Talbot started, as if awaking from a dream. He gave Tom Merry an almost wild glance, and turned unsteadily and walked away from the cricket-field. Tom hurried after him.

The Toff did not stop till he reached the shady old elms in the quad. There he came to a halt, his face still white.

"Talbot, what on earth's the matter?" exclaimed Tom Merry, alarmed and anxious.

"Tom, you—you saw that man with Mr. Railton?"

"Yes; Captain Bertie."

Talbot laughed, a harsh laugh.

"Is that Captain Bertie, the Head's guest?"

"Yes," said Tom, in wonder. "What about him, Talbot? You looked as if you knew him."

"Knew him! Yes, I know him."

"You've seen him before, then?"

"Yes."

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"But what's the matter, Talbot? Where have you seen him, and—"

"In Angel Alley."

"What!"

Talbot grasped his chum's arm, and lowered his voice as he replied:

"Tom, that's the man I saw in Rylcombe!"

"Talbot!"

"That man is Gentleman Jim, the cracksman!"

CHAPTER 3.

Captain or Cracksman?

TOM MERRY stared blankly at the Toff. For a moment he thought that the Shell fellow must have taken leave of his senses.

Talbot's face was pale and strained. It was only too evident that he was in deadly earnest.

Tom Merry could not speak. He could only stare at Talbot in amazement and dismay.

"Do you understand?" Talbot's voice was low and husky.

"It's Gentleman Jim, the cracksman who used to come to the rookery in Angel Alley, when I was a nipper. I saw him there perhaps half a dozen times, but I never forget faces. What is he doing here—under a false name—under false colours, Tom?"

Tom Merry found his voice at last.

"You're mistaken, Talbot. You must be mistaken. The Head knows him."

"It's Gentleman Jim!"

"But—but the Head knows him," insisted Tom Merry.

"You've been taken in by a resemblance. He's been in the Army—his arm's disabled—"

"Spoof!" said Talbot quietly.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"The Head would know whether he's Captain Bertie or not. Dash it all, Talbot, you're dreaming. You've been thinking about the—the past, and it's got on your nerves."

"I wasn't thinking of it till I saw that man step out of Rylcombe Station, Tom. Then I knew him at a glance. He's changed—he's older. He's got a sunburnt complexion now—unless it's faked, as it very likely is. But he's the same man. His name may be Bertie, for anything I know—but in the old gang at the rookery he was never called anything but Gentleman Jim."

"But—but—"

"And his coming here must mean mischief, Tom."

Tom Merry was perplexed and troubled.

Talbot's manner was so earnest, that he could not help being impressed by it. And yet it seemed wildly impossible.

"He didn't know you, Talbot," he said at last.

"He didn't look in my direction. He wouldn't expect to find the Toff here, either!" said Talbot bitterly.

"He wouldn't know anything about me; he saw me at the rookery when I was a nipper, that's all, but he had no connection with the gang there for the last few years. I understand that he was in prison. Most likely he hasn't been out of prison long. He's come here—for what?"

"Well, if—if he's the man you take him for, I suppose he's up to some mischief," said Tom.

Talbot nodded quickly.

"Of course he is—the Head's safe, of course. I know that the Head keeps his Exchequer Bonds in his own safe—that inquisitive beast Trimble said so—and he found out somehow. And it's no secret that the Head sold off a lot of Yankee securities to invest in Exchequer Bonds—five thousand pounds, I have heard. That's his game, Tom!"

"But how could he know?"

"Well, it wasn't a secret. I believe it was mentioned in the local paper, too!" said Talbot. "I remember something being said about Dr. Holmes' patriotic example, something of that sort."

"But if a man knew the Head had bought the bonds, he couldn't know that they were kept in the house, Talbot."

"No; he would come on spec. There would be enough to pay him for his trouble, in any case."

"But—but it's impossible, old chap. The Head knows him," said Tom Merry, quite puzzled and bewildered. "It can't be possible."

Talbot made an irritable gesture.

"Look here, Tom; I tell you I know the man! He calls himself Captain Bertie, and he's really Gentleman Jim, the cracksman. There isn't the shadow of a doubt about it in my mind. The question is, what had I better do?"

"Well, if you really feel quite sure about it, Talbot, you'd better—better speak to the Head, I suppose," said Tom hesitatingly. "But—but if you're mistaken, it will be an awful blunder!"

"I'm not mistaken. You don't think I'm a fanciful ass, do you?"

"Well, no; only you might be fanciful on that subject, though not on others," said Tom. "What you say seems to me simply impossible. But if you feel sure about it, I suppose you're bound to speak out."

Talbot nodded.

"I must, Tom. He is here on mischief, and I simply can't keep silent and let him go ahead. It would be too late when he has committed a robbery. That's his object."

"I suppose it is, if you're right," said Tom doubtfully.

"You don't believe I'm right."

"I can't," Tom confessed. "The Head knows the man, or he wouldn't be here. Better not say anything about it to any other fellows, till you're sure, at any rate. They'd think you were potty—really!"

"Not a word, of course. But I must speak to the Head."

Talbot spoke in a tone of resolution. He left Tom Merry, and walked away towards the School House. The captain of the Shell was left with a troubled brow.

Talbot's positiveness staggered him; and yet it seemed impossible. How could Captain Bertie, home from the Front, be the same man as Gentleman Jim, the cracksmen? Tom knew his chum to be cool and level-headed, and not likely to make mistakes. But it seemed certain that Talbot was mistaken this time.

Tom Merry went back to the cricket-field, where Mr. Railton and the captain were still looking on. Kildare had come off the pitch, and had been introduced to the captain, who spoke to him very pleasantly. Kildare treated him with the greatest respect, which increased as the captain's remarks showed that he was well acquainted with the grand old game of cricket.

"But my cricketing days are over, I'm afraid," the captain remarked, as Tom Merry came within hearing, and he glanced down at his stiffened arm. "The Huns have taken care of that."

"My own case, for the present," said Mr. Railton. "But I hope to recover the use of my arm in the long run. I hope it will be the same with you."

"I fear not. The bone has been broken by a German bullet," said the captain quietly. "But I escaped very cheaply considering. There were a dozen dead lying about me when I was found and picked up."

"You've seen some war work, sir," said Kildare, his eyes glistening.

"Very warm at times," said the captain, with a smile. "The Huns are good fighting men, and they return as good as we give. I don't suppose I shall ever handle a bat again, but I think my bowling powers are as good as ever. I wonder if you would care to try me?"

"Right-ho, sir!" exclaimed Kildare at once. "Chuck the ball here, Darrel."

The captain gave Mr. Railton an apologetic smile.

"I can't resist the sight of the cricket-pitch," he said. "You'll excuse me—"

"Go ahead, my dear fellow!" exclaimed Mr. Railton warmly.

The captain caught the ball as Darrel tossed it over and walked on the pitch. Langton of the Sixth was at the wicket. All eyes were turned upon the captain, and fellows came from all quarters to watch him. There was something peculiarly interesting in the maimed veteran of the wars trying his hand at the good old game.

The captain sent the ball down, and Langton knocked it away. But it was not an easy ball to play, and the Sixth-Former opened his eyes a little. The captain's uninjured arm was evidently in good trim.

Monteith fielded the ball and tossed it back, taking a long catch very neatly.

He bowled again, and Langton hit at the ball, but it was not exactly where he hit. There was the crash of a falling wicket.

"Well bowled!" shouted Kildare.

"Bravo!"

"How's that?"

"My hat!" said Langton.

Captain Bertie came back to where Mr. Railton was standing. There was an almost boyish smile upon his sunburnt face.

"No, I won't bowl again, thanks!" he said, as Kildare spoke. "But I'm not quite a crook yet—what!"

And he walked away with the Housemaster, smiling genially, evidently pleased to find that his skill had not deserted him.

"Good man!" said Kildare. "A regular sport, Darrel."

"Ripping chap!" said Darrel.

Tom Merry strolled away, very thoughtfully. He had felt his own heart warm towards the captain. Talbot's strange accusations seemed more wild and unfounded than ever in his eyes.

If Captain Bertie was an impostor—if he was playing a

part at St. Jim's, with dishonourable intentions, he was the most consummate of actors. But Tom Merry could not believe it. Talbot was mistaken. And Talbot was gone to the Head's study—to warn Dr. Holmes!

CHAPTER 4.

Talbot Speaks.

"COME in, my dear boy!"
The Head of St. Jim's greeted Talbot with a kind smile.

Dr. Holmes' manner was always kindness itself to the one-time Toff. No one knew better than Dr. Holmes how the Toff had lived down the past, and that there was not a straighter, truer-hearted fellow within the walls of St. Jim's.

The Head was busy, as it happened, when Talbot interrupted him. The door of the iron safe in the study wall was ajar. On the table, before the Head, was a number of paper bundles, and Talbot could not help seeing that they were bonds.

It was well known that Dr. Holmes had invested a good deal of money in Exchequer Bonds—that being his "bit" towards the war. He had sold off American securities to raise the money. A large registered envelope lay on the table, recently opened, showing that a number of new bonds had just arrived by the post. Talbot paused as he saw how the Head was engaged.

"You are busy, sir?" he said, hesitating.

"Wait a few moments—that is all," said the Head.

Talbot waited while the doctor counted the bonds and fastened them up in little bundles, which he placed in the safe.

There was a strange expression on the Toff's face. The Head did not even think of concealing from the Toff the bundles of bonds. And the Toff had been the prince of cracksmen in his time. Boy as he was, the iron safe, strong and secure as it was, was nothing to the Toff. It was at his mercy if he had chosen to exercise his skill upon it in the dead hours of the night. The complete trust the kind old Head reposed in him touched Talbot strangely, and it almost brought the tears to his eyes.

If he could have repaid the Head's kindness by the sacrifice of his life, the Toff would not have hesitated for one moment.

Dr. Holmes placed the bonds in the safe, and closed and locked the door. Then he turned to Talbot with a smile.

"You wish to speak to me, my boy?"

"Yes, sir."

Talbot hesitated, his colour deepening. He had an awkward task before him, and he hesitated to begin.

"Well, speak freely," said the Head, puzzled by his look.

"You may have confidence in me, my boy. What is it? Some little trouble?"

"Oh, no, sir!"

"Then what—"

"I am bound to speak, sir, though I am afraid you will be very surprised and shocked," said Talbot. "I have to give you a warning. I fear that there is an intention to rob you, sir."

"My dear lad!"

"I have seen a man, sir, whom I have not seen for a long time—a man I knew by sight when I was what I used to be," said Talbot, his handsome face crimsoning. "He was called Gentleman Jim—I never knew his name. He was a cracksmen. He has now come to this school, sir—"

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the Head. "You did quite right to speak to me, Talbot. But how could such a man come here? That is extraordinary! In broad daylight?"

"He has come here in a false character, sir."

"As a servant, do you mean?"

"Oh, no, sir! As a guest!"

Dr. Holmes started.

"Talbot! At present the only guest in the school is Captain Bertie, of the Lothshire Light Infantry."

"That is the man, sir."

"Talbot!"

"I—I knew you would be surprised, and shocked, and perhaps you wouldn't believe it, sir," said Talbot desperately. "But it's true. The man who calls himself Captain Bertie is Gentleman Jim, the cracksmen. There isn't the slightest doubt in my mind."

Dr. Holmes shook his head.

"It is impossible, Talbot."

"I am sure of it, sir."

"Impossible! The captain is well known—"

"You know him personally, sir?"

"Many years ago I knew him personally," said the Head.

"Ten or twelve years, when he was a very young man."

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"Then you do not recognise him, sir—"

"He has, of course, changed very considerably in ten years," said the Head. "But I am satisfied. Moreover, he knows many things he could not know, if the case were as you suppose. We have had many talks about his college days. And although he has, of course, changed, he is still recognisable as the lad I used to know quite well. You have been deceived by a chance resemblance, Talbot. You did quite right to speak to me, but please dismiss the idea entirely from your mind."

"But, sir, will you not at least make some investigation?" Dr. Holmes made a gesture.

"That is quite unnecessary, Talbot, when I know perfectly well that Captain Bertie is an honourable gentleman. I could not so insult my guest. If you reflect a moment, Talbot, you will see that it is impossible. You would not suggest that the criminal you name could have been to the Front and won the rank of captain?"

"I don't believe he is a captain, sir, and I can't believe he has been to the Front."

"My dear boy, his arm is disabled by a German bullet!"

"I think that is deception, sir. If you would make him have that arm examined by a surgeon—"

"Talbot!" The Head frowned. "Do you imagine for one moment that I could treat an honoured guest in such a manner?"

"Then you will take no steps, sir?" said Talbot, in dismay.

The Head smiled.

"None! My dear lad, you are mistaken. It is a chance resemblance. You have done your duty in speaking to me, but now that I assure you there is no foundation for your suspicion, please dismiss it from your mind."

"How can I do that, sir, when I know that the man is Gentleman Jim, the cracksmen?" exclaimed Talbot.

Dr. Holmes looked impatient.

"You must leave the matter to my judgment, Talbot. Even now I am ashamed that I have allowed myself to discuss my guest in such a manner. Please say no more."

"I—I'm sorry you are angry with me, sir," said Talbot humbly. "I was afraid it would be so; but after all your kindness to me, I could not see you injured—"

"I understand, my boy," said the Head, his face relaxing again, "and I thank you. But you have made an absurd mistake, you see."

"Will you not at least question him, sir?"

"Certainly not. Such questioning would be an insult. Surely you can see that yourself?"

"Yes, if he is Captain Bertie, as he pretends; but not if—"

"Come, come, my boy, say no more. I shall be really angry with you if you persist in this ridiculous accusation against an honourable man."

"Very well, sir," said Talbot, with a sigh. "I have done my best."

"I hope you have told no one else this extraordinary suspicion, Talbot?" said the Head anxiously.

"Only Tom Merry, sir."

"That is very unfortunate. Kindly ask Merry to say nothing about it, and say nothing yourself. I should be terribly humiliated if a word of it came to the ears of my guest," said the Head, distressed. "Really, Talbot, you have not acted in this matter with the consideration I should have expected of you."

"Tom will say nothing, sir."

"I hope not—I hope not. I could never face my young friend again if he should hear a whisper of it. Please see Merry at once, and tell him that you were mistaken, and that it is my earnest wish that nothing should be said on the subject."

Talbot left the study with a heavy heart.

He had done no good, as he had feared. He had done his duty, but no good had come of it. Was it possible that he was mistaken? he asked himself. But he shook his head at the thought.

He was not mistaken.

Yet, from the fact that the Head had once known the man personally, it seemed certain that Gentleman Jim bore a distinct resemblance to the real Bertie. Talbot's first suspicion had been that Captain Bertie was an entirely fictitious personage. That, evidently was not the case, since the Head had known the man in earlier days. Gentleman Jim had assumed the name and rank of a man whom the Head had known personally.

It was almost incredible, yet Talbot could not doubt. But he realised that his accusation must seem palpably absurd in the Head's eyes. If the Head's guest was not the real Captain Bertie, where was the real man? Could even a cool and unscrupulous criminal have the nerve to play such a dangerous game? And if he was an impostor, how had he

been able to talk over old times with Dr. Holmes—of matters Gentleman Jim could be supposed to have no knowledge of?

Talbot was puzzled, perplexed, almost bewildered, as he thought of it. But on one point he never wavered. Whatever else was uncertain, one thing was quite certain, and that was, that the man who called himself Captain Bertie at St. Jim's, was the cracksmen he had known of old.

He looked into Tom Merry's study, and found Tom there. The captain was waiting for him, anxious to know the result of his interview with the Head.

"Well?" he said.

Talbot smiled bitterly.

"I've spoken to the Head, Tom. He laughs at the idea, and he wants both of us to say nothing about the matter. The captain would feel insulted if he knew."

"I think he jolly well would!" said Tom. "Dash it all, Talbot, he's a ripping chap. Everybody seems to like him already."

"Gentleman Jim was always a popular fellow," said Talbot.

Tom made a grimace.

"Oh, rats! He's been bowling to Langton. He seems to have been a good cricketer before the Huns winged him."

Talbot nodded.

"Gentleman Jim played cricket," he said.

"A giddy criminal—a cricketer!" said Tom incredulously.

"It was useful in his profession. I remember hearing of his playing in a country-house eleven during a cricket week. He knows the game inside out."

"But it's all rot, old chap," urged Tom. "The Head's right. Didn't he tell you he knew the chap?"

"When he was a young man, yes."

"Then that settles it. He'd know whether he was the genuine article or not."

"I've no doubt the man resembles the real Captain Bertie."

"Well, then," said Tom, triumphantly, "if he resembles him, that's where it is. Your cracksmen resembles him, you see, and that's why you take him for the cracksmen. If it's established that the two men were alike, that settles it."

Talbot shook his head.

"The Head hadn't seen him for ten years," he said. "There's enough resemblance to take him in, after all that time."

"My dear chap—"

"I can see you don't believe it, Tom, any more than the Head does," said Talbot patiently. "When the robbery happens, you'll have to believe."

"But it won't happen."

"I hope not," said Talbot.

And the subject dropped.

CHAPTER 5.

Gussy's Guests.

"YOU'RE comin', deah boy!" It was the following day, and lessons were over. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth, apparently in high feather, stopped Talbot, as the Shell were coming out of their Form-room.

Talbot's brow was sombre.

He was usually one of the cheeriest fellows in the Shell; but all that day he had been quiet and gloomy.

Only Tom Merry knew the cause—knew that the Toff was still thinking of the man whom all St. Jim's admired and respected as Captain Bertie, the hero from the Front, and whom the Toff believed to be Gentleman Jim, the cracksmen.

It was impossible for Talbot to drive the matter from his mind; neither did he desire to do so. The Head would not and could not listen to him. Captain Bertie remained a guest in the school, held in high honour.

Talbot was waiting for the blow to fall.

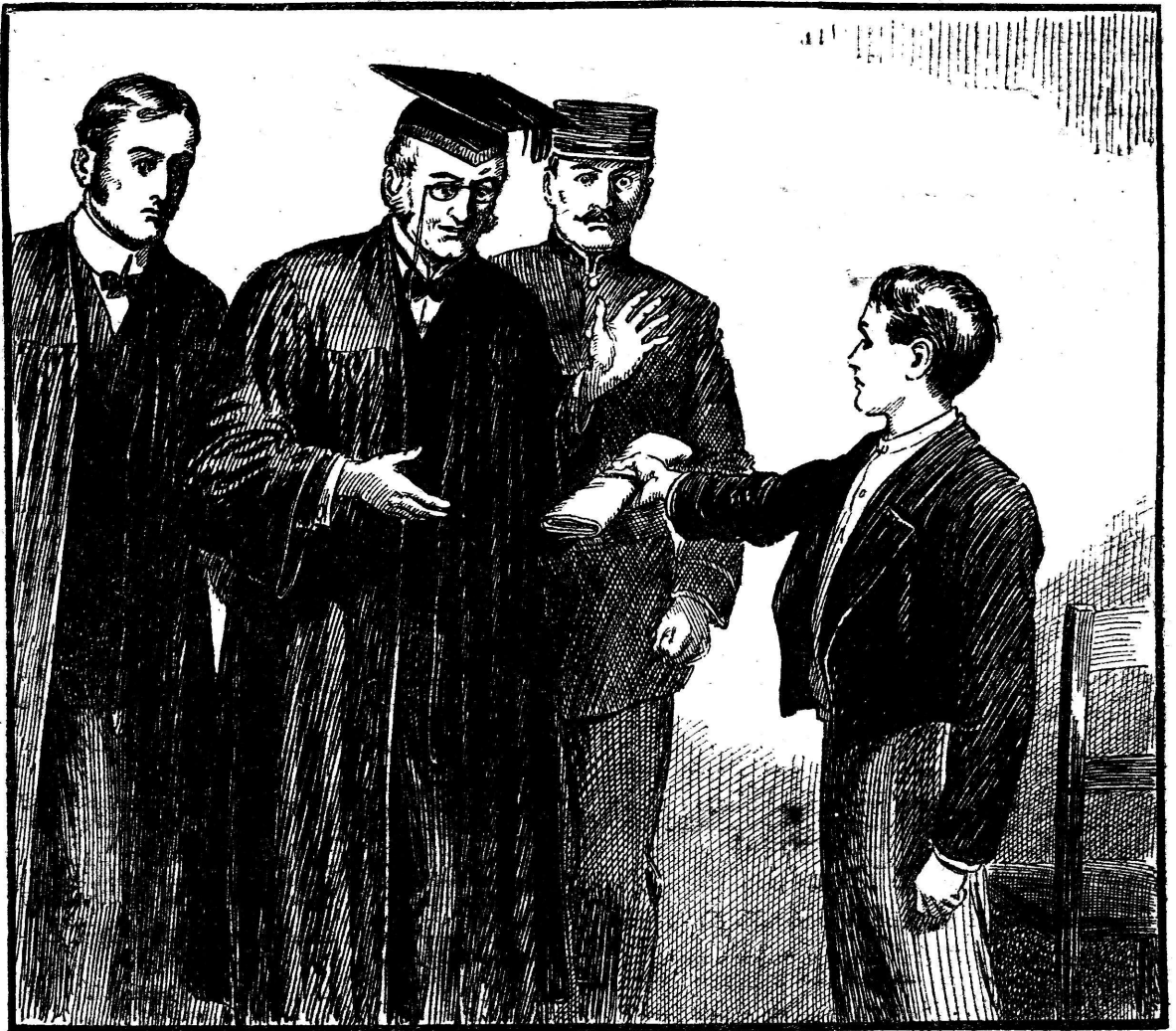
That it must fall he was certain. The captain was biding his time till he knew where and when to act—he was gaining information for his purpose—that was the Toff's theory.

Then, when the blow had fallen, the Head would know the truth; but he would know it too late.

Yet there seemed nothing that Talbot could do. Well he knew what a terrible blow it would be to the Head if the cracksmen succeeded in "lifting" what represented almost a life's savings. There was no sacrifice the Toff would have shrunk from to save the kind old gentleman from that loss. But he was helpless, and his helplessness troubled and harassed him. It was no wonder that during the whole day he had been thoughtful and morose.

Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell, had had occasion to find fault with him in class several times. With that weight on his mind, Talbot could not put his thoughts into his work.

His grim and glum looks contrasted with the cheery, smiling countenance of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as the swell of St.



Talbot slid his hand under his jacket. It came out with a bundle of thick paper in it, and the Head gave a cry of astonishment. "The bonds!" "The bonds, sir!" said Talbot quietly. (See Chapter 13.)

Jim's stopped him in the passage. Arthur Augustus was in high spirits.

"You're comin', of course, Talbot?" he asked.

"Where?" asked Talbot.

"Tea in studay No. 6," said D'Arcy impressively. "Wathah a gweat occasion, you know. There will be a wippu' spwead."

Talbot smiled.

"I'll come with pleasure, Gussy."

"That's wight. That will make eight, without the guest," said Arthur Augustus. "Pewwaps we could find woom for young Julian, too—I wathah like young Julian. But, of course, we must not crowed out the distinguished guest—and juniah studies are not weally made for big parties."

"Who's the distinguished guest?"

"The hewo!"

"Eh? What hero?"

"There's only one hewo at St. Jim's at the pwsent moment, deah boy. I am weferin' to Captain Bertie."

Talbot started.

"I—I think I won't come, after all," he said hurriedly. "I didn't know—"

"Wubbish! Of course you'll come! I've asked Captain Bertie to tea in the study, and he's accepted like a weal bwick," said Arthur Augustus. "It isn't ewevy day you have a chance of meetin' a man fwom the Fwont at tea, is it? And he's been wounded, too; wounded by the beastly Huns, and ewocked, like old Waitlen. You see, I want him to undahstand that he is the sort of chap St. Jim's delights to honah"

"But—"

"Awf'ly cheewy and chatty fellah, too," said Arthur

Augustus enthusiastically. "He's got no side at all—he doesn't seem to think it a cheek of a juniah to ask him to tea. Of course, it isn't a cheek, but some chaps might have thought it was, aftah bein' at the Fwont. I weally think I might swank a little myself if I had been to the Fwont, you know. But the captain doesn't—not a bit. He was vevy intewested in my ideah of havin' a cwicket week at Eastwood, you know, if old Conway gets leave—a cwicket week would be a wippin' entahtainment for chaps home on leave—"

"A cwicket week at your home?" said Talbot.

"Yaas—my patah's thinkin' of it, to entahtain chaps on leave fwom the Fwont, but it was weally my ideah. I'm goin' to w'ite to the patah to invite Captain Bertie—I'm sure he'll come."

"I'm sure he will!" said Talbot grimly.

"Yaas, he's fond of cwicket, though he can't bat with his gammay arm, you know. I should like to have him at Eastwood House in the vac. I'm suah he'd like it."

"No doubt about that."

"I am glad you agree with me, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus unsuspectingly. "You will be there, too, I hope, so you mustn't lose this chance of makin' the captain's acquaintance. Tea at six."

"I'll come, old scout," said Talbot. "As you say, it's a ripping chance to make closer acquaintance with the captain."

"Good. I suppose we could crowd in if I asked young Clive, too," said Arthur Augustus. "That will make ten, beside the captain."

"Rather a squeeze," said Talbot, smiling; "but the more the merrier."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Talbot went out into the sunny quad. His first impulse, on

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learning that the captain was a guest in Study No. 6, was to refuse the invitation. But second thoughts were best.

He was certain of the man's identity. But there was no proof. He wondered whether Gentleman Jim would recognise him. If he did, and if he betrayed his recognition, that would be proof, Talbot considered. At all events, it was worth while putting the matter to the test.

Tom Merry found Talbot walking under the elms, towards tea-time.

"I've come for you," said Tom. "Gussy says you're coming. I suppose you know you're going to meet the captain at tea."

"Yes, Tom."

"Have you given up that idea—"

"No."

Tom made a restless movement.

"It does stick in your head, old chap," he said. "It will be rather awkward for you to meet Captain Bertie, won't it, thinking as you do about him?"

"I want to see whether he knows me. He hasn't seen me here yet," said Talbot, "and, of course, he wouldn't know my name if he's heard it spoken. Gentleman Jim wouldn't expect to see the Toff here."

Tom was silent, and Talbot coloured painfully.

"Tom, I know what you're thinking. But I must keep an eye on the fellow, knowing him as I do. It's my duty to the Head."

"It's rotten, Talbot. I wish you'd get the idea out of your head. But if you can't, you can't help suspecting him."

"It will be proved one way or the other before the week's out, Tom."

"Then I wish the week were out."

Talbot was silent as he accompanied Tom to the School House. Lowther and Manners were waiting for them in the doorway.

"Come on!" said Lowther. "The giddy feast is spread, and the noble guests are crowding into the festive halls!"

"I'm going to ask the captain to let me photograph him," said Manners confidentially. "I'm going to put him in my list of War Heroes, if he'll let me. I've got Sergeant Brown, and Private Lomax, of Rylcombe, and Gussy's brother Conway, and Captain Cleveland, and General Merry, and Kangaroo's Dardanelles uncle, and some more. I'd like to put Captain Bertie's chivvy along with them!"

Talbot gave him a curious look.

"I don't suppose he'll let you," he said.

"Eh? Why not?"

"I imagine he has an objection to having his photograph taken."

"Why should he?" demanded Manners, rather warmly.

Manners was too keen on amateur photography to understand anybody objecting to it.

"Oh, Talbot means that he's too modest, like a true hero!" grinned Lowther. "Blessed if I see it! When my turn comes to go in the trenches, I'm going to be taken in khaki, and again when I get my colonelcy, and again with the V.C. on my manly chest, and I shall have the lot shoved into the 'Daily Mirror'!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The four juniors proceeded to Study No. 6, where they found the rest of the guests assembled, conspicuous among them the captain from the Front.

CHAPTER 6.

Tea in No. 6 Study.

CAPTAIN BERTIE had the place of honour at the festive-board.

His sunburnt face was smiling and good-humoured.

Blake and Herries and Digby and D'Arcy, the owners of the study, were vying with one another in looking after their distinguished guest. Julian and Sidney Clive, of the Fourth, were equally attentive.

The captain glanced carelessly at the Shell fellows as they came in.

His eyes rested upon Talbot's handsome face for a moment, and a puzzled look came over his face.

Talbot's eyes were fixed upon him.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy presented Talbot to the captain. The Terrible Three had already made their guest's acquaintance.

The captain spoke to the Shell fellow civilly but carelessly enough. If Talbot had expected him to show any emotion of any kind, he was disappointed.

Beyond that momentary puzzled look, the captain treated him exactly the same as the other juniors.

The look had been only momentary, and the juniors had not observed it, but it had not escaped Talbot. Yet he had to admit that that fleeting expression was little or nothing.

Tea in Study No. 6 that evening was a spread of unusual magnificence in honour of the occasion.

There was a merry chatter of voices.

The juniors delighted in getting the captain to talk of his experience at the Front in Flanders, and Captain Bertie told several stories of the trenches, which were listened to with keen interest.

"Bai Jove! Powwaps you may have met Talbot's uncle out there!" Arthur Augustus remarked, the idea coming suddenly into his mind. "Talbot's uncle is in the Loamshires!"

"I do not remember the name," said the captain, with a shake of the head.

"Yaas; but the name isn't Talbot—Talbot's uncle is Colonel Lyndon."

"No; I do not recall the name."

"Colonel Lyndon is in the Loamshire Rifles, duffer!" said Blake. "The Loamshire Light Infantry is a horse of another colour!"

"Yaas; but Colonel Lyndon was at Loos," said D'Arcy.

"There were some scores of colonels at Loos," said Captain Bertie, with a smile. "Is your uncle still at the Front, my young friend?"

"He came home to take the command at Abbotsford, close by here," said Talbot.

"Then he is still at home?"

"No," said Talbot. "He left for Flanders again. He has taken out a new battalion of the Loamshires!"

Captain Bertie nodded. Whether he was relieved to know that Colonel Lyndon was no longer in the neighbourhood of St. Jim's, the Toff could not tell. Yet he must have been relieved—if he was Gentleman Jim.

More than once during that cheery tea-party Talbot asked himself whether he had not, after all, been mistaken.

He was certain of his ground; yet Captain Bertie played the part of the cheery, careless soldier so well that the Toff was fairly nonplussed.

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If he was an impostor, why was he taking the trouble to make himself popular with the schoolboys?

But that question was soon answered.

Not only the Head's safe was the cracksman's game. An invitation to Lord Eastwood's country-house for a cricket-week would open up a new field to Gentleman Jim's peculiar abilities. And there were other fellows who had wealthy homes into which the cracksman might hope to gain the entree.

When tea was over Manners broached the subject of the photograph. There was plenty of good light for the operation, and Manners was keen to get to work with his camera. "I'd like you to let me photograph you, sir," he said. "It won't take long. I'm making a war album of men who've been to the Front."

Captain Bertie shook his head.

"I must ask you to excuse me," he said. "Another time, when I am in khaki, I should be pleased."

"Yes, that would be better, of course," agreed Manners, though he was disappointed.

But politeness forbade him to press the distinguished guest.

Tom Merry could not help glancing at Talbot.

The Toff had said that Captain Bertie would decline to be photographed. His reason was that Gentleman Jim would not want to have photographs of himself in existence if he could help it.

Even Tom could not help thinking that it was odd that Talbot's prediction should have been verified in this way.

But he glanced at the captain, and his momentary doubt vanished at the sight of the good-humoured, sunburnt face, and, above all, the stiffened, useless arm.

But he felt extremely uncomfortable, knowing what was in the Toff's mind.

"You can get a photograph of the captain, Manners," said Blake, with a laugh. "I've seen one in the papers!"

"Indeed!" said Captain Bertie, rather sharply. "Where have you seen it?"

"In the 'Daily Mirror'—portrait of a chap killed in action," said Blake. "That was when you were reported dead, sir. I suppose that happens to a good many chaps out there—reported killed?"

The captain nodded.

"Yes, it happens not infrequently," he said. "A man is seen to fall, and is missing, and he turns up again after a time. That was the case with me. I should like to see that photograph, though, if you still have it."

"I've got the paper somewhere," said Blake. "I kept it because of the pictures of the Battle of Loos. I have a cousin out there. He was in it. I'll look for it!"

"Yes, I should like to see it."

The captain rose to take his leave.

"Thank you for your entertainment, my young friends! I have really enjoyed myself immensely. It brings back my own schooldays, bogad, to have tea in a junior study again!"

"It is a great honah and pleasuah to us, sir," said Arthur Augustus gracefully.

"Yes, rather!" said Blake.

"You might bring that paper to my room if you find it, Master Blake. I am going there for a smoke now!"

The captain took his leave. There was a chorus of praise in Study No. 6 as soon as he was gone.

"Wippin' chap!" said Arthur Augustus.

"At all Lloyds!" said Monty Lowther heartily.

"Best of the batch!" said Julian. "Shall we help you look for that paper, Blake?"

"Yes, do; it's somewhere about the study."

The tea-party proceeded to search for the back number of the "Daily Mirror." It was found after a time, under Blake's old football-boots in the bottom of the cupboard.

Blake regarded it rather dubiously.

"A bit grubby," he remarked. "Can't be helped. I didn't know I should ever be showing it to a giddy captain!"

"Let us see the photograph in it," said Talbot.

Blake opened the paper, and the juniors looked at the handsome officer portrayed there, in an excellent reproduction of a photograph.

"Not exactly like the captain, is it?" said Talbot.

"Well, it's like him," said Blake critically. "You'd hardly take it for his chivvy, but it's like him. Photographs ain't always exactly like—Manners' sort, frinstance."

"Fathead!" said Manners. "I'd take a better one than that of the captain. This one makes his eyes look further apart than they really are, and the mouth smaller. The nose is right."

"Chap looks different in khaki, anyway," said Tom Merry.

"That's so," agreed Lowther. "The photograph looks better-looking than the captain; but everybody is better-looking in khaki. You'd better buzz along with it, Blake, as the captain wants it!"

"Right-ho!"

Jack Blake took the paper away, and the tea-party broke up. Tom Merry went out with Talbot, who was smiling grimly.

"Why do you think the captain wanted that paper, Tom?" the Toff asked, as soon as they were alone.

"Curiosity, I suppose, to see how the printers have dished him up," said Tom.

Talbot shook his head.

"He wants it, to put it out of existence," he said. "It doesn't suit Gentleman Jim to have a portrait of the real man knocking about."

"Oh, rot, old chap!" said Tom uneasily.

"Blake won't see that paper again," said Talbot quietly. "If I were a betting chap, I'd give you ten to one that the paper will be accidentally destroyed."

"Then I'll hold you to that," said Tom, laughing. "We'll see. Manners wants the paper to reproduce the photograph, and the captain will produce it."

"He won't!" said Talbot.

"We'll see, you doubting Thomas."

The chums of the Shell did see. About an hour later Manners of the Shell was speaking to Captain Bertie in the quadrangle, and he left him, looking disappointed. He was joined at once by Tom Merry and Talbot.

"You've been asking the captain for the old 'Mirror'?" asked Talbot.

"Yes. How do you know?"

"I guessed," said Talbot, with a smile. "Has he given it you?"

"He can't. It's gone," said Manners.

"Gone!" repeated Tom Merry, with a start.

"Yes. It's destroyed by a beastly accident. He threw a match away after lighting his cigar, and it fell on the paper, and it flared up," said Manners regretfully. "He asked me to tell Blake how sorry he is."

Talbot drew a deep breath.

"That settles it!" he said.

"Eh? Settles what?" said Manners. "My idea of photographing it, do you mean? It does, and no mistake! Chap ought to be more careful with matches."

Tom Merry did not speak. Talbot's prediction, once more, had been verified, and Tom did not know what to think. Was it merely a coincidence, or was the Toff, after all, right in his suspicion, and was the distinguished guest in the School House the dangerous criminal Talbot believed him to be?

CHAPTER 7.

Face to Face.

TALBOT knocked quietly at the door of Captain Bertie's room in the Head's house. A deep and pleasant voice bade him enter.

The Toff drew a deep breath as he opened the door.

Captain Bertie was seated at a table by the window, pen in hand. Apparently he was writing letters. The captain's room was a pleasant one, with a window looking out on the elms in the quadrangle. His bed-room adjoined it. The red sunset streamed in at the window, lighting up the old oak panels of the walls.

The captain raised his eyebrows a little as Talbot entered. He seemed surprised by the junior's visit, as was natural enough.

"Pray come in!" he said. "Let me see! I think you are one of the young gentlemen I met at tea?"

"Yes. My name is Talbot."

"I remember. You have something to say to me, I presume?"

"Yes."

"Please sit down."

Talbot shook his head. He remained standing, looking at the captain across the writing-table.

"My name is Talbot," he repeated. "But there was a time when I was known by another name. I was called the Toff."

Captain Bertie looked puzzled.

"A schoolboy nickname?" he asked.

"No; a nickname among a gang of criminals and cracksmen, who gathered at a den called the Rookery, in a London slum."

"By gad! With such antecedents, it is rather surprising that you belong to a school like this, my young friend!" exclaimed the captain.

"It's a long story," said Talbot. "Dr. Holmes was kind enough to think that I was more sinned against than sinning in my childhood. He gave me a chance, and knows that I am as straight now as a fellow can be."

"Very interesting, no doubt," said the captain. "But

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NEXT WEDNESDAY:

"THE MAN FROM THE FRONT!"

excuse me, may I ask why you have come here to tell me this?"

"So that you will know how I have recognised you."

"You have—er—recognised me?"

"Yes."

"I do not quite understand. I have never met you before, to my knowledge. Certainly I should not be likely to have seen you in the very peculiar quarters in which, as you say, your childhood was passed," said the captain ironically.

Talbot flushed.

"It was there that you met me," he replied quietly.

"Eh?"

"In the Rookery, in Angel Alley," went on Talbot steadily. "I was called the Toff, the son of Captain Crow, the cracksman, a member of the gang to which Hookey Walker and the Professor belonged. You were not a member of the gang, but you had dealings with them sometimes—like Tickey Tapp, and the Cherub, and other fellows of the same sort. You disposed of a good deal of swag through the Professor. In a word, I know you, Gentleman Jim."

Captain Bertie met the glance with which Talbot accompanied the words with an expression of bewilderment. He rose to his feet.

"I think you are out of your senses, my boy," he said calmly. "If you have come here to insult a guest of your headmaster, you had better go. I fear that I shall have no alternative but to report this extraordinary conduct to Dr. Holmes."

He had not flinched.

For a moment a chilling doubt assailed Talbot. If the man were guilty, could he have the nerve to face that sudden test so coolly, so steadily?

But it was only for an instant that he doubted. That coolness, that iron nerve, had characterised Gentleman Jim of old.

"You deny, then, that you are Gentleman Jim?" said Talbot.

The captain smiled.

"Who is Gentleman Jim?" he asked.

"A cracksman—recently, I believe, released from prison," said Talbot.

"Indeed! You are asking me whether I am a criminal and a gaol-bird?" exclaimed the captain, in astonishment.

"I am not asking you. I am telling you what I know."

The captain looked at him curiously.

"You appear to be in earnest, my lad," he said, after a pause. "I do not wish to be hard upon you, if you are speaking in good faith. Do you mean that I bear some personal resemblance to this person you name, and that you have taken me for him?"

"I mean that you are he, and that you bear some resemblance to Captain Bertie," said Talbot. "But you are not Captain Bertie. Your name may be Bertie, for all I know, but you are not the Arthur Bertie whose name you bear."

"It is a discovery to me that I resemble a criminal," said the captain, with a smile. "Do you base this extraordinary accusation upon any other grounds?"

"Yes."

"You interest me. Pray state your reasons."

"I will do so," said Talbot.

"You are Gentleman Jim. I knew you the moment I saw you step from the station in Rykcombe yesterday. When I found you posing here as Captain Bertie, a guest of the Head, I supposed that Captain Bertie was a name you had adopted to cover some new trick. I found that there really was a Captain Bertie, known at one time to the Head. I concluded, therefore, that you had borrowed the name of a real man for your purpose here. Captain Bertie was killed in action, as the newspapers reported. As he had died, you thought it safe to assume his name, probably having discovered that you resembled him in features—perhaps by seeing the photographs in the papers."

A smile flickered for a moment on the captain's lips.

It did not escape the Toff's watchful eyes.

"Or perhaps you knew the captain, and knew that you resembled him, and considered it safe to personate him when you learned that

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 433.

he had fallen," he said. "I do not know; but what I know is, that you are not Captain Bertie."

"And what motive do you assign for the impersonation?" smiled the captain. "When Captain Bertie was reported killed, it was mentioned that he left no property of any kind. Why should you suppose that an impostor assumed his name when there was no profit to be made by so doing?"

"For the sake of penetrating to places which Gentleman Jim could not enter in his own character," said Talbot. "For the sake of gaining an entree into this school, and other places, where there were cribs to be cracked."

"My dear lad," said the captain good-humouredly, "you make me fear that you are not quite right in your mind. On these fanciful grounds, you accuse me—"

"I have other grounds. I knew in advance that you would refuse to let Manners photograph you, and you did. I knew that when Blake's paper was brought to you the photograph of Captain Bertie would be destroyed by a pretended accident, and it was."

The captain's eyes gleamed for a moment.

"So you have been watching me?"

"Yes."

"Very good. I am a guest in this house, and I do not think Dr. Holmes will allow his guest to be insulted by a foolish and fanciful schoolboy," said the captain. "If you choose to apologise immediately for your offensive words, I will let the matter drop. Otherwise, I shall complain to your headmaster."

Talbot winced for a moment.

If the man was Gentleman Jim, he was playing a bold game in brazening the matter out; yet he was playing the only possible game. For to take the accusation in silence was to admit its truth.

But Talbot knew how deep would be the Head's anger when he learned that Talbot had, as he would consider it, insulted his guest to his face.

But the Toff had had no choice in the matter. Captain Bertie's hand was already on the bell.

"Stay a moment," said Talbot quietly.

"You prefer to apologise, and withdraw your ridiculous accusation?"

"I withdraw nothing. But I have another word to say. The police know Gentleman Jim, and the Army authorities know Captain Bertie. They can prove whether you are the one or the other. Unless you leave the school this day, I shall write to the War Office, and to Scotland Yard at the same time. We shall see whether the report of Captain Bertie's death has been officially contradicted. If the War Office maintain that Captain Bertie is among the killed, even Dr. Holmes will understand that your story is false."

If Talbot expected the captain to blanch, he was disappointed.

He smiled and pressed the bell.

There was a short, grim silence. Talbot knew that he had failed. The cracksman was game to the last.

Tap at the door and it opened. Toby, the page, looked in.

"You rang, sir?"

"Yes. Please go to Dr. Holmes, and ask him whether he will step to my room for a few minutes."

"Yessir!"

Toby, after a wondering glance at Talbot of the Shell, withdrew. The door closed. Talbot drew a deep, deep breath.

"Then you mean to play the game out?" he said.

"I mean to report your impertinence to your headmaster," said the captain coldly.

"You know that by to-morrow you must be exposed, if the report from the War Office justifies me?"

"I know that I shall request Dr. Holmes to see that I am not annoyed by insolent schoolboys."

Then there was silence in the room, till the footsteps of Dr. Holmes were heard in the passage, and the Head entered.

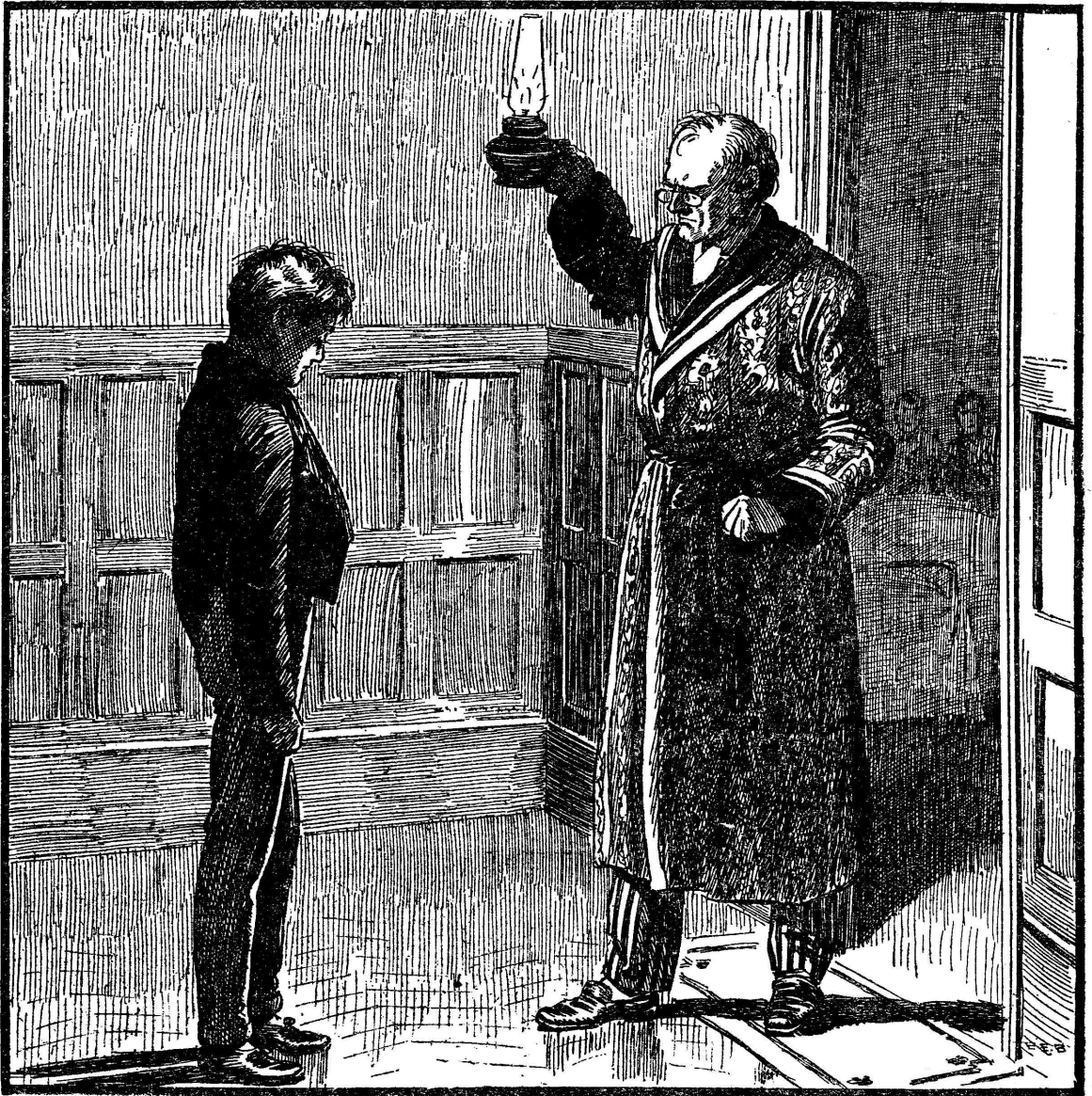
CHAPTER 8.

In Disgrace.

DR. HOLMES glanced in some surprise at Talbot, and then at Captain Bertie.

"Toby brought me your message," he said. "Is anything the matter?"

**TUCK HAMPERS
FOR READERS OF
THE
BOYS' FRIEND
ONE PENNY.
OUT TO-DAY!**



The junior glanced up as he saw the light, and his face paled at the sight of the Head standing in the doorway, lamp in hand. Dr. Holmes' face was as hard as iron. "You have disobeyed me, Talbot." His voice cut like a whip. "After this, I have nothing more to say to you. You leave in the morning." (See Chapter 12.)

The dark frowns on the captain's face, and Talbot's very grim look, warned the Head what was the matter. He knew that Talbot must have repeated his accusation to the face of the accused man. He frowned angrily. The wrath that gathered in his face made Talbot's heart sink. Yet he had expected it—if Gentleman Jim brazened the matter out to the end.

In the long run he would be justified; he must be justified. But at the present moment, the cracksman held all the trumps.

"Yes, Dr. Holmes." The captain's voice was quiet and dignified. "A most extraordinary thing has occurred. As your guest, I should have passed it over in silence if it had been possible. But—"

"What have you done, Talbot?"

"He will tell you, sir," said Talbot heavily.

"This boy has forced himself into my room, and uttered a string of the most surprising and extraordinary insults," said the captain. "I fear that he cannot be quite right in his mind. He accuses me of being some criminal—he says that he has lived among criminals, and recognises me as one of his associates—"

Talbot crimsoned.

"I need not ask you, sir, if you attach any weight to such a

ridiculous accusation," said the captain, with great dignity. "If such a thing is possible, I can only say that I am prepared to leave your house—"

"Not a word more, Bertie!" exclaimed the Head, his face scarlet. "Not a word, my dear fellow. You cannot dream that I should doubt you. As for this unfortunate boy, I can only apologise for his rudeness, his cruelty, and stupidity. It is true that he had a very unhappy upbringing—a matter that his friends have agreed to forget. He made acquaintances among criminals—he doubtless met such a person as the ruffian he declares resembles you in features. He has a foolish idea that he is doing me a service by insulting my guest."

"Then he has already mentioned this matter to you, sir?"

"Yes; and I forbade him to mention it to any other, and to dismiss it from his mind as a stupid mistake. I do not know how to apologise to you, Bertie, for this atrocious insult, inflicted upon you under my roof!" exclaimed the Head, in great distress.

"Not at all, sir!" said the captain, with a deprecating gesture. "I can make allowances for the boy, if, as you say, he was brought up among criminal associations, and had a foolish idea that he was doing you a service in insulting your guest. I deemed it only proper to bring the matter to your

knowledge. But let it drop, I beg of you. It would pain me to be the cause of the infliction of punishment upon any boy in this school."

The Head fixed his eyes upon Talbot's pale face. Never had the junior seen so grim a wrath in Dr. Holmes' countenance.

"You hear what the captain says, Talbot?"

"Yes, sir," said Talbot dully.

"Are you not ashamed to insult him—my guest—a man who has shed his blood for the country?" exclaimed the Head, with a withering look. "Talbot, I have always had a high opinion of you. That opinion I am now compelled to reconsider. This childish fancy should never have entered your mind, but I forgave you for that. But that you should insult my guest to his face—that is unpardonable."

The Head's wrath gathered as he proceeded.

"It is unpardonable—infernal, Talbot! I told you you were mistaken, that I know Captain Bertie in his boyhood—yet you persisted in this infernal slander."

"Slander, sir!" muttered Talbot.

"What else do you call it?" exclaimed the Head scornfully. "You have attempted to smirch the honourable name of a brave officer!"

"Oh, sir!"

The misery in Talbot's face touched the Head a little, in spite of his anger. Involuntarily, his face relaxed.

"Unhappy boy!" he exclaimed. "I am willing to believe that you fancied you were acting for my service. But you have deeply wounded me, and injured me, by this mad, inconsiderate action. Captain Bertie has asked me not to punish you. I really do not know any punishment adequate to your offence. I am shocked and disgusted. You will immediately apologise to Captain Bertie in my presence, and withdraw your odious accusation."

"I—I—"

"I shall be satisfied if the foolish lad apologises," said the captain.

"You hear, Talbot? I command you to apologise at once!"

Talbot's lips quivered.

"I will never disobey a command of yours, sir," he said.

"I am sorry!"

"And you will withdraw your foolish accusation?"

"Dr. Holmes—"

"Immediately, sir!" thundered the Head. "Tell Captain Bertie that you have made a mistake, and are sorry for it!"

"I cannot do that, sir," said Talbot firmly. "I have not made a mistake, and if you communicate with the War Office and the police in London, they will tell you so."

"Boy!"

"That is all I can say, sir."

"You refuse to obey me?"

Talbot was silent.

"Very well," said the Head, in a tone of concentrated anger. "In spite of what I tell you, you persist in nourishing this wicked slander concerning my guest. I cannot find words to describe your conduct, Talbot. I can only say that I have been grossly deceived in you. Unless you assure me, at once, that you no longer believe this stupid accusation against my friend and guest, you will be ordered a flogging for to-morrow morning!"

"Very well, sir. I am not afraid of a flogging," said Talbot steadily. "I am afraid you will be sorry afterwards, sir, but I shall not reproach you."

"How dare you!" thundered the Head. "Leave this room at once, Talbot! Do not let me see you again!"

Talbot quitted the room in silence.

The Head, greatly agitated, turned to Captain Bertie.

"My dear fellow, I hope you will not let this make any difference to your stay here," he exclaimed. "The boy is incomprehensible—his obstinacy is amazing. But you may be sure that he will not spread this infernal slander in the school, obstinate and foolish as he is, his motives are good. Pray assure me that you will forget all about the matter. You may rely upon it that that boy will not annoy you again."

The captain nodded.

"Very well, sir. I am only sorry such an extremely unpleasant incident should have occurred. The boy cannot be quite sane, I think."

"Really, it would seem so," said the Head. "I cannot understand him. Usually he is intelligent and obedient—one of the best lads in the school. But I am compelled to entertain a very different opinion of him now. His conduct is absolutely indefensible."

"Pray think no more about it, sir," said the captain reassuringly. "I assure you that I shall dismiss the matter from my mind at once."

"I am glad to hear you say so, my dear Bertie."

The Head, still greatly flustered, left the captain's room. Captain Bertie bowed him out and closed the door.

Then the good-humoured expression dropped from his face like a mask.

The handsome features lost all their good looks—the expression became old and worn and haggard and intense. He paced the room with hurried steps, muttering.

If the Head could have seen his honoured guest at that moment he would, perhaps, not have dismissed Talbot's accusation as utterly without foundation. But the Head did not see him.

CHAPTER 9.

The Only Way.

GORE of the Shell looked oddly at Talbot as the latter came into the study. Gore and Skimpole were at work on their preparation. Talbot was late for his work. The handsome Shell fellow was deadly pale, and he moved slowly and heavily, like a fellow who had sustained a terrible shock.

"Are you ill, Talbot?" exclaimed Gore, rising to his feet.

Talbot shook his head.

"No, Gore. I'm all right."

"You're looking jolly queer," said Gore. "Can I do anything for you, old chap?"

Gore's look was anxious and concerned. Even the bully of the Shell liked Talbot. It was curious how the "Toff" had won popularity even in the least likely quarters.

Talbot only shook his head again, and dropped into a chair at the table. Skimpole blinked at him benevolently through his big spectacles.

"You look quite seedy, my dear fellow," said Skimpole. "I suggest that you should miss your prep this evening. If you like, I will read you a chapter from Professor Balmycrum-pet's great book on biology."

Talbot smiled faintly.

"I've a bit of a headache," he said. "That's all right, though. I'm going to do my prep."

He settled down to work, and there was silence in the study.

Talbot was a hard worker as a rule, but this evening he found it difficult to concentrate his mind upon "prep."

He had made a false step.

He had not believed that Gentleman Jim's nerve would be equal to the test he had put it to, that the rascal would have the cool audacity to remain at St. Jim's when he knew that he was known, when he knew that a day or two, at latest, must bring public exposure of the cheat, and arrest. For although the cracksmen had so far broken no law at St. Jim's, there were old scores against him. His coming there under a false name, just after release from prison, would be taken as sufficient proof of felonious intentions.

But he had brazened it out, and Dr. Holmes believed him. And Talbot had incurred the Head's deep wrath. His kind and loyal friend had turned against him. Whether the Head seriously intended to order him a flogging in the morning Talbot did not know, but it was practically certain. Regarding the matter as he did, the Head could not leave the insult to the "captain" unpunished.

Talbot did not fear punishment. But the humiliation of it hit him hard. And to be severely punished by his kind friend, whom he was trying to save from a loss that meant almost ruin—that was the unkindest cut of all!

His justification would come—it must come. His letter to the War Office was already written and posted. If the captain was an impostor, using the name of a brave man who had died on the battlefield, his exposure would be swift. It would not come in time, however, to save Talbot from bitter injustice. And that was not the worst. It would not come in time to save the Head from ruinous loss. For Gentleman Jim, knowing full well that the time was short, would strike at once.

Talbot's work, for once, was ill done.

He left the study at last with his preparation unfinished. It meant more sharp words from Mr. Linton in the morning, but that could not be helped. That was a small trouble in comparison with others that weighed on his mind.

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Arthur Augustus D'Arcy met him in the passage as he went towards the stairs. The swell of St. Jim's gave him a genial smile.

"I've written to my governah," he said cheerily. "He's goin' to invite Captain Bertie to Eastwood for the cricket week—at least, I've requested him to do so. It will be wippin', won't it?"

"Awfully ripping," said Talbot, with a grim smile. Before that invitation could be accepted Talbot had no doubt that the "captain" would be known in his true colours. He had done that much good, at any rate.

"You're lookin' wathah seeday, deah boy," proceeded Arthur Augustus. "You cut cricket p'actice, too. I twust you are not goin' to be cwocked."

"Right as rain!" said Talbot.

He passed on, and went out into the dusky quadrangle. There he walked to and fro under the shadowy elms, thinking.

A footstep startled him a little later, and Tom Merry joined him. The captain of the Shell peered at him anxiously in the gloom.

"Near bedtime, old chap," said Tom. "Is anything the matter?"

"I don't know what to do, Tom," said Talbot huskily. "That scoundrel has beaten me all along the line."

"Still harping on that?" said Tom uneasily.

"Yes, I have to. I've spoken to him, told him I knew him, and gave him a chance to clear off."

Tom Merry jumped.

"Talbot, you ass! You oughtn't to have done that! I tell you the man's as right as rain!" he exclaimed. "You've insulted him—a wounded man from the Front!"

Talbot made a weary gesture.

"What did he do?" asked Tom anxiously.

"Sent for the Head, and complained to him. I'm to be flogged in the morning for grossly insulting the Head's guest."

"Talbot"—Tom's face was the picture of dismay—"you— you couldn't expect anything else. Captain Bertie couldn't forgive such a thing."

"I'm not afraid of the flogging," said Talbot quietly. "I don't think it will come off. Captain Bertie won't be here in the morning, I fancy."

"Why shouldn't he?"

"I've written to the War Office explaining the matter. He knows it."

"Good heavens, Talbot!"

"If Captain Bertie, of the Loamshire Light Infantry, was really killed in action, the authorities know it. When they find that 'Captain Bertie' has turned up alive here, they will know he is an impostor. They will write at once to Dr. Holmes and tell him so. They may even telegraph. And in that case the Head will know the truth early to-morrow."

"If it is the truth," said Tom doubtfully. "Suppose they write that the captain was reported killed, under a mistake, as Captain Bertie says?"

"In that case I shall be proved to be wrong, and I shall deserve what I get for making a fool of myself, Tom. But I haven't the slightest expectation of that. The man is not Captain Bertie, he is Gentleman Jim, and he knows that, owing to my chipping in, the game will be up to-morrow."

Tom was silent.

"I have written to Scotland Yard also," pursued Talbot, "to the Criminal Investigation Department. I have told them the facts, and to-morrow morning I fully expect a man from Scotland Yard will be here to arrest the impostor."

"Talbot!"

"Perhaps I ought to have done that at the very first, but I shrank from causing such a scandal in the school. I believed the rascal would clear when he knew that he was known, and no harm done."

"He would have cleared, Talbot, if you were right."

"Not without his plunder, it appears!" said Talbot bitterly. "He has more nerve than I gave him credit for. I do not believe he will be here to-morrow. But he will not go empty-handed if he can help it."

Tom Merry started.

"You think that to-night—"

"I do not think, I know," said Talbot quietly. "He can have only one reason for risking a longer stay at the school now he knows that the game is up. That reason is that he is going to make an attempt to-night to gain his object."

"But—but it can't be true!" said Tom. "Talbot, I know you don't often make mistakes, but you're wrong this time. You've fairly put your foot in it. If a detective comes here to-morrow to arrest, and finds that it's a real captain, a jolly good fellow, too, Talbot, what do you think will happen? What will the Head say?"

"The Head's pretty wild with me at present," said Talbot, with a faint smile. "I don't know what he will say, but I

know what he will do in that case. He will expel me from the school."

"And you've risked that—"

"I've risked it, to save Dr. Holmes from being robbed of his life's savings," said Talbot calmly. "If I'm wrong, I shall suffer for it—about as much as a fellow could suffer for a mistake. If I'm right, all's serene!"

"But you're wrong, and you've ruined yourself!" said Tom in dismay. "After a scene like that the Head couldn't let you stay here. He couldn't possibly forgive you for exposing his guest to such a humiliation—charging him with being a criminal, and calling in a detective!"

"I know it. But I don't fear that; for, as I've said, I know that the man is Gentleman Jim, the crackman. That isn't what's worrying me. But—but what am I to do to-night? Tom, I tell you I know—I know that the man intends to rob the Head to-night, and run before morning!"

"You've got this thing on the brain," said Tom incredulously. "Anyway, the Head's his own master, I suppose, and he's chosen to take the risk."

"I can't let it go at that. You know how Dr. Holmes has stood by me; you know how much I owe to his kindness. But—but it is useless to warn him. If I asked him to take some precautions to-night, on account of the captain, you can guess how he would receive me. But I cannot let him be robbed. I shall have to keep watch to-night myself."

"You can't!" exclaimed Tom, aghast. "Suppose the Head found out—"

"I must risk it."

"Talbot, do be sensible, old chap! The Head must be awfully ratty already. If you do anything further, you may be turned out of the school."

"I know."

"Well, chuck up the idea," urged Tom. "It's all moonshine, you know. The Head's satisfied about the man, and it's his business. Look here, you're jolly well not going out of the dormitory to-night."

Talbot did not reply. Monty Lowther came out of the School House, and called to them.

"You fellows out here? Don't you know it's bed-time?"

The chums of the Shell went in.

Tom Merry glanced at Talbot anxiously in the Shell dormitory. Talbot's face was pale and sombre, and he was silent. Kildare of the Sixth saw lights out, and the dormitory settled down to slumber. But there were two who did not sleep.

CHAPTER 10.

In the Dead of Night.

BOOM! The last stroke of midnight had died away, when there was a rustle in the silent dormitory.

Talbot was slipping quietly from his bed.

He dressed quickly in the darkness.

"Talbot!"

It was a low voice from Tom Merry's bed. The Toff started as he heard the whispering tones.

"Tom, you're awake!" he muttered.

Tom Merry sat up in bed, and peered through the darkness.

"Yes. You're getting up? Talbot, old chap, won't you take my advice? Go back to bed."

"My mind's made up, Tom."

"Blessed if I don't begin to think you're off your rocker!" said Tom peevishly. "You're enough to exasperate a chap, Talbot."

"I'm sorry, Tom. You'll think differently to-morrow."

"Oh, rats! Look here, are you really going?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll come with you, you ass," growled Tom.

"No, no! One's enough," said Talbot. "If there's need, I shall shout; and I dare say there will be need. But one's enough to keep watch. If I'm found out of the dormitory there will be a row, and I won't drag you into it."

"Look here—"

"Go to sleep, old chap," said Talbot quietly. "You can't do any good."

"Well, I know there's nothing to watch for, anyway," said Tom. "You're off your crumpet, you know."

"To-morrow will show."

Tom Merry grunted, and settled down on his pillow again. It was evidently of no use to argue with Talbot. Right or wrong, the Toff had the idea firmly fixed in his mind, and words would not remove it.

The juniors had spoken in low tones, and none of the others had awakened. Tom Merry had kept awake with great efforts, but he was very sleepy. There was no reason to keep awake longer, since Talbot was determined to go.

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and Tom did not believe for a moment that there would be an alarm in the night.

He was asleep almost by the time Talbot had glided silently from the dormitory, closing the door without a sound.

The Toff passed noiselessly down the passage. He was wearing rubber shoes that gave no sound. A bitter smile was on his face; this stealing softly through the night, with unsuspecting sleepers round him, reminded the Toff of the black old days, when he had been the prince of cracksmen, the confederate of the Professor and Hookey Walker. Those miserable days had come to seem like a black dream to him; like the scenes of a former state of existence. Now once again he was the Toff of old—wakeful when others were sleeping, soft-footed, silent, cautious, watchful as a fox.

The great building was silent as the grave. The last light had been extinguished, the last door had closed.

Silent in the darkness, the Toff reached the wide, panelled corridor upon which the door of the Head's study opened.

That door, he knew, was locked.

There was an alcove in the passage near the study door, where a great window pierced the wall—thickly draped in dark hangings. Talbot entered the alcove, and sank down on the window-seat.

There he waited.

His eyes and ears were on the alert. His eyes were of little use in the darkness, but his ears were keen. No one could have passed along the passage without his knowledge.

He waited patiently.

He had come down to take up a rigil as soon as he was sure that all the occupants of the School House were in bed. He would leave nothing to chance; but he did not think that the cracksmen would be at work so soon. Not for an hour or two yet did he expect to hear the stealthy footsteps of the thief in the night.

Silent, sleepless, he waited.

Boom!

It was the stroke of one, from the old clock-tower, sounding duly through the quiet summer night.

The faint echoes died away, and all was still again.

Talbot hardly moved, as the slow minutes passed.

Another hour dragged by.

Boom! Boom!

The Toff drew a deep breath then. It was two o'clock. If the cracksmen's attempt was to be made, it could not now be long delayed. Unless the Toff had made a terrible mistake, Gentleman Jim must be already preparing for his night's work; for he needed to be far from St. Jim's before the first rays of the early summer sun.

He listened with almost painful intensity.

Suddenly he started, and his breath came quicker.

There was a faint sound in the wide corridor.

The sound was so faint that less keen ears than the Toff's would have passed it unnoticed. But the Toff knew that it was a footfall—the soft footfall of a slinking marauder—the footfall he had been waiting for.

He rose to his feet, his heart beating.

Faintly, almost inaudibly, the footsteps approached. They were passing the alcove, in which Talbot stood wrapped in darkness.

The Toff's plan was simple. To reach the Head's safe, the thief had to pick the lock of the study door. Once he had done that, the alarm could be given; for no lie, no subterfuge, could save the rascal then.

Once he was within the study, the alarm would ring out; for even the Head could not have doubted further.

Talbot's heart beat almost to suffocation as the cautious footsteps passed the alcove, within three feet of him.

It seemed to him as if the creeping rascal must hear the throbbing of his heart.

He stilled his breath.

But the stealthy footfalls ceased. Suddenly, there was dead silence. In the darkness, Talbot heard a hurried breath.

His heart leaped.

Gentleman Jim was an old hand; he was not easily caught napping. Possibly, too, he had some suspicion that the Toff might be on the watch.

He had stopped directly outside the alcove; his quickly-drawn breath, audible to Talbot's ears, showed that he was within three feet of the junior.

He had heard some slight sound—perhaps Talbot's breath in the dead stillness of the night. He knew that someone was there.

There was a terrible pause.

The darkness in the alcove was so intense that neither could see the other; but each knew that the other was there.

A touch fell upon Talbot in the darkness—the hand of the cracksmen, groping in the alcove!

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The Toff's hand was ready. Clenched, hard as iron, it dashed out, and there was a sharp cry.

For the junior knew what he had to expect. The baffled cracksmen would not have hesitated a second to fell him senseless to the floor; would not have shrunk even from taking life itself.

Talbot heard a hissing breath, and then the hands of the ruffian closed on him, and he was fighting—fighting for his life!

The moment had come, sooner than Talbot had expected—sooner than he had wished. In the grasp of the cracksmen, he struggled and struck; and his voice rang out through the night:

"Help! Help!"

CHAPTER 11. A Cool Hand.

"HELP!" Talbot's voice rang and echoed in the silent house.

There was a fierce oath in the darkness.

"Help!"

A door was heard to open above, a voice called. Somewhere a light glimmered. Talbot's voice rang on fiercely, breathlessly:

"Help!"

The furious grasp upon him was suddenly relaxed.

"Who are you?" asked a panting voice.

"You know who I am—Gentleman Jim."

"By gad, that boy again! I took you for a burglar!" It was the voice of Captain Bertie, breathless, but with an amused tone. "What are you doing out of bed at this time of night, you young duffer?"

Talbot did not reply. The cracksmen had ceased to struggle, but the Toff held on to him. He had expected Gentleman Jim to make a wild effort to escape now that it was evidently too late to think of the robbery. But the captain made no effort, he made no movement.

There was a blaze of illumination in the corridor as the electric light was turned on.

Mr. Raitton came striding up.

Behind him came the Head. On the stairs a dozen fellows in pyjamas could be seen, wildly excited.

The alarm had roused the whole house.

Mr. Raitton stared at Captain Bertie and Talbot, in utter amazement.

"In Heaven's name, what does this mean?" he exclaimed.

The captain shrugged his shoulders.

"I think it means that this boy is insane," he said. "Will you ask him to remove his hands from me? I do not wish to hurt him."

"Talbot, release Captain Bertie at once! Are you mad, boy?"

Talbot stepped back.

The captain made no move to escape. He glanced at the Head and the Housemaster, with a smile.

Dr. Holmes gave Talbot a dark frown.

"It was you alarmed the house, Talbot?"

"Yes, sir."

"What do you mean by it? I begin to believe that you are not responsible for your actions. What are you doing out of your dormitory?"

"Ask Captain Bertie what he is doing out of his room," said Talbot bitterly.

Talbot's heart was like lead. Again he had failed; he knew it already. The cracksmen had discovered his presence too soon. With iron nerve, the rascal meant to brazen it out. And Talbot had no proof. Had he cornered the cracksmen in the study after the door had been forced all would have been well. But the alertness of the cracksmen had baffled him again.

There was a buzz of excited voices at the end of the passage.

Dr. Holmes looked round angrily.

"Boys, go back to bed! Go at once!"

"Isn't there a burglar, sir?" called out Kerruish of the Fourth.

"No, no, no!"

"But we heard somebody yellin' for help, sir!" exclaimed D'Arcy.

"It is a foolish trick of a foolish junior!" exclaimed the Head. "Go back to your beds—go at once!"

The St. Jim's fellows, greatly excited and perplexed, reluctantly obeyed. Many of them had seen Talbot in the group in the corridor, and wondered what the Shell fellow was doing there. Tom Merry was in the crowd, and his heart was heavy as he went back to the dormitory.

"Now, I want to know what this means, Talbot!" said the

Head grimly. "It appears that you have attacked my guest, and called for help."

"He attacked me," said Talbot.

"That is true," said the captain. "I am sorry, as it turns out to be a boy of this school, but I was under the impression that it was quite a different person. I heard a noise, Dr. Holmes, and, knowing that you had valuables in the House, I thought of burglars at once, and came down to investigate. I found this boy here; but in the darkness, of course, I did not know him, and I supposed I had found the burglar, and seized him. As soon as I heard his voice, however, he will admit that I released him at once; I did not wish to hurt him."

"Will you leave this matter in my hands, Mr. Railton?" said the Head quietly.

"Certainly, sir!"

The Housemaster, after a curious look at Talbot, returned to his bed-room. The Head and the two late combatants were left together.

"Now, Talbot, explain your conduct," said the Head sternly. "You have left your dormitory at this late hour, and alarmed my guest, and then alarmed the House. What is the meaning of it?"

"I did not alarm him, as he says, sir," said Talbot. "He did not hear me come down. I have been down here since midnight."

"Since midnight! For what reason?"

"To keep watch, sir."

"Are you mad, Talbot? Why were you keeping watch?"

Talbot smiled wearily.

"I suppose you will not believe what I say even now, sir. But that man knew that he would be exposed to-morrow, and I knew, therefore that he would make an attempt on your safe to-night. For that reason I kept watch. He came, as I expected; and now he is discovered he means to brazen it out."

Dr. Holmes' face was crimson with anger.

"How dare you, Talbot!" he gasped. "How dare you bring such an infamous accusation! You have heard Captain Bertie say that he came down because he heard a noise, and supposed it was burglars."

"He has spoken falsely, sir."

"Wretched boy!" thundered the Head. "How dare you! Captain Bertie, please forgive this absurd boy. I really fear that he is not in his right mind."

The captain nodded.

"I think so myself," he said. "I have never heard such an extraordinary thing. I suppose the foolish lad made some noise, and that was what I heard."

"I made no sound," said Talbot. "You did not hear me till you were passing the alcove."

"Dr. Holmes," said the captain, with a great deal of dignity, "it is impossible for me to endure this. I am afraid I shall have no alternative but to bring my visit to a close to-morrow."

"How can I apologise, my dear Bertie?" exclaimed the Head, greatly distressed. "You must surely know that Talbot's insolence will be severely punished. I have warned him what to expect if he repeated his wicked accusation. Talbot, to-morrow you will leave this school."

"Very well, sir."

"I shall run no risk of my guests being insulted again in this manner," said the Head. "Later, if you choose to write a humble apology to Captain Bertie, I may allow you to return. But to-morrow morning you go. Upon that I am resolved. I am amazed—astounded at your effrontery!"

Talbot did not speak.

There was nothing to say. With his usual cunning, his enemy had glided from the net. There was no proof—no proof! The captain's story was natural enough; it could not be gainsaid.

"You will now return to your dormitory, and stay there until the morning!" said the Head sternly.

Talbot made a step to go, but he turned back.

"Dr. Holmes, that man has been struggling with me, and in the struggle he grasped me with both hands. His left arm is not disabled, as he pretends. If you choose to ascertain

"Silence!" thundered the Head. "I never expected you to add falsehood to insolence, Talbot, to bolster up a wicked and incredible slander! Go!"

Talbot went.

"Let me see you back to your room, my dear Bertie," said the Head more calmly. "I cannot tell you how I regret this! I hope you will reconsider your decision, and remain with me. I assure you that that wretched boy will have no opportunity of troubling you again."

"As you wish, sir," said the captain gracefully.

And the Head walked with him to his room and said "Good-

night!" at the door, shaking hands warmly with the captain. Then Dr. Holmes made his way to the Shell dormitory.

Talbot was in bed. His eyes turned upon Dr. Holmes as the Head switched on the light. His look was steady as he met the dark, frowning glance of the old gentleman who had always been kindness itself to him—always till now. But steady as he was, there was deep pain in the handsome face.

"Talbot"—the Head's voice was deep and unrelenting—"you understand that I cannot possibly forgive you for what you have done this night! But I must be assured that you have ceased this folly. You will not leave your bed again till the morning!"

Talbot did not speak, though his lips quivered.

"You do not answer," said the Head icily. "Very well! I shall lock the door, Talbot!"

A momentary smile flickered on Talbot's pale face. The Head continued, in a harsher voice:

"I forgot—a locked door is nothing to you. Talbot, I command you to remain in bed. I shall not sleep again to-night, I fear, and I shall revisit this dormitory to ascertain whether you have disobeyed me. Take care!"

The light was turned off, the Head closed the door and withdrew.

There was a buzz of voices. Half the Shell were awake, and inquiries poured upon Talbot. He did not answer a word. Tom Merry did not speak. He did not need to ask a question; he knew that Talbot must have been discovered keeping his vigil, and he knew what the Toff's feelings must now be. But the other fellows were curious, naturally, and there was a good deal of grumbling when no word of explanation could be elicited from Talbot.

But the juniors settled down to sleep at last.

CHAPTER 12.

The Head of the Cracksmen.

TALBOT did not sleep. It was not likely that his eyes would close. There was something like despair in his heart. All that he had done had been in vain; he had provoked once more the wrath of the Head; and he had failed to prevent the crime he knew now without the shadow of a doubt was planned for the night.

He could not resume his vigil.

The Head in his deep wrath had warned him. At any moment Dr. Holmes might look into the dormitory, to ascertain that the junior had not left his bed. If he found that Talbot had disobeyed his command? Talbot could have faced his wrath; he could not make that deeper than it was, but if the Head missed him from the dormitory he would seek him at once, the watch for the cracksmen would be interrupted. It was useless to commence a watch that could not be continued.

And Talbot knew, as clearly as if the cracksmen had told him, that the captain was simply waiting for the house to be buried in slumber once more in order to renew his attempt.

He had brazened out the discovery; he had imposed upon the Head with an explanation that was plausible enough—which Talbot himself in the Head's place would have believed.

He had only to wait till all were sleeping, and then carry out his project, and fly.

The robbery would take place. In the morning the Head would know the truth. But then it would be too late. The thief and the plunder would be far beyond reach.

Talbot groaned as he thought of it.

What could he do?

As he lay in the silence and darkness, his brain was burning, as he thought and thought, till his head seemed to spin. Suddenly he sat up in bed.

A new idea had flashed into his tormented brain—a thought that made him start and grow pale as he thought of it.

He set his lips hard.

It was the only way!

It was desperate—it was a terrible peril for himself—a peril of misunderstanding and of dishonour.

But it was for the sake of his benefactor, and he did not hesitate.

He slipped silently from the bed, and dressed hurriedly.

A minute more, and he was gone from the dormitory.

The juniors were sleeping; it was nearly three o'clock. The house was silent and dark. The silence was broken by a step in the passage, a gleam of light came through the gloom. The dormitory door opened; Dr. Holmes, with a lamp in his hand, looked in.

The doctor's face was pale and troubled. His wrath against the junior had not abated; but his old affection for Talbot struggled with it. In his heart he knew that it was

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to serve him that the Toff had acted as he had done. Yet his perverse obstinacy, as the Head regarded it, could not be forgiven.

Dr. Holmes glanced at Talbot's bed. A terrible frown came over his face as he saw that it was empty.

The junior had disobeyed.

"It is too much!" muttered the headmaster.

His lips set in a tight line. Tom Merry awoke, blinking in the light, and looked at the Head. He glanced at Talbot's empty bed, and understood. Dr. Holmes did not observe him.

He moved to the door again. The light of the lamp streamed out into the dark passage.

The Head started a little.

Talbot was returning.

The junior glanced up as he saw the light, and his face paled at the sight of the Head standing in the doorway of the dormitory, lamp in hand. Dr. Holmes' face was as hard as iron.

"You have disobeyed me, Talbot." His voice cut like a whip. "After this I have nothing more to say to you. You leave the school in the morning—for ever. Follow me!"

"Dr. Holmes—"

"Follow me!" said the Head harshly.

He closed the dormitory door, and led the way downstairs. Talbot followed him without another word.

The Head paused outside the door of the punishment-room—Nobody's Study, as the juniors called it.

He unlocked the door with the ponderous key, threw it open, and stood aside for the Toff to pass. Talbot stepped into the room in silence.

"It wants but a few hours to dawn," said the Head icily. "You will remain here till then, Talbot—locked in. I shall run no further risk of your disobeying my commands, and annoying and insulting my guest. I will not say how much your conduct has hurt and shocked me; I leave that to your consciences. Remain here, under lock and key."

"Very well, sir."

Dr. Holmes closed the door.

The key turned in the lock outside, and then a bolt was shot. The Head knew—only too well—that no lock alone could have held the prince of cracksmen. But the bolt on the outside of the door was too much even for the skill of the Toff. The punishment-room was the only room in the School House where Talbot could be held a prisoner.

Dr. Holmes returned with slow and heavy steps to his own quarters.

There was no sign of relaxation in his stern face now. It was, as he had said, too much. Henceforth all was at an end between him and the boy he had befriended.

In the punishment-room Talbot stretched himself upon the bed without undressing.

His face was tranquil now.

Whatever it was that had taken him downstairs against the Head's command, it seemed to have had the effect of relieving his mind.

After a time he slept.

In the Shell dormitory Tom Merry remained long awake. He knew that his chum was in disgrace; he dreaded what was to happen on the morrow. It was the finish for Talbot at 'St. Jim's', unless—unless it proved that his suspicion of Captain Bertie was well founded. And Tom could not believe that likely.

He knew where Talbot was; he knew that the Head must have locked him in the punishment-room to prevent any further watching. He did not blame the Head. Indeed, anxious as he was for Talbot, he could not help feeling a little angry with him, too. Why had he been so obstinate?

Tom slept at last, and did not awaken till the rising-bell rang out in the summer morning.

The Shell fellows turned out, and the one topic while they dressed was the mysterious happening of the night. That Talbot's bed was empty was noted at once. Tom Merry hurried downstairs, and stopped outside the door of the punishment-room and tapped.

Talbot's voice came at once from within. He was awake.

"Hallo!"

"Talbot, old chap—"

"Is that you, Tom?"

"Yes, Talbot. I—I say, you're in trouble, old fellow."

"Not for long, I hope!" replied Talbot.

Tom Merry half laughed.

"You're still sticking to that idea, Talbot?"

"Yes."

"Then you think the captain has gone?"

"I am sure of it."

"After robbing the safe?"

"After taking everything he could lay his hands on."

Tom Merry whistled.

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"Well, we shall soon see," said Tom.

"Yes," came Talbot's voice quietly through the keyhole. "We shall soon see. Don't worry about me, Tom."

Tom Merry went downstairs. He found a number of fellows already in the hall. There was a buzz of voices.

"Vewy wemarahable, deah boy, isn't it?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "You wemembah we were alarmed last night, and the Head said it was only a joke of a silly ass—Talbot, I pwesume. The Head was wathah off the wicket, as it turns 'out."

"What's happened?" exclaimed Tom.

"A burglary," said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! Kildare says so—the Head's safe has been wobbed duwin' the night."

Tom Merry jumped.

"The Head's safe! Robbed!" he shouted.

"That," said Kangaroo, of the Shell. "It's just got out. The Head was down early, and he discovered it as soon as he came down. I hear they've telephoned for the police."

"Where's Captain Bertie?" exclaimed Tom breathlessly. The news fairly astounded the captain of the Shell.

"Not down yet, I think," said Herries.

"The captain was awakened last night, like us," said D'Arcy. "I wemembah seein' him on the spot. I dare say he's sleepay this mornin'."

Tom Merry did not speak. Was Talbot right after all? Had the captain done as the Toff had predicted, while the junior was locked in the punishment-room, unable to interfere? Had the captain gone? That, at least, would be known ere long.

CHAPTER 13.

At Last!

ST. JIM'S was buzzing with the startling news that morning.

From one quarter or another the details came to general knowledge. The Head's safe had been opened, and the skilful way in which it had been done showed that it was the work of a practised cracksmen. Exchequer Bonds to the value of five thousand pounds had been taken, as well as a number of banknotes and currency notes. Many articles of value from the Head's study had also been taken, and from several other apartments. The thief in the night had evidently made a clean sweep. He had taken everything he could lay hands upon—and an open window showed the way he had gone, though there was no clue to the way he had entered the house.

At breakfast the tables were in a buzz. The junior locked in the punishment-room was forgotten in the general excitement.

The Head had telephoned at once to the police, and soon after breakfast Inspector Skeat, of Rylcombe, made his appearance. He was shut up for a long time in the Head's study, and he was observed to look very grave. He was still occupied in the study, the Head and Mr. Railton with him, when the telegraph-boy arrived from the village, with telegrams for the Head. He was taken to Dr. Holmes at once.

The Head took the telegrams carelessly—his thoughts were elsewhere. The robbery of the night had not failed to remind the Head of Talbot's accusation against Captain Bertie. But Dr. Holmes would not allow suspicion to enter his mind, and he had not uttered a word to the inspector of Talbot's suspicion. Yet he could not help regarding it as curious that Captain Bertie was not yet downstairs. The captain was not usually a late riser.

He read the first telegram, and as he read it he gave a violent start.

It was from the War Office, and it ran:

"Capt. Arthur Bertie, Loamshire Light Infantry, killed in action at Loos. Anyone calling himself by this name an impostor."

"Bless my soul!" ejaculated the Head.

He stared at the telegram dazedly.

"Is anything the matter, sir?" asked the School House master.

The Head passed him the telegram.

"Read that, Mr. Railton."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the Housemaster.

"It—it is incredible, surely! There must be some mistake!" exclaimed the Head, in a faltering voice. "I—I do not know why this telegram should be sent to me, unless, indeed, Talbot communicated with the War Office yesterday."

"There is another telegram—"

The Head opened the second telegram.

It was from the Criminal Investigation Department at Scotland Yard, and it ran:

TUCK HAMPERS ARE GIVEN AWAY TO READERS OF "THE BOYS' FRIEND," 1st

"Frederick Bertie, alias Gentleman Jim, known to resemble a relation, officer in the Army. Detain man calling himself Captain Bertie till detective arrives."

Dr. Holmes sank limply into a chair.

He could not doubt now.

Talbot, upon whom his anger had fallen so heavily, had been right. The man was Gentleman Jim, the cracksmen.

"Heaven help us!" murmured the Head. "Then—then it is true! Poor Bertie is dead, and this man—he is an impostor—a scoundrel! Poor Talbot!"

"It certainly seems so, sir," said Mr. Railton, with a deep breath. "But what has Talbot to do with it?"

"The poor lad warned me. He knew the villain by sight," said the Head, in an agitated voice. "I was angry with him. Inspector Skeat, please read those telegrams."

The fat inspector rubbed his hands as he read them.

"Gentleman Jim!" he exclaimed. "Not two months out of chokey, and at work again, and in this style! By gum!"

The inspector's professional satisfaction jarred on the Head.

"And the man's here!" exclaimed the inspector.

"I—I presume he is here."

"You must have suspected him, sir, since——"

"I did not. These telegrams have come in answer to an inquiry, but the inquiry was not made by me. It must have been made by Talbot, of the Shell."

"The Toff?" said the inspector. Inspector Skeat knew all about Talbot.

"He warned me yesterday that he knew the man, and I believed him. In the night he kept watch against my door. The man came down, but—but he succeeded in deceiving me," faltered the Head. "I have done Talbot a cruel injustice. He was right."

"That lad has his head screwed on the right way," said the inspector. "But the business now is to nab Gentleman Jim. So he has been calling himself a captain?"

"He came here as Captain Bertie—a splendid young fellow whom I knew in his boyhood," said the Head. "He deceived me completely. He bears a remarkable resemblance to Arthur Bertie."

"But is the man here still?" exclaimed the inspector doubtfully. "By gad, he may have had the nerve to stay, unless he suspected that he was known! Did he know of what Talbot had told you?"

"Yes."

"Then he is gone!" said Mr. Skeat.

"He—he has not come down yet. I—I think——"

"Show me to his room, then, please. I do not think we shall find him, however."

Dr. Holmes, still in a state of great agitation, led the way to the captain's room. The inspector and Mr. Railton followed him, and a crowd of St. Jim's fellows looked on from a distance.

"This is the room?" asked Mr. Skeat.

"Yes."

The inspector opened the door and strode in. The room was empty. He passed into the bed-room beyond. That, too, was untenanted.

"The bird's flown," said the inspector coolly.

"There was no sign of Captain Bertie.

The bed had not been slept in.

"What is this?" exclaimed Mr. Railton suddenly.

On the table lay a sheet of notepaper. Across it was written in pencil:

"Many thanks for your hospitality! I am really sorry to tear myself away.
GENTLEMAN JIM."

The inspector gave a fat chuckle, evidently amused by that sample of the cracksmen's coolness.

Dr. Holmes bit his lip.

He realised how the unscrupulous rascal must have been laughing in his sleeve all the while he was deceiving the un-suspicious old gentleman.

"Well, he has gone," said Mr. Skeat. "But never fear, sir, we'll find him yet—and the loot, too. Perhaps Talbot may be able to tell us something useful about him. Can I see Talbot?"

The Head's lips quivered.

"I am ashamed to say that he is in the punishment-room," he said. "I—I locked him in last night. I regarded his accusation against Captain Bertie as a wicked slander. I could not credit such a thing. The poor lad!"

"Let us see him, sir," said the inspector.

Talbot, in the punishment-room, was expecting a visit. The door was unbolting and unlocked, and the Toff rose to his feet. Dr. Holmes entered.

"Talbot!" The Head's voice faltered. "My dear lad, can you forgive me for my harshness?"

Talbot's face lighted up.

The doctor's words showed him that all was known. His ordeal was at an end. The truth was out.

"It is nothing, sir," he said brightly. "I am sorry I angered you, but—but I knew the man, sir. Then—then you have found him out?"

"Yes—too late," said the Head. "He is gone."

"He has robbed you?"

"Yes. It was as you told me," said the Head sadly. "If I had listened to you, I should have escaped this loss. But you did all you could, my poor boy, and I was angry with you for trying to save me."

Talbot smiled.

"What has he taken, sir?"

"Most of what I possessed," said the Head, with a sigh. "Five thousand pounds in Exchequer Bonds, banknotes and currency notes, and other things. It is possible that they may be recovered, if—if the man is caught."

"Gentleman Jim will not be easy to catch, sir," said Talbot quietly. "I am afraid everything is gone for good—excepting the Exchequer Bonds. Those I can place in your hands."

The Head started.

"Talbot! If I recovered the bonds, the remainder of the loss would be trifling—in comparison, at least. Perhaps a hundred and fifty pounds—that is all. But how can you——"

"Look, sir!"

Talbot slid his hand under his jacket. He came out with a bundle of thick paper in it. The Head gave a cry of astonishment.

"The bonds!"

"The bonds, sir!" said Talbot quietly.

Dr. Holmes, like a man in a dream, took the bonds from the junior, and examined them. There were ten bonds for five hundred pounds each. Mr. Railton and the inspector stared in blank silence at the junior.

"In Heaven's name, how did you recover the bonds?" exclaimed the Housemaster. "You were locked here——"

"Yes, sir."

"Then how did you get the bonds back from the thief?"

Talbot smiled again, and explained.

"My dear lad! While I was so harsh with you, you were thinking only of saving me from loss!" Dr. Holmes grasped Talbot's hand. "My dear boy, it is a life's savings you have preserved for me—it is what I have designed to provide for my child after I am gone. I cannot thank you enough, Talbot—I can only ask your forgiveness!"

Mr. Railton shook Talbot's other hand in his delight, and the inspector patted him on the back.

The clouds had rolled by, and Talbot's face was very bright when at last he left the punishment-room.

"Now tell us all about it, you bouncer!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

A crowd of excited juniors surrounded Talbot as he came downstairs.

Talbot explained quietly.

"Well, my only hat!" said Blake. "And you didn't tell us a word! Why, Study No. 6 would have spotted the rotter at once, if—if—if—— Ahem!"

"Yaas, wathah; if only we'd been on the twack!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Undah the circs, deah boys, I shall wefuse to have that feahful impostah at Eastwood House for the wicket week!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Talbot was the hero of St. Jim's that day. It was Talbot who had defeated the cracksmen—and defeated he was, for the hundred and fifty pounds he had purloined was but a fraction of what Gentleman Jim had designed to take. The Head could not be kind enough to the junior whom he had treated so harshly the day before, but the harshness was all forgotten now.

As for Gentleman Jim, that cool and pleasant-mannered rascal was not heard of again at St. Jim's. Inspector Skeat and a detective from Scotland Yard sought him; but they sought in vain. The cracksmen had disappeared, and with him disappeared what loot he had been able to take with him. It was owing to the Toff that he had not left Dr. Holmes almost a ruined man. Talbot at last had succeeded in repaying his benefactor. And Tom Merry vowed solemnly that "next time" he wouldn't have the slightest doubt that Talbot was right, at which Talbot laughed merrily. There was no "next time" to be feared; St. Jim's was not likely to receive another visit from "Gentleman Jim."

THE END.

(Next Wednesday's grand, long, complete story of St. Jim's is entitled, "THE MAN FROM THE FRONT!" by Martin Clifford.)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 435.

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

INTO THE UNKNOWN!

This Week's Long Instalment
of a Magnificent New Serial
Story of Thrilling Adventure.

By DAGNEY MAJOR.

Last Week's Instalment Told How

Mr. THOMAS WHITTAKER, accompanied by his son REGGIE, JIMMY REDFORD, LARRY BURT, a Chinese servant named SING LOO, Dr. PHENNING, and a party of natives, of whom Phwaa Ben Hu—nicknamed TOOTHY JIM—is leader, sets out to explore Patagonia in search of a specimen of the giant sloth, which is believed to be still existent there.

One night during the journey the party is attacked by a pack of wolves, and are eventually forced to retreat before the hungry beasts to the edge of a river.

Reggie and Jimmy are standing close together, when one of the wolves leaps up at them, and causes them to fall back into the water.

(Now read on.)

A Gallant Rescue.

REGGIE'S and Jimmy's wild cry of despair had been heard. As the rushing waters closed over their heads and sucked them deep down, Toothy Jim, who, unknown to the boys, had been near at hand, rushed to the spot from which the cries had come.

With one splendid shot he had brought down the wolf who had sprung at the lads and had then darted to the edge of the bank. With his quick, piercing native eyes, accustomed to the darkness of primeval forests and plains at night-time, he saw the heads of both boys as they appeared above the surface of the roaring waters.

With a wild yell, he roared out something in his strange lingo. Though neither Reggie nor Jimmy understood it, it brought encouragement to their hearts, and, shouting to each other words of hope and cheer, they struggled towards the bank. Both were strong swimmers for their years. But they had to battle with all their strength to fight the fierce currents.

"Hallo, Jimmy!" shouted Reggie, spluttering and gasping.

"Where are you, old sport?"

"Just behind you!" panted Jimmy.

"Keep going for a bit!" shouted back Reggie. "Bank's to the left."

"Right-ho!" half gurgled Jimmy. "There's help coming! Toothy yelled out just now on bank!"

As he spoke, Reggie's keen eyes, getting accustomed to the darkness, looked to his left and saw a dark figure running with them as they were borne onwards by the current. The native suddenly gave vent to a fierce yell, and presently Jimmy heard a faint splash, and just caught sight of a thin line right in front of him.

Part of the rope struck him in the face. He made one frantic grab at it, seized it, then yelled out to Reggie:

"A rope—a rope! Quick!"

With one desperate effort he just managed to swim right alongside his chum. Reggie caught at the line. He was almost done for. But Jimmy, never thinking of himself,

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thrust his hand under his friend's chin just as Reggie was going under.

Then the rope tautened, and the boys felt themselves being drawn to the bank.

Jabbering and shouting in his weird tongue, Toothy Jim made a desperate clutch at the two boys when they reached the bank. It was then his great strength proved the boys' salvation. Holding each firmly by the arm, he dragged them out of the raging torrent.

Breathless, panting, choking, Reggie and Jimmy lay on the bank, safe.

Toothy Jim, keeping up his flow of vernacular, showed his pleasure at having rescued the boys. When Reggie and Jimmy had more or less recovered their breath, they warmly and solemnly shook their deliverer by the hand. Then, with their wet clothes clinging round them, they walked back to the camp, distinguishable in the darkness by the faint glow of the fire. But they had been carried by the stream much further than they thought. Reggie reckoned that by the time they reached home, they must have walked a very good quarter of a mile.

"And now for the wolves," said Reggie, as, with a glad shout, he let their friends know they were safe.

It was good to see the blaze from the camp fire, but better still to hear the answering joyful cry, as three figures came running out from the gloom.

"Good heavens!" gasped Mr. Whittaker, who came running up with Larry and the doctor. "Why, boys, we thought you were done for! We've beaten off the wolves, but owing to the darkness and confusion, we only just missed you, and were about to start to search for you. But you're safe, so that's all that matters."

"What cheer, old pals?" grinned Larry, who was immensely relieved to see his chums again.

"Had a bit of a ducking, eh?" asked the doctor, with a great sigh of relief now that he realised the lads were with them once more. In a few words Jimmy and Reggie explained their adventure and the fine part Toothy Jim had played in rescuing them.

"Well, boys," said Mr. Whittaker gravely, "you've had a narrow escape, and it strikes me you owe your lives to Toothy Jim."

"He's a real sport!" cried Jimmy.

"You've got to look slick and get out of those wet things at once," put in the doctor, and slip in between warm blankets, and no shirking about that, my boys."

By this time they had reached the camp fire, and Mr. Whittaker's tent, and Sing Loo, his yellow face one large grin, came running out to welcome them.

"Sing Loo velly glad Massa Reggie and Jimmee gettee back allee lightee!" he said. "Sing Loo velly muchee fliddee bothee join ancestors."

Then he ran back into the tent and quickly returned with two steaming tin mugs of coffee, which he solemnly presented to the boys.

TUCK HAMPERS ARE GIVEN AWAY TO READERS OF "THE BOYS' FRIEND," 1^o.

"Thank you, Sing Loo!" said Reggie and Jimmy, with gratitude.

While the boys were undressing, the doctor and Mr. Whittaker told them how the wolves had been beaten off.

The doctor, Mr. Whittaker, and Larry had shot a number of them down, and Sing Loo, with great presence of mind, had gone to the fire, and, raking out some huge burning logs, had seized them by the uncharred ends and had hurled them among the pack. What with this and the good work done by the guns, the wolves had been driven off, but not without slaughtering one or two mules, though happily, no lives had been lost. One native, whose yell of fear they had heard when the brutes first appeared, had received slight injuries, but the doctor had patched him up. No one expected a return of the savage creatures that night.

Soon Reggie and Jimmy, snug between hot blankets, were sound asleep, while Larry, the doctor, and Mr. Whittaker took it in turns to keep watch. And so the boys passed their first night in the wilds of Patagonia.

Before daybreak they struck camp, and, after a hasty breakfast the expedition journeyed onwards.

They were passing through country covered with dense scrub and coarse grass. Species of small game, such as Patagonian rabbits hares, partridges, had fallen to the guns of all the whites—Reggie, Larry, and Jimmy had proved themselves to be good shots—and this game went to stock their larder.

Suddenly Toothy Jim, who was in front of the cavalcade, came creeping stealthily towards Mr. Whittaker with his fingers to his lips. He whispered one word into Mr. Whittaker's ears.

Quickly the word was passed round—"Pumas!"

The hearts of the three boys leapt with excitement.

With their rifles at the cock, and on foot, the party cautiously proceeded. All unexpectedly, about five hundred yards in front, there dashed across a little clearing two big pumas.

With a flash and a crack Mr. Whittaker's rifle spoke.

"Hit, my golly!" whispered Larry excitedly, as the party saw the beast swerve a little in its course.

Then came an anxious moment. What were the pumas going to do? Would they lurk in the bushes and spring out at some unexpected point, or would they steal onwards through the scrub?

Quickly Toothy Jim, with two other natives, went cautiously ahead, now crouching down amidst the bushes, now half bent double, creeping stealthily along towards the spot whither the pumas had disappeared. A wounded puma is a nasty thing to tackle, and is up to all sorts of cunning tricks.

Then there suddenly broke through the stillness an angry half snarl, half roar, and there leapt out from the bushes not fifty yards ahead of Toothy Jim, the huge puma Mr. Whittaker had wounded. His tawny yellowish skin flashed in the sun. With lightning-like leaps and bounds he came on. Then for a second he crouched, just before he made his terrible spring. The party saw Toothy Jim's rifle at his shoulder; a gasp of horror escaped everyone as no report came. Then the great brute leapt. Simultaneously with his spring, Larry's rifle blazed.

The next second Toothy Jim's form was half covered by the still, lifeless form of the dead puma.

They rushed forward. With a sigh of relief the doctor discovered that Toothy Jim was not dead, but unconscious. Quickly they dragged him from beneath the dead puma, and applied restoratives. Soon they were rewarded by seeing the big native, who was as tough as a rhinoceros, show signs of returning animation.

"The puma was shot dead in mid air, in the midst of his spring, just before he landed with his full weight on Toothy Jim's legs," said Mr. Whittaker. "Bravo, Larry, my boy!" he said, with a smile of approval. "That was a fine shot of yours!"

"Don't know how I did it," murmured Larry modestly.

"Good old Larry!" cried Reggie, slapping him on the back.

"A bullseye that time!" put in Jimmy.

"That made the old puma's funeral bell ring!" put in the doctor, with a grim smile. "He's a fine beast!" he added, gazing at the dead puma, while he supported Toothy Jim, who was now sitting up, looking a bit dazed.

Together the boys, with Mr. Whittaker's help, assisted the natives to string up the puma by its feet to a pole, and it was borne away by two natives, with an end of the pole on each shoulder.

"That's your first bag of 'big game,' Larry," remarked Mr. Whittaker. "We'll skin it to-night, and, of course, you shall have the skin as a trophy!"

Toothy Jim was placed on a mule, and, after the party had vainly waited for the other puma to appear, and no trace of it being seen, the cavalcade moved on once more.

Mr. Whittaker ascertained from Toothy Jim that just at the supreme moment when he was about to shoot his rifle missed fire. So the faulty rifle was put away, and another taken out to replace it.

Nothing of a very exciting nature happened for the next few days, when the distance covered was about twenty miles a day.

The party were all full of good spirits, and gradually getting toughened and hardened by their constant exposure to wind and sun. But on the tenth day of the expedition they entered a dense piece of jungle, and progress was rendered difficult, hampered as they were by great, twining tendrils and branches of tropical and semi-tropical plants.

Toothy Jim, who had quite recovered from the puma incident, other natives, and Sing Loo, often had to hack and chop their way through the dense undergrowth, through which no white man had certainly ever trod before.

Sing Loo happened to be in front one afternoon, busy with his hatchet, when suddenly he came running back, his face twisted into a terrified dismay and surprise, his small, slanting eyes aflight with terror.

"Massa Whittaker—Massa Whittaker!" he panted. "Me velly good Chinaman at choppee choppee allee day, but me no go on choppee choppee!"

"What's the matter, Sing Loo?" inquired Mr. Whittaker.

"Gleat big animal nearly see blave Chinamando downee Fil valee!"

And he waved his hand towards a clump of trees, behind which Mr. Whittaker gathered there was a slope, which the Chinaman had observed, and which the party could not see.

"Gleat animal likee Chinese dragon!" went on Sing Loo. "Velly big paunchee, muchee snoutee!"

Instantly Mr. Whittaker put the expedition on the alert. Everyone was tense with suppressed excitement. What were they going to see? The giant sloth, or some other supposed extinct monster?

"Something to have a pot at!" whispered Reggie to Jimmy, who happened to be next to him.

"A big skin for somebody who bags it," said Larry, "providing Sing Loo hasn't exaggerated its size!"

Cautioning the boys, and ordering Toothy Jim to keep the natives away, with rifles ready and at full cock, Mr. Whittaker, guided by Sing Loo, led the boys and Dr. Phanning towards the spot whither Sing Loo directed them.

Between the big trees, bushes, and undergrowth, near which Sing Loo had been busy with his axe, was a small gap.

Looking through this, Mr. Whittaker, the boys, and the doctor could see the bushes and big stems gradually sloping down towards a small valley, about five hundred yards below, in the centre of which was a clearing. At the bottom of the vale were stagnant pools and reeds. A thick, murky mist hung in patches over the waters. Everything was deathly still.

It seemed as if no living thing was within miles of the party—as if the voice of neither beast nor man had ever disturbed the stillness of this primeval forest since the world came into being.

Breathlessly the party waited for something to move—something to appear. Even the boys were awed, filled with a vague sense of mystery, of a strange feeling that something beyond the pale of imagination was about to happen.

Then slowly, all unexpectedly, there appeared through the mists by the pools the vague outlines of some huge, lumberingly moving thing.

A gasp of amazement, of utter incredulity, escaped the watchers.

Here surely was something that no white man had ever seen before!

The enormous bulk of the animal seemed prodigious. It was half as big again as a full-grown rhinoceros, but with the head, neck, and snout resembling a tapir.

"By gum!" half hissed the doctor, almost white with excitement. "It belongs to the great and supposed extinct megatherium tribe!"

With clumsy, heaving gait, the huge creature shambled along, with its long, ugly snout to the ground. Then suddenly one of the mules in the background lifted up its voice!

The great beast in the valley stopped, swung round towards the observing party, lifted its long, narrow snout in the air, sniffed, and then omitted a series of horrid, loud screams and howlings, intermingled with terrific snorts.

Then Mr. Whittaker, taking long and careful aim, let him have both barrels.

With a scream and howl of pain and rage, the animal stamped on the ground; then, pausing for a moment as if to gather strength, and lowering his head, began to charge up the slope.

Neither of the bullets had found the fatal spot.

The great brute came thundering up the incline.

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A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

earth trembled as, in a perfectly straight line, this unknown species of a supposed extinct monster came rushing onward.

"When I give the word, fire all together!" gasped Mr. Whittaker.

Instantly the boys and Dr. Phенning took aim.

Simultaneously at Mr. Whittaker's word "Fire!" all the rifles cracked. But the giant beast did not go down. For just a few seconds the mighty brute paused, screaming, bellowing, and stamping the ground. Blood flowed freely from several places where bullets had entered its thick hide. But before anyone scarcely realised it down went its head, and it was charging full speed, in a perfectly straight line, seemingly right at them.

It came at tremendous speed.

Once more the five rifles spat lead and smoke; but they only made the infuriated thing swerve a little to the right. In an instant it was on them. There was no time to reload.

With incredible agility Mr. Whittaker sprang back from the little clearing; so did the others at the same instant.

And then there thundered and flashed by them, skimming them by a few feet, that enormous, raging creature.

As it crashed through undergrowth, tearing and trampling branches and stout tendrils under its mighty weight, twisting them up as if they were paper, the affrighted onlookers caught a fleeting glimpse of dull, mottled, greyish skin, covered with long but scanty hairs, an enormous girth of belly, and a huge, long snout.

Onward it smashed and crashed through the jungle, the sound of snapping branches and cracking brambles gradually growing fainter and fainter, till at last perfect stillness reigned once more.

Everyone looked a bit white and scared.

"Phew!" exclaimed Mr. Whittaker at last. "Touch-and-go that time! If it had swerved a little our way, we should have been mincemeat. Its hide must have been thicker than a rhino's!"

"If it belongs to that species, which I think it does, and which everyone versed in the study of bygone animals believes to be extinct, then from what I saw of it I gather that its hide must be nearly twice as thick as the skin of a rhino," put in Dr. Phенning. "Well, we've seen something to-day," went on the doctor—"something which nobody else living has certainly ever seen. But I wish we could have brought it down!"

"It's no good trying to stalk it," said Mr. Whittaker. "I dare not spare the time, and the probability is that we should never get it. You'll have to content yourself by drawing it from memory, doctor."

The doctor made a wry face, but took his disappointment as being part of the ill-luck that must always pursue those who travel in unknown regions.

Sing Loo, very proud that he had been the first one to spot the monster, was glad to find that his skin and his pigtail were intact.

When the party rejoined the mules and native bearers, they were relieved to see that everything was safe, though the great brute must have passed pretty close to the cavalcade through the undergrowth. None of the natives had seen it, but had heard it.

So once more the expedition moved on, going through the opening of the trees from where they had seen the giant tapir, and cautiously crossing the valley and up the other side.

There was no sign of life, save a few birds which lazily hovered on the wing just above the heads of the party.

The jungle grew less dense on the further side of the little valley. The ground became very rough and uneven; huge rocks, stones, and giant boulders constantly obstructed their path. Even the sure-footed mules were hard put to it to keep steady legs and feet, and Sing Loo's pigtail flapped up and down as his steed jerked and jolted him in the saddle.

"Stick it, Sing Loo!" cried Larry, by way of encouragement, as he saw the Chinaman jolting up and down like a springjack.

"Me vel-vel-velly muchee soree!" cried out Sing Loo, in between the flip-flops. "Sing Loo's tummee all shakee shakee!"

"Good for the liver!" laughed Reggie.

"Get you into training!" said Larry. "But, hallo! Hold up there!" he broke off, as Sing-Loo's mule suddenly came down on its knees, and the Chinaman all but pitched over the beast's head on to solid rock. As it was, the Chinaman showed a strong desire to dash his head on the stone and fling his heels into the air.

But suddenly the mule jerked up again, and nearly threw the Chinaman backwards over his tail.

"Yow, yow!" yelled Sing Loo. "This Chinaman nearly insidee outee!"

The boys, shaking with laughter, got Sing Loo securely in the saddle again, and then turned their attention to their own mules.

They were going down a somewhat steep incline, which, as they proceeded, gradually became a narrow, rocky defile. Suddenly there was a shout from Mr. Whittaker, who was at the head of the procession, and the cavalcade came to a halt.

The boys dismounted, leaving their steeds in charge of the natives, and ran up to Mr. Whittaker and the doctor, who stood together.

Well might the boys stare in amazement at what they saw. Just below their feet the edge of the ravine dropped sheer down for about five or six feet, and, lying in a sort of cup, hollowed out by Nature's hand, was a bubbling lake of boiling water and mud, the steam arising from it in little puffs and eddies. This boiling lake, somewhat like the hot springs in New Zealand, but on a larger scale, was about two hundred yards long, and seventy or eighty yards across. Fringing the edge of the lake was a rough, rocky path, the perpendicular sides of which appeared to be intersected by little caves and caverns.

At the end of the chasm could be seen a long stretch of level plain, and, beyond this, a distant range of high hills.

"That lake is fed by some underground stream of molten lava and white-hot rock, goodness knows from how many miles away or at what depth," said Dr. Phенning.

"Plenty hotee water make chop-chop," said Sing Loo. "Me cookee velly good chop-chop there. Water plenty velly hot."

"Suppose we camp here for the night?" suggested Mr. Whittaker. "The mules and heavy baggage can wait above on the higher defile whilst we take shelter in one of the caves below."

"That'll be fine!" said Reggie.

"We can explore some of the caverns!" put in Larry.

"And p'raps have an unexpected adventure in them!" cried Jimmy.

The order was quickly given to unload what was required, and with the aid of the native bearers, who soon scrambled down to the fringe of the lake and deposited the necessaries in a large cave whose small opening gradually widened out into a cavern of seemingly vast proportions.

"While Sing Loo gets supper ready," said Mr. Whittaker, "I'm going to stay with the natives up on the higher ridge. Toothy Jim tells me they are getting frightened and restless, and that they don't like this boiling lake. They think it's evil spirits or some nonsense of that kind. It would be serious if they bolted with some of the mules and baggage, so while you're preparing chop, I'll stay with them with Toothy Jim."

While Sing Loo prepared the meal, the doctor and the three boys began to explore the great cave.

The doctor lead the way with Jimmy, Reggie and Larry bringing up the rear. The doctor carried a small candle-lamp.

Suddenly a cry of half-surprise and horror broke from Jimmy, whose sharp eyes, peering closely before and to right and left of him, had discerned, before anyone else, a strange, uncanny sight. Half-hidden behind a cleft of rock to their left, on a small, narrow ledge, were several skeletons of human remains, the bones all blackened and partly crumbling away.

They were gazing on the ancient cemetery of prehistoric man. Stone hatchets, with wooden handles, stone spears, flint arrow-heads lay in a tumbled heap near them.

When their first surprise was over the doctor quickly picked up some of the stone and flint implements, stuffing them in his pocket, and handing the boys a stone hatchet each to carry. The lads stuffed them in their belts, for they were already carrying rifles.

Carefully they wended their way through the tortuous windings of the cave. Suddenly the doctor slipped. Crash went the lamp to the ground, and in another moment they were in utter darkness.

At the same instant there came to their ears a strange whirring and buzzing noise. The place seemed alive with some unseen, flitting things.

"Hurt, doctor?" cried Larry.

"No, boys; all right. I'm up again— Ugh! Wow!"

He suddenly broke off, as some horrid thing, cold and palpitating, brushed against his face.

A yell of terror and dismay broke from Jimmy, and from the strange, half-stifed grunts and groans that he emitted, he appeared to be battling with some unseen thing.

"Bats—enormous bats!" cried out the doctor. "Lay about with your rifles, boys—"

Oh, horror! As he spoke, one of the unseen things dashed

(Continued on page 10 of cover.)



THIS WEEK'S CHAT



Whom to Write to

EDITOR "THE GEM" LIBRARY.

THE FLEETWAY HOUSE, FARRINGTON ST. LONDON. E.C.

OUR · THREE · COMPANION · PAPERS !

"THE MAGNET" THE "PENNY CHUCKLES.

- LIBRARY - ; - POPULAR - ; - 1/2 -

EVERY MONDAY ; EVERY FRIDAY ; EVERY SATURDAY.

For Next Wednesday:

"THE MAN FROM THE FRONT!"

By Martin Clifford.

In next Wednesday's magnificent, long, complete story of school life, Mr. Railton, the popular master of the School House, is troubled by his old wound, and finds it necessary to take a temporary rest in Yorkshire. His place is filled by Mr. Herbert Selwyn, who, like Mr. Railton, has won glory on the battlefields of Flanders. Grave beyond his years, yet with a boy's love of the open air and all things athletic, Mr. Selwyn makes a very favourable impression at St. Jim's, albeit he is continually tormented by Banks, the bookmaker, the latter having raked up some shady incident of the past. The secret surrounding Mr. Selwyn comes to light at last, with results which are not so disastrous to

"THE MAN FROM THE FRONT"

as Mr. Banks fondly anticipated.

A SON OF THE SEA!

Who Will Send Him Some Back Numbers?

One of my staunchest reader-chums, who hails from the famous old city of Bristol, and is now hundreds of miles away from the Old Country, helping to keep the flag flying at sea, writes me the following chatty and interesting epistle:

"H.M.S. Niobe,
Halifax, Canada.

"Dear Editor,—I have just been reading one of your papers, and am simply delighted. I have been a reader of the companion papers for some time, and my only regret is that I am unable to obtain them every week.

"My pal and I are going to ask you a favour, dear Editor. We want to know if you would ask your readers to send us out some back numbers, as directly we get a solitary copy all our messmates want it, and the result is a free fight. Yesterday I was fortunate enough to receive six copies from home, and I was going down into the mess to put them away for a while, when all of a sudden there was a terrible rush. Somebody put a deck-cloth over my eyes, and in a tick every one of the books was torn from my hand. When I wrenched the cloth from my face there was my messmates grinning and spreading my "Gems" and "Magnets." Talk about ragging!

I shall be seventeen in September, and my native town is Bristol. When we are out at sea and not on watch duty you can take a stroll round the mess-deck and see seven fellows out of ten reading your books.

"Well, dear Editor, I must close now, with best wishes from a staunch reader.—Yours sincerely,

"P. A. SAGE."

I feel sure there will be a swift and genial response to my sailor chum's appeal, and that there will be no further need for his messmates to have to resort to the deck-cloth! I am sure, also, that the united wishes of myself, my staff, and my vast army of readers, go out to this gallant Bristolian across the seas.

NOTICES.

Private S. Pow, 1517, A Squadron, North Somerset Yeomanry, Kelvedon, Essex, would like to correspond with readers.

J. Cracknell, Elm Lodge, Shire Hall Lane, Hendon, London, N.W., wants to buy the numbers of both the "Gem" and "Magnet" contained in vols. 1-5.

Private H. Butcher, 3615, 1/7 City of London Regiment, 47th Divisional Base Depot, B.E.F., Le Havre, France, would like to correspond with a girl reader aged about 19-20.

Peter McCabe, Enagh, Swanns Cross Road, co. Monaghan,

would like to hear from readers who have for sale any of the following: "Gem," Nos. 1-380; "Magnet," Nos. 1-380; "Dreadnought," Nos. 1-150; "Through Thick and Thin"; "Tom Merry and Co."; and any other school stories in the "Boys' Friend" 3d. Library.

Private W. H. Peach, 4679, 1/7 City of London Regiment, No. 11 Camp, Base Depot, B.E.F., Le Havre, France, would like to correspond with a girl reader of about 18-19.

K. Hargreaves, 374, Abbey Lane, Belgrave, Leicester, wishes to buy the following: "Gem," Nos. 379, 380, 382, 386, 387, 388, 389, 390, 391, 403, 404, 405, 406, 407, 411, 413, 415; "Magnet," Nos. 380, 384, 387, 388, 391, 394, 410 418; "Greyfriars Herald," No. 4.

Private W. Rymer, 4563, 1/7 City of London Regiment, No. 11 Camp, Base Depot, B.E.F., Le Havre, France, would like to correspond with a girl reader.

Drummer H. Watt, Middlesex Regiment, Egypt, wishes to thank heartily all those who sent copies in response to his appeal. He would be glad to have the paper sent regularly by one of them, but does not think it fair for him to take so many copies.

Drummer R. Sayer, 3128, 2/7 Middlesex Regiment, Western Frontier Force, B.M.E.F., Egypt, would be glad of letters from readers.

H. Stuart Alexander, Fulham Palace Road, expresses his thanks to the readers who kindly supplied him with the copies he wanted.

H. Jump, 61, Wavertree Vale, Wavertree, Liverpool, wants to buy the numbers of both the "Gem" and "Magnet" contained in volumes 1-6.

Private E. R. Chapman, 4526, 2 Platoon, 1 Company, 1st Herts Regiment, B.E.F., France, would be glad of back numbers of the companion papers.

P. A. Sage, Boy, H.M.S. Niobe, Halifax, Canada, who hails from Bristol, would be glad of correspondence with either boy or girl readers, and would also be grateful for back numbers of the "Gem."

V. Wightman, 15, Duchess Street, Belgrave, Leicester, wants to buy Nos. 360, 361, and 364 of the "Gem."

John Lohle, 10, Old Compton Street, Soho, London, W., wishes to form a "Gem" and "Magnet" League, open to readers anywhere, and will be glad if all writing to him about it will enclose stamped and addressed envelopes.

H. Higgins, 250, Thistle Street, Glasgow, regrets to say that, through unavoidable circumstances he has been obliged to give up his idea of forming a "Gem" and "Magnet" League.

Signaller John Haslam, 11115, 2nd King's Own Royal Lancs Regiment, attached R.E., Base Signal Depot, Cleopatra, Egypt, would like to correspond with a girl reader aged 17-19, and would also be glad to receive back numbers of the "Gem."

Private H. Fisher, B. Company, 6th Battalion, Northants Regiment, B.E.F., France, would be very glad to have a mouth-organ.

Drummer W. Comley, 23354, A Company, 12th Battalion South Wales Borderers, Marne Barracks, Blackdown Camp, via Farnborough, Hants, also asks for a mouth-organ.

A lonely girl, age 20, would be glad to correspond with a really lonely soldier. Address: Miss Dorothy Young, 76, Beryl Road, Hammersmith, London, W.

E. Henry, 29, Raleigh Road, Penge, S.E., wants to buy Nos. 1-25 of the "Gem."

Alpha C.C. (average age 16½-17½) are open for dates. Please write to Secretary, A.C.C., Glenthorne, Reading Road, Farnborough, Hants.

Private F. Croker, S/4 146609, Bakers, A.S.C., Fovant Camp, near Salisbury, would be glad to correspond with readers.

Miss D. Harrison, 4, Colebrooke Row, City Road, Islington, London, N., wants to buy a copy of "The Boy Without a Name."

Your Editor

INTO THE UNKNOWN!

(Continued from page 20.)

right into his eyes, momentarily half-blinding him by the impact.

"Boys," he yelled out, "whatever you do, keep together, but take care that you don't hit each other in the dark! Great heavens!" cried the doctor. "I've lost the matches. They must have dropped out of my pocket when I fell."

What followed none of the party ever had any really clear recollection. In the dark, and yelling at the top of their voices, they fought the horrid things. Every now and again their beating fists would meet the soft, yielding body of a mighty bat, and with a pop it would drop to the ground. The verminous things flew against their faces, struck them in the eyes and mouth.

But their shouts and cries had been heard.

"A light—a light!" yelled the doctor. "Help coming!"

Yes, away in the distance a bright light was rapidly approaching them. Very dimly at first it lit up the cave, and they saw the dim, shadowy forms of the beastly bats—at least a foot long—with big, outstretched, webbed wings, flitting here and there in their crazy, uncertain flight. As the light grew nearer, the bats disappeared, and then they heard the welcome voice of Sing Loo.

"Allee lightee, allee lightee!" he cheery voice said. "This brave Chinaman heardee shriek, and him scully velly quick."

"Golly!" murmured Jimmy, wiping his face with a little shiver. "I don't want that experience again."

"Beastly things! There was no getting at 'em in the dark," said Larry.

"Look there!" chimed in Reggie, pointing to the ground, "we've done for a few of 'em, anyway."

Quite a number of bats lay on the ground, some dead, others feebly moving.

"Well," said the doctor, with a sigh of relief, "we're all of us unhurt, thank goodness! It's a jolly lucky thing that nothing worse has happened to us but a few scratches and bruises. Come along out of this cave, boys, and let's get into the open."

They were quickly by the boiling lake again, and were soon laughing over their little adventure, while they heartily tucked in to the good spread the Chinaman had prepared for them.

Mr. Whittaker rejoined them after supper, and while he ate his meal, told them that he had tied up all the mules with the aid of Toothy Jim, but that one or two of them would have to keep vigil all night by the mules lest the natives turned treacherous and ran off with them. However, the natural fragmation of the rocky defile offered excellent safety, as it was so narrow that the mules could not negotiate it in the dark.

Night swooped down rapidly. Mr. Whittaker and Larry took the first watch by the mules on the upper ledge of the defile, whilst Jimmie, Reggie, and the doctor, and Sing Loo watched turn and turn about by the edge of the boiling lake. Some old wooden packing-cases were broken up, and these, with the aid of some rank grasses and scrub, which Sing Loo had collected during the afternoon, in thoughtful anticipation of the night fire, made a cheery blaze just at the mouth of the bat cave.

But during the night, the unexpected happened. Such a deluge of torrential rain poured down, that it quickly put out the fire. The wind got up, and soon one of those terrible Patagonian rain and wind storms swept down upon the little expedition with pitiless violence.

Then the doctor heard Mr. Whittaker and Jimmy shouting—shouting for help. Seizing his lamp, and followed by Jimmy, Reggie and Sing Loo, they carefully made their way over the narrow path that skirted the boiling lake. In a jiffy that had scrambled up the slight but precipitous side leading to the upper plateau. And then they heard the dread news. The mules had stampeded!

By the aid of the lamps Mr. Whittaker and Toothy Jim had lit, the new arrivals were able to see a little by their fitful glare. Quickly Mr. Whittaker shouted out his orders, and hurriedly the party struck out towards the opening of the defile where they had entered to come down it.

What with the frightful rain and fierce wind all seemed to be confusion.

Suddenly Larry shouted out.

"I've got hold of a mule," he cried, tugging on to its halter like grim death.

Larry stuck to his animal like a Briton, though it dragged him along roughly, cutting his legs and feet against the sharp stones and rocks as it went along. But he hung on.

Confused cries and shouts from the others rang in his ears. Meanwhile, Sing Loo and Jimmy were, a few yards away,

wrestling with another mule. It was terrible work to find and hold the stampeding creatures in the darkness, and had it not been for the fact that the defile was so narrow, the game would have been hopeless, for the beasts would have gotten away. But the wind, rain and shouts terrified them, and, at last, exhausted and spent, both beasts and captors met about fifty yards from the steep decline of the boiling lake, where the doctor, who had lit one or two lamps, made the rendezvous known.

Seven of the mules had evaded capture, leaving them with only five, including those which had been previously lost. It was a very serious depletion indeed.

There was no more sleep for anyone that night. When day broke the rain had ceased, and the wind had considerably dropped.

But another blow awaited Mr. Whittaker. Eight of the native bearers had disappeared—run away and deserted the party. It was Toothy Jim who gave this information.

Notwithstanding their loss, there could be no stopping still. They must go on.

With the aid of planks carried by some of the mules, a slanting platform, supported by rocks and boulders underneath, was made to connect the upper with the lower path by the lake, and in this way the mules were got down to the path that skirted the boiling basin of mud and water, and at length the party once more found themselves on the open plain at the other end of the lake where, about twelve miles ahead, could be seen a big range of hills.

"Well, boys," said Mr. Whittaker, as he, the doctor and his three charges rode together in a little group, "you have just had a taste of the beginning of our troubles. It will give you some idea of the difficulties to be encountered in our search for the Giant Sloth."

"It's fine," said Reggie and Larry together, "real sport. Wouldn't have missed it for anything," put in Jimmy.

Just at that moment, when about two miles from the hills, Toothy Jim came running up from the head of the procession. He was grinning like a shark, and his eyes glittered with excitement.

"Torsha arrah darrah misky toosha!" he cried.

And he began to arrange a long coil of rope, with a lasso at the end, which he carried over his arm.

"Something about torches and whisky," laughed Jimmy.

"Take care, old sport," put in Reggie to the black, "or you'll sprain your lip if you use too much of that language!"

"Me no understandee," chimed in Sing Loo, who was walking by his mule. "Velly funny talker."

Mr. Whittaker, however, who knew a little of the native lingo, was at once on the qui vive.

"I couldn't think what that slow-moving dark line was over there," he said to the doctor, who strode by his side. "Toothy Jim says it's llamas. Now for some sport, boys!" he said.

Creeping on the ground from bush to bush, Sing Loo, Toothy Jim, and the other blacks began to stalk the grazing herd, whilst Jimmy, Reggie, Larry, the doctor, and Mr. Whittaker, taking cover, stood ready to intercept the animals if any ran their way.

Suddenly Toothy Jim gave a signal. He and his three fellow-hunters simultaneously threw their lassos. They were beautiful throws; all the ropes fell over the long necks of the startled creatures. The alarm was raised.

About twenty, terrified and half dazed, came straight at Jimmy and Larry. Though not very big animals, llamas are pretty strong, and the two boys underestimated their strength. They tried to intercept them, but the startled creatures, never swaying from their course, ran into Jimmy and Larry, sending them spinning head over heels. Mr. Whittaker and the doctor roared with laughter, but a second later, met with a similar fate themselves, while Reggie, seeing that the whole herd were off, emptied his rifle at the fleeing things, and brought one of them down.

Meanwhile, Toothy Jim and the two other natives were "playing" with their new captures, gradually tautening their lines, or letting them out as occasion required.

The llamas were mad with rage and terror at being caught, and performed the most extraordinary antics.

Sing Loo was up to his pigtails in frantic anxiety, and was going through the most wonderful exhibitions of wild gambols.

The boys, the doctor, and Mr. Whittaker, approached the Chinaman and shouted out words of encouragement.

"Go it, Sing Loo!" cried Reggie.

"Stick to it!" "Pull him in!" "Let him out!" "Mind his head!" were some of the playful remarks hurled at the Chinaman from the amused onlookers.

Suddenly Sing Loo, in tautening his line, had the temerity to go right up to the llama. As quick as winking it jerked its head round like a flash, and spat full into Sing Loo's face. Then, before Sing Loo had time to run, it went into him full tilt, sending the Chinaman head-over-heels to the ground.

(Another long instalment of this splendid new serial story next Wednesday. Order your copy early.)