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DOING HIS BEST!

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



JUST IN TIME!

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A MAGNIFICENT NEW, LONG, COMPLETE SCHOOL STORY OF TOM MERRY & CO. AT ST JIM'S.

DOING HIS BEST!

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1. Talbot's Request.

"IT'S treating the rotters better than they deserve, Talbot!" said Tom Merry gravely.

"A heap better!" agreed Manners.

"Anything short of hanging is that!" added Monty Lowther.

"I know it's a good deal to ask of you fellows; but I have a reason for it, and I think it's a good one," Talbot replied.

"Not much to ask, for the matter of that," Tom said. "At least, as far as I'm concerned. There aren't many fellows who would have done what you did for me—throwing away your chance of winning the Marathon to make sure that my chance shouldn't be spoiled."

"Kerr did as much. And Kerr hadn't as strong a motive as I had," said Talbot. "It was no end decent of old Kerr, and we shan't forget it!" answered Tom.

"But when you talk about keeping this tizzy dark, you surely forget that it's known over in the New House."

"Only by those three—Kerr, Figgins, and Wynn. They won't talk if we ask them not to."

"They'd do a good deal for you, Talbot, any one of them, I know!" Tom said.

"But Baggy can't be depended upon not to talk," objected Manners.

"Trimble knows nothing more than that the plot was laid. He doesn't know the attempt was made and defeated. I don't think he'll blab; but if he does no one will believe him," said Talbot.

"H'm! That's possible!" Lowther admitted. "But there's Skimmy!"

"I can depend upon Skimmy," Talbot said quietly. "Anyway, Skimmy has probably forgotten all about it by now."

"Well, I feel that you ought to have your way, Talbot," said Tom soberly. "The Shell owes you a debt. But let's look at the matter fairly and squarely before we promise to keep it a secret, for I don't feel so dead sure that we've any right to."

The Terrible Three—Tom Merry, Lowther, and Manners—sat with Talbot in their own study, No. 10 on the Shell passage. It was the day after the Marathon race, which had given the Shell victory by the narrow margin of two points in the great sports competition. Something had happened in the course of that race which was known only to a few fellows, and it was in consequence of what had happened that Talbot had come to Tom Merry & Co. with his request.

"Go on, Tommy," said Manners.

"Be terse, and be lucid!" added Lowther.

"There isn't an ass!" retorted Tom. "There isn't any real need to go over it all, perhaps; but it won't do any harm. This is how it stands. Crooke and Racke, having betted heavily against their own Form, tried by a blackguardly trick to spoil the Shell's chances in the Marathon."

"Yours and mine, Tom," put in Talbot.

"Yes, in a way; but the plot was against the Form. It might be specially against you and me; but that was only because we were most fancied for winners."

"That's true enough. Still, we were chiefly concerned."

"Talbot got wind of it, and with Kerr's help spoiled the dodge. The rascal they'd employed got away; but there doesn't seem much doubt that he was that rotter of a man Racke's keeping somewhere near by to help his food-hogging and betting games. Never mind that; we'll deal with Mr. Scaife, or Clancy, or whatever his real name may be, later."

"We will!" said Lowther, fervently. "Now old Talbot wants us to keep dark about it, and let off Racke and Crooke," went on Tom.

"I don't care a scrap what you do to Racke!" said Talbot. "I wouldn't stir a finger to save him!"

"But if we let up on Crooke, we simply can't touch Racke," Tom reminded him. "We shall have to let the whole affair drop."

"Yes, that's so!" admitted Talbot.

"They deserve a Form ragging at the very least. That would be letting them off lightly. But Talbot spoiled their game, and he wants them let off altogether. He says he has a reason for it. I don't care a scrap what that reason is, but he wants without hearing his reason. I don't know how you fellows feel about that."

"I think we ought to hear it," said Manners. "You won't mind my saying that, Talbot, I know?"

"Not a bit, old man!" replied Talbot heartily.

"Natural inquisitiveness compels me to agree with Manners," said Lowther. "We're in a majority of two to one, Tommy."

"I'd really rather tell you," Talbot said, with a flush mantling his handsome face. "I'm not much in the way of keeping secrets from you fellows; and if I ever do, it isn't because I don't trust you. You haven't forgotten that Crooke's my cousin?"

"We haven't forgotten that," answered Tom.

"I should think you'd be glad to forget it, though," remarked Manners.

"Perhaps I would; but it's the sort of thing one can't put aside wholly. I don't like Crooke. I know he's a good deal of a rotter. But there's my uncle, you know!"

"Colonel Lyndon, you mean?" said Lowther.

"I thought he'd sacked Crooke for good and all!" growled Manners. "Can't see what he wanted to change his mind for."

"He was very near death," replied Talbot simply. "I suppose that makes anyone see differently. Anyway, he wrote to me and asked me to have another, shot at helping Crooke to get into the straight and keeping him there."

"You couldn't, very well say 'No' to that, in the circumstances," said Tom gravely.

Lowther and Manners nodded agreement.

"You fellows know that I'm not a prig or a Pharisee," said Talbot, flushing again. "I'm not very hopeful about doing anything effective, as a matter of fact. But it's up to me to do my best. This affair has prevented my saying anything to Crooke yet. If the plot had come off it would have spoiled any chance I had, as I see it. That's one reason why I was so keen on foiling it. But it's failed, and, as long as it isn't made public property, I think it will give me a sort of handle with Crooke."

"Don't see how," said Manners bluntly.

"I fancy I do," Lowther said. "It would be a sort of moral blackmail. It's difficult to imagine old Talbot as any sort of a blackmail—er—even a highly moral one—but that's how it looks to me."

"Not quite that," replied Talbot. "I don't mean to hold this over Crooke to keep him straight; that wouldn't work. But I may be able to use it to separate him from Racke, and to get him away from Racke is his one chance, in my opinion."

"Nothing in it," said Manners. "There ain't a pin to choose between them. Of course, they're bigger rotters together than they would be apart; but Racke doesn't corrupt Crooke any more than Crooke corrupts Racke. Of the two, I detest Racke most, but I can see that."

"You may be right," Talbot admitted. "All the same, for my uncle's sake, not for Crooke's, I want to try it."

"Well, there you are, you fellows," said Tom. "If you keep it dark, it's for Talbot's sake, and for Colonel Lyndon's. Talbot's our chum, and the colonel is one of the men who have been risking death every day over there for us all. It won't really hurt the Form to miss giving Racke and Crooke the ragging they've earned. They'll soon be qualifying for another, you know!"

"I agree!" said Lowther readily.

"So do I!" Manners said, after ever so brief a hesitation. Manners was given to weighing up things carefully when his temper was not ruffled.

"Thanks, all of you!" said Talbot heartily. "I think I can talk over Figgy & Co."

"Needn't bother about that!" Tom answered. "I'll see them for you. How much are I to sell them the thing?"

"That's jolly good of you, Tom! Tell them just what I've told you—that's what I should have done. I thought of asking them to come and talk it over with us, as I'd agreed that Kerr might let Figgy and Wynn know about the plot and how we kyboshed it. But this was so much more a Shell matter than a Fourth that it seemed best to have it out with you fellows first. Thanks again! I shan't forget how jolly decent you've all been."

With that Talbot went.

"One of the best, but a regular old Don Quixote," said Manners.

"Trying to pull Crooke straight is about as profitable a job as ploughing

the sands," remarked Lowther caustically.

"I can't see any real hope myself," admitted Tom. "But, all the same, Talbot's right. It was up to him. And if he parts Racke and Crooke for a time he won't have done a bad stroke of work."

But Racke and Crooke were to be parted—for a time—without the intervention of Reginald Talbot!

CHAPTER 2.

A Quarrel Between Pals!

"**N**OT a dashed bob!" snapped Crooke. "I'm hanged if I'm going to shell out for a dashed fiasco like that! Even if your rotter's telling the truth, an' I don't believe he is. He never tried the game on—that's about the long an' the short of it!"

Racke and Crooke faced each other in their study, No. 7 on the Shell passage. Both were furious. Crooke's face was red with rage, Racke's pale.

The failure of Sciffe's attempt to prevent Tom Merry from winning the Marathon, and the plucky last-minute efforts of Grundy and Dane, which had given the Shell points enough to enable them to win the competition series, had put both Racke and Crooke in a tight corner.

Even to a fellow with his pockets so well lined as Racke's, it was no joke to have to shell out something like sixty pounds. Racke had plunged heavily on the sports competition, giving longish odds on the Fourth at a time when that Form stood well ahead. Now the fellows with whom he had bet—Knox of the Sixth, and Cutts & Co. of the Fifth—were pressing him for settlement.

They were also pressing Crooke. Crooke had not risked as much as Racke; but twenty pounds just now meant more to him than five times the sum would have meant to Racke.

Racke could pay, though he might have to be about it to his father, and though he hated parting with so much.

Crooke saw no way of paying. It was useless for him to write home, he knew.

He was feeling desperate—even before Racke demanded two pounds ten of him as his share of the sum due to Sciffe for the rascally attempt to trip up Tom Merry, and disable him.

That was the last straw. Crooke could stand no more!

"You'll have to pay, hang you!" snarled Racke. "You agreed to go halves."

"Yes, you fool, if the rotter did it! But he didn't—we've no proof that he even tried. His yarn's a dashed lie, an' you know it!"

"I know it? What do you mean, you ravin' maniac?"

"Doesn't it stand to reason that if two of the fellows had piled in on him at the critical moment an' stopped him, as he says they did, the tale would have been all over the school in half an hour, you wooden-skulled idiot?"

"Perhaps your dearly-beloved cousin is keepin' it dark for your sake!" sneered Racke.

"My cousin? Talbot, you mean?" said Crooke, in amazement.

"He's the only cousin you have here, I believe."

"But—but he wasn't—Sciffe doesn't say—"

"Sciffe didn't know either of them. But, from his description, one must have been Talbot, and the other was most likely Kerr. It all fits in. Those two didn't finish in the race; they popped up suddenly from no one knows where."

Crooke stared dazedly.

"Talbot!" he breathed. "Confound

the fellow! If he's keeping it dark, it's only to come down on me like a thousand of bricks just when I'm not expectin' it!"

"Oh, dash it all, you silly clump, how can he know you were in it?"

"You think he doesn't know! But why—"

"They asked no questions of Sciffe, so he says. He reckons they had no idea who he was. They most likely took you for a tramp—he was got up to look like one!"

"But why should a tramp try on a game like that?"

Racke shrugged his shoulders and grinned.

"Kerr fancies himself no end as a detective," he said. "Let him find out that—"

"I'd a dashed sight sooner he didn't try," replied Crooke, breathing more freely now, and no longer in such a savage temper. "Kerr's too cunning by half. But if they haven't found out yet, they aren't likely to now that the biznez's two days' old, I should think."

"Unless Sciffe lets on!" said Racke meaningly.

"What? Oh, don't talk rot! The sweep wouldn't dare!"

"So I should have thought. It's givin' himself away. But when I told him that we weren't goin' to cash up for a dashed failure, he threatened to, an' he means it, I am sure."

Crooke's brow darkened again.

"It's rotten blackmail, by gad!" he said morosely.

"Something like that!" agreed Racke.

"Well, I'm not goin' to stand it."

"Your mistake, Gerry! You've got to. So cash up fifty bob an' look pleasant about it!"

Crooke pushed his hand into his trousers-pockets, and thrust his face forward till it glared right into Racke's.

"I won't pay a sou!" he hissed. "You brought that sweep here to snub your own dashed ends, an' now he's turned blackmailier you can settle with him. He's not goin' to blackmail me!"

"Why, you mean rotter—you low cad—"

Crooke's right hand came out of his pocket, and Racke staggered back with a red mark upon his pillow cheek. The blow had been given with the open hand, but Crooke had put all his strength into it.

"Say that again!" roared Crooke.

Racke's reply was a punch at Crooke's nose. It got fairly home, and Crooke roared with pain and fury.

Next moment the two were engaged in a wild and whirling conflict.

Stamp, stamp, stamp! They fought each other round the room. They were pretty well matched on the whole. Neither was a skilful boxer, but both could hit hard enough to hurt, and both were getting hurt now.

The door was flung open on a sudden, catching Racke on the shoulder. At the same moment Crooke hit him upon the nose, and the ruby flowed.

"Yooop!" howled Racke. "Stoppit! Oh, I'll make you smart for that, Crooke!"

CHAPTER 3.

Parted Pals!

"**H**ERE, I say, I'm not going to stand this, you know!" boomed the great George Alfred Grundy from the door.

"Let them alone, Grundy!" spoke Monty Lowther behind him. "You don't really mind either of them getting hurt, do you?"

"I don't mind either of them getting killed, as far as that goes," replied Grundy generously. "But that ain't the thing. I'm not going to put up with a

row like this in a Shell study. Why, we shall have Raiton along here if these silly maniacs aren't careful!"

"What's it to do with you if he does come?" snorted Crooke.

The combat was suspended. Racke mopped his nose with a fine cambric handkerchief, and Crooke was gingerly feeling bruises on various parts of his anatomy.

"My position in the Form—"

"The biggest duffer in it!" murmured Lowther. "Still, Raiton's not going to be rough on you for this, Grundy. He must have got used to it by this time."

"You shut up, Lowther! What's the matter with you is that you've got no sense—none at all!" snapped Grundy.

He turned to Racke and Crooke.

"Now, what were you two silly asses squabbling about?" he asked, with an air of authority.

"Find out," snarled Crooke.

"Go an' eat coke!" Racke retorted.

"Very well. You don't care to tell me. That means it's something disgraceful, of course. I can't say that I'm surprised."

"Does anything ever surprise you, Grundy?" inquired Tom Merry blandly.

Quite a crowd had gathered at the door of the study by this time. The Fourth as well as the Shell being largely represented.

"Not much, Merry. I'm not the sort of chap that's easily surprised."

"Will it surprise you if I say you're not wanted here?" Racke asked sardonically.

"Not at all! Nothing that you could say or do would surprise me. You're a rank outsider, Racke! But as I've quelled this silly disturbance I'm going. I've got no more time to waste on you. Take care you don't start it again, or I'll come down on you heavily, I promise you!"

And with that Grundy stalked majestically away. He had always had a vast idea of his own importance in the Form; and the fact that he had saved the situation for the Shell by turning out at the last moment for the Marathon had not tended to make him more modest.

Without Grundy's help the Shell would certainly not have beaten the Fourth in the sports competition. But for him there would have been four of the Fourth in the first six homes in the Marathon, scoring points for their side, as both Redfern and Figgins had run in ahead of Noble, the fourth Shell fellow to arrive at the winning post.

But Grundy was really pluming himself a trifle too much on his achievement.

He seemed to imagine that he had done much more than Tom Merry, though Tom had come in first, well ahead of all rivals in the race.

Grundy had always fancied that he could make a better skipper of the Shell than Tom, and had never been backward in saying so. During the last day or two he had behaved more than ever as if he were skipper.

But Tom Merry had a good deal of patience; and at heart he really liked the masterful George Alfred, as did many fellows who nevertheless considered that worthy quite the biggest ass they knew.

Tom grinned as he moved off with Manners and Lowther. The rest also cleared out. Racke shut the door.

"You needn't do that!" snapped Crooke. "I'm goin', by gad!"

"Oh, don't be a silly ass! After all, you were mostly to blame for—"

"Rats! I've done with you, Pcter Racke. I'm goin' to change out!"

"Bit of a puzzle where you're goin' to change into," sneered Racke. "You won't find everybody openin' their arms to you, my pippin!"

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"I could get along with the fellows all serene if I stopped being pally with you, an' I've dashed well stopped now!" retorted Crooke sullenly. "That's at an end, anyway."

Racke shrugged his shoulders. "So be it!" he said. "Mind, it's you that's to change out, not me! I'm satisfied with this study."

"So am I. It's only the vermin that inhabit it I can't stand!" Crooke answered bitterly.

"Pity to call yourself names, Crooke, by gad!"

Crooke disregarded that repartee.

"Serope's about your mark," he said. "Perhaps you would like to have him. I fancy I can stand Gibbons; an' he doesn't care about Serope, I know."

"I don't fancy Gibbons can stand you, though," Racke replied.

"Do you want another punch on the nose, by gad? Because I'll dashed soon give you one if you do!"

"Come on, then!"

The combat might have been renewed, in spite of Grundy's warning, but for an interruption just then.

Tap, tap!

"Oh, come in!" howled Racke. "We're entertainin' all comers to-night, y'know!"

It was Talbot who appeared, and at the sight of him Racke scowled more blackly than ever, while Crooke's face grew no pleasanter.

"I want a few words with you, Crooke," said Talbot, in quite a civil tone.

"Not with me, by any chance?" asked Racke, sneering.

"Not by any chance!" replied Talbot contemptuously.

"Well, I'm stayin' here. Take your dashed change out of that!"

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind coming to my study, Crooke?" asked Talbot.

"An' perhaps I would!" returned Crooke.

He wavered. Somehow, his split with Racke had made him feel for the moment better disposed towards his cousin.

"As you like. There's no one else there just now."

Talbot had strung himself up to be patient. He knew that his task would be no easy or pleasant one; but for his uncle's sake he was prepared to go through with it.

"I'll come," said Crooke, "though I can't think what the merry dickens you can have to say to me!"

"Better stay there!" sneered Racke, as the two cousins went out together.

"You're booked for a change, you know, an' I'm dashed sure Talbot would be delighted to have you!"

CHAPTER 4.

Blood is Thicker than Water!

IT was not often, outside the hours of classes, that Study No. 9 on the Shell passage was to be found unoccupied. Gore was frequently absent, for Gore played games now; but Skimpole was not at all an outdoor kind of person. He spent all his spare time in abstruse studies or extraordinary experiments, and most of it in No. 9. But that evening he had wandered out with one of Professor Balmcrumpet's lightest tomes, weighing only three or four pounds.

Talbot closed and locked the door when he and Crooke were inside. Crooke looked slightly alarmed, perhaps because his conscience was uneasy.

"Look here, none of your larks!" he muttered nervously.

"I'm not intending anything of the sort, Crooke. You've quarrelled with Racke, I gather?"

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"Yes, I have, then!"

"I'm glad of that."

"I don't see what dashed concern it is of yours!" snarled Crooke.

"Not much, perhaps. And yet, in a way, it might be. You and I are cousins, after all."

"Worse luck!"

"Well, I dare say it did seem to you rather a misfortune that I should turn out to be a relation of yours. But, after all, I'm not exactly to blame for that. And we needn't be enemies unless you choose."

"I don't see how we're ever to pull together!" growled Crooke.

"I'll admit we haven't many tastes in common. But that isn't the only thing that matters, is it? Skimpy and I don't care about the same things, but we get on all right."

"Look here, what's all this about?" "I can't tell you in three words; but the upshot of it is that, if only for Uncle Lyndon's sake, I don't like seeing you go the way you're going, Crooke."

"A dashed lot that old hunk cares about me—I don't think!"

"It would be more decent not to abuse him," said Talbot mildly, though he found the strain of keeping his temper no easy one. "I rather fancy, you know, that he cares more than you fancy."

"He's got a queer way of showin' it, by gad!"

"That may be, from your point of view. He'd like to feel some pride in you. You don't give him much chance of that, Crooke!"

"I'm not a plaster saint, hang it all!"

"You certainly are not!" replied Talbot emphatically. "You aren't even at present a tolerably decent fellow. But I think you might be, if you'd only chuck Racke for good and all. Just try it!"

"You can't talk me round by rakin' up bygones!" Crooke said sullenly. "I don't see that I've done anything so very black just lately."

"Well, personally, I should consider that rope trick on the Marathon day just a trifle thick," Talbot said very quietly.

"Wha-at?" gasped Crooke. "I—I don't know what the thump you're talkin' about! Are you potty?"

"Don't lie!" snapped Talbot. "I know all about it. You may be pleased to know that I helped to upset the dirty scheme."

"I don't believe it! You'd have let the whole school know before this if you could have proved that I did it."

"I can prove up to the hilt, Crooke, that you were in it; and I certainly haven't let the whole school know. I'm not so fond of showing up a relative as all that. When have I ever done anything of the kind?"

Crooke did not answer that. He knew well enough that Talbot had more than once done his best to cloak his transgressions. But the thought did not soften him.

"If you don't mean to split, you mean to hold it over me!" he snarled.

"Not even that. The trick failed, and I fancy it will be your own fault if you hear anything more about it."

"Who knows besides you?" demanded Crooke.

"Nobody who is likely to talk."

A brief silence followed that. Crooke, his face very sullen, thought hard.

"Did you ask me to come here just to tell me you knew?" he said at length.

"Mind, I don't admit anything—not a dashed thing! I'm not exactly givin' myself away like that to an enemy!"

"I'm not your enemy, Crooke. It was partly to make you understand that I'm not that I wanted a yarn with you."

"It will take a lot to make me believe it, Talbot!"

"So I suppose. It's true, nevertheless. I'm not going to pretend I'm fond of you. But I wish you nothing but good; and if you're willing to bury the past I'm more than willing!"

"What's the use of it?" returned Crooke morosely.

"Depends upon you, as I see it. After all, blood's thicker than water, and the fact that we're cousins is one we can't alter."

"You'd like the credit of reformin' me—eh?" sneered Crooke.

"I shouldn't set on a score for the credit, and I'm not keen on talking about reforming anyone. But I'd like to see you running straight, and on a decent footing with the Form."

"I'm not sure that I'd mind it much myself," replied Crooke, with a sudden burst of something like contention for past misdeeds. "I have rather mucked things up, I know—chiefly Racke's fault, though—an' I'm in the very dickens of a hole at the present moment, if that happens to interest you."

"It did interest Talbot; but at the time he did not reply to it. That could be left till later."

"I wouldn't put it all on to Racke, if I were you," he said. "But, all the same, your best chance is to cut that sweep. There's no good in him."

"I have cut him. Haven't I told you so?"

"Will it last?"

"Oh, I don't know," Crooke scowled, and bit his lip. "Makin' a fresh start ain't so dashed easy. If Serope will pig in with Racke, I thought about sharin' No. 5 with Gibbons. Can't say he's just the chap I'd choose, though."

In spite of Racke's words, Crooke still seemed to think that there was no doubt Gibbons would welcome him.

But Talbot thought there was room for considerable doubt.

Gibbons was in every way a more decent fellow than Racke, Crooke, and Serope. He might be glad to get rid of Serope, but hardly at the cost of taking in Crooke.

And Gibbons was not likely to have a good influence on Crooke if he did agree to partner him. He would have simply no influence at all. He was not decided or strong enough for that. Crooke was more likely to lead him wrong than he was to lead Crooke right.

"I've a better notion than that," said Talbot. "Come and join me here."

"You don't want me," growled Crooke.

"I asked you," replied Talbot. "That should be good enough."

"Gore doesn't want me, I'm dashed certain!"

"I'm not going to tell you he does. But I don't think he'll much mind changing out. He gets about a bit fed up with Skimpy at times. He might go into No. 8 with Skimpy and Winkley. He will if I ask him, I feel sure."

But Talbot did not feel quite sure that Gore would quite like being asked, and Crooke felt sure he would not. Talbot would hate having Gore's feelings hurt, but was prepared to risk that for his uncle's sake. He would risk it in the least mind-having Gore's feelings hurt; in fact, he rather enjoyed the idea.

"Well, if you can fix it up with Gore to change out, I'll come. Mind, I'm not comin' if he's stayin' on. I can make Skimpy to the line all right, but Gore an' I would be like a dashed dog on a conformation of the ground."

"I'll speak to Gore. I think you can take it for granted he will agree. As for Skimpy, just you go easy with him. Skimpy may be a potty old duffer, but he's a friend of mine."

"Oh, all right! I dare say I can be civil to the ass if I try. Let me know as soon as you've fixed it up, will you?"

"You'll find me in the Common-room after prep. I shall do that in Scrope's study." There was no word of thanks—no recognition of Talbot's generosity.

But Talbot hardly expected anything of the sort. George Gerald Crooke was about as likely to show gratitude as thistles are to produce grapes.

"My hat! You want that rotter with you, Talbot?" gasped Gore, when Talbot put the matter to him.

"Hardly. It isn't a question of whether I want him. There's another reason, which I can't explain."

"You needn't. I think I can guess it," growled Gore.

"I'd rather have you, old man; you know that."

"Yes, I believe that, Talbot. And I'm not going to be too proud to come back after you've kicked Crooke out, as you'll jolly soon have to! This won't alter things between me and you. But I tell you straight that I don't love Crooke a bit the better for it; and if it was any other chap at St. Jim's but you, I'd see Crooke jolly well hanged before I'd do it!"

And Gore went off, growling.

Skimpole was hardly better pleased than Gore. But, like him, Skimpole did not know how to refuse Talbot anything. It was so seldom he asked a favour of them. Giving was more in Reginald Talbot's line than receiving.

Mr. Railton consented; and that evening, before bed-time, the move was made.

"Great Scott!" said Racke, when he heard where Crooke was going. "Talbot had better look out for himself! If Crooke doesn't serve him some dashed dirty trick inside a week I don't know Crooke!"

But Aubrey Racke knew Crooke very well indeed.

CHAPTER 5.

Skimpy Remembers!

"O H, get out, and be hanged to you!"

It was Crooke who spoke, and his polite words were addressed to Herbert Skimpole, the genius of the Shell.

Less than two days had passed since Crooke had changed out of No. 7 into No. 9, and Gore out of No. 9 into No. 3, but already Skimpy, though he had no great cause to be fond of George Gore, was regretting him.

Gore had often been rough on Skimpy. He considered Skimpy a pest, and often told him so. But with it all there was a sort of rough comradeship in Gore's attitude towards his weaker study-mate, and between them was always one bond—that both were fond of Talbot.

There was no possibility of friendship between Crooke and Skimpole, and no such bond. Crooke had changed into No. 9 to suit himself, and his feelings towards his cousin were quite unchanged. "But, my dear Crooke—" began Skimpole.

"Stow all that! I know just how dear I am to you, you turnip-faced kite! Get out. I tell you I've got a visitor coming, and I don't want you here!"

"Really, I must protest both against your language, which is violent and abusive, and your assumptions, which lack both logic and courtesy. There is no reason whatever why I should temporarily relinquish my occupancy of this study to oblige—"

"Oh, isn't there, then? I'll show you a reason!"

And Crooke put his right fist within an inch of Skimpy's nose.

Skimpy blinked at it. He was by nature pacific; but something of the combative instinct stirred in him then, mingled with some vague memory in which Crooke had a part.



Talbot intervenes!

(See Chapter 6.)

"I shall certainly not allow you to terrorise me, Crooke," he said mildly.

"Better go, then, or I'll do a bit more than terrorise you," snarled Crooke.

Skimpy sighed, took up a volume of Professor Balmyscrumpet, and went. It was a fine day, and he could easily find a secluded place in the fresh air. But Skimpy cared much less about fresh air than about having his cherished scientific tomes around him.

As he mandered across the quad the vague memory which had stirred in him began to grow more definite.

"Dear me!" he murmured. "It failed to occur to me, when Talbot mentioned that Crooke was taking Gore's place in our study, that I had an unsettled quarrel with Crooke. Let me see! Trimble, Mellish, Chowle, Scrope, Clampe—that is five. Oh, yes, of course, Racke was the sixth. I have met them all and defeated them, thus establishing my theory that a person with brains can always learn easily and readily to hold his own in the exercises which individuals of inferior mental, but possibly superior physical, development pride themselves upon being skilful in."

But for Talbot's coaching, Skimpy would hardly have beaten any of the seven against whom he had vowed vengeance. They were, it is true, for the most part, funks and duffers. But Skimpy, though never a funk, had possibly been a bigger duffer than any of them.

Talbot's lessons had done him good, however, and one by one six of the seven had gone under to him, each quite surprised to find that Skimpy's bony fists could inflict pain even when muffled in boxing-gloves. Then, absorbed in his studies, Skimpy had forgotten that Crooke was still outstanding. Now that he recalled the fact, he felt that his vow must be kept, and he really felt no unwillingness to meet Crooke in combat.

"I suppose that I am now one of the most accomplished boxers in the Shell,"

he went on, talking to himself, as he often did. "Possibly not the superior of Talbot or Tom Merry, or Noble or Grundy; but I really cannot think of anyone else in the Form who is my equal in skill. There is no doubt whatever that I can overcome Crooke."

"Good egg!" spoke a cheery voice behind him. "Do it, old top!"

Skimpy dropped the volume he was carrying in his surprise.

"Dear me, Lowther!" he said. "I was not aware that you were in the vicinity. It is extraordinary that you should answer my unuttered thoughts—a clear case of mental telepathy. I am confident, though the mention of an egg appears to indicate that the transmission was imperfect, since eggs were not in my mind."

"But Crooke was—eh, old bird?" said Lowther, politely picking up the dropped volume, and groaning in pretended dismay at its weight as he replaced it under Skimpole's arm.

"That is correct. I must really investigate further this very remarkable—"

"Taint so very remarkable after all, old chump! You were talking to yourself, and I heard you say that you could thrash Crooke. Not a fat lot of mental telepathy about that—eh?"

"Dear me!" Skimpy looked and felt intensely disappointed. "You are quite sure that I was talking to myself, Lowther? It is not, as far as I know, a habit of mine."

"Lots of things you don't know, Skimpy, old dear!"

"That is so, Lowther. Even a mind constituted as is mine, with a hunger for all worthy knowledge, cannot cover the whole ground of science—"

"Just so, old top! I feel the same way myself with my little mind. But about Crooke?"

Skimpy blinked again.

"I consider, Lowther, that it is my duty to meet Crooke in pugilistic combat

and to overcome him, since he is one of the seven against whom I registered a vow of retribution," he said solemnly.

"Bow-wow!" replied Lowther. "That is to say, bow to your vow, by all means. I'll second you; and if you like I'll go and see Crooke about it at once."

"That is kind of you, Lowther!"

"Not at all, old frump! When and where shall the great combat take place?"

"I will leave such minor matters entirely to you, my dear Lowther. I shall now dismiss the subject from my mind, and rely upon you to be good enough to tell me when I am required. That is all."

And Skimmey walked on hastily, feeling that he had already wasted too much valuable time.

"My hat! If he isn't the giddy outside edge!" said Monty Lowther, gazing after him.

CHAPTER 6.

Visitors to No. 9.

"COME IN!" snapped Crooke, as a knock sounded at the door of No. 9.

But the fellow who came in was not the one he had expected.

It was George Gore who entered, with an expression on his face which hardly suggested that he was making a friendly call.

"Where's Skimmey?" he asked sharply.

"Do you want him?" retorted Crooke.

"Queer taste, by gad!"

"What I want or don't want is no business of yours," answered Gore warmly.

"Not in the least. So it's hardly worth while to bother me with it, is it?" yawned Crooke.

"I asked you where Skimmey is!" rapped out Gore.

"Well, he ain't in my pocket. You can look under the dashed table, an' in the dashed cupboard, if you like!"

"See here, Crooke. I'm not going to have Skimmey driven out of his own study by a rotter like you!"

"You don't say so? Quite touchin', this fondness for Skimmey!" sneered Crooke. "Talbot has it, too. I haven't as yet, an' I don't even feel it comin' on."

"You leave Skimmey alone, or you'll have me on your back!" roared Gore.

"I haven't touched the potty idiot, An'. As I'm to leave him alone, I don't think it's fair to blame me for his leavin' me alone. I wish you'd do the same, Gore."

Gore left Crooke alone, slamming the door after him as he went. He had given the warning he intended, and had relieved some of the anger he felt against Crooke.

Cutts of the Fifth was Crooke's next visitor, and apparently the one he was expecting.

Cutts lounged in without tapping at the door, and took a seat upon the table.

"Well?" he said.

"Well?" returned Crooke, looking very sullen.

"I'll trouble you to cash up," said Cutts tersely.

"I can't. Hang it all, didn't I tell you so yesterday?"

"An' I told you, my buck, that now you're in with Talbot you can get round him for a loan to settle your debts of honour. He has plenty of oof, though he doesn't splash it about much."

"Give me time, Cutts, there's a decent chap! It's all very well to talk, but a fellow like that can't be worked in an hour. Talbot sits at bench, an' it won't help me that I was bettin' against my own Form."

"Low thing to do, by gad!" said Cutts.

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"But you're rather a low chap, Crooke—always were. I'll give you another twenty-four hours, though. Not sure that Gilmore will give you that. Debt of honour, remember! Dash it all, a chap must meet debts of honour, or where are we?"

Crooke had the same notion of debts of honour that Cutts professed. The gambler never seems to realise that one's honour is at stake in the case of any debt. He will let down a faithful friend or a trusting tradesman without remorse; but he worries about what he owes to a fellow-gambler. Perhaps conscience has less to do with it than the dread of getting barred as one who fails to meet such debts.

"That's so, of course," replied Crooke.

"I'm goin' to cash up. But you needn't be in such a dashed hurry. Why don't you dun Racke? He owes you more than I do."

"Wrong there, my pippin. Racke's forked out!"

Crooke gritted his teeth. He knew that Racke could have provided, as a loan, enough to settle up for him, too, at a pinch. But Racke would not do that. Instead, he had demanded two pounds ten from Crooke to help pay the soundlessly Scaife for a trick that had failed.

DOES YOUR SOLDIER PAL WRITE TO YOU?

Note-paper is "some" price these days, but none of us would grudge Tommy all the paper he needs on which to write those cheery letters of his if his paper were treble the price it is today. Still, it's no use simply "gassing" about it; it's up to each one to do his bit to pay the paper.

It costs the Y.M.C.A., who supply Tommy with free stationery, no less than £60,000 a year. Sixpence will supply your own or somebody else's pal with enough note-paper to write some letter each week for a year. Going to let him have it? Of course you are!

So send sixpence along to-day to Y.M.C.A. (Stationery Fund), Tottenham Court Road, London, W., mentioning that it comes from a reader of this paper.

"Well, I'll fork out, too. Only, give me time," Crooke growled.

"Right-ho! Till Saturday, then—that's two days. Can't answer for Gilmore though."

Cutts departed, leaving in Crooke's mind the seed of an idea.

Talbot had plenty of cash.

Crooke pondered sulkily over that. He hated Reginald Talbot as bitterly as ever. In accepting the invitation to take up his quarters in No. 9 he had had a vague notion that, somehow or other, he might turn the move to his own advantage, and a quite definite idea that to put up with Talbot—even in seeming—was a slap in the face to Racke.

Talbot had plenty of cash.

Crooke writhed as he thought of what this meant.

His cash! So he reckoned it. Until Talbot has been discovered to be his cousin, Crooke had been looked upon as Colonel Lyndon's heir. Talbot had supplanted him. He might pretend friendship now, but he could not feel it. It wasn't possible he should, Crooke argued.

Such thoughts as these are steps on the road of temptation—a familiar road to Crooke.

Talbot was on the cricket-field. Skimmey had been thrust out. It was not very likely that anyone else would come in this hour.

To lock the door might arouse sus-

picion. Crooke peered out. The passage was empty, and silence reigned.

He went back, closed the door, and opened Talbot's desk, which was unlocked.

There were letters in the desk, and among them one addressed in Colonel Lyndon's well-known fist.

Crooke had no scruples about reading it. He had few scruples about anything that did not appear dangerous.

It was the letter in which the colonel had asked Talbot to try once more whether he could influence his cousin for good. Crooke's teeth showed in a grin as he read it.

To him the generosity of uncle and cousin meant nothing. It touched no chord in his selfish and mean nature. He held Colonel Lyndon a soft old fool, and Talbot a meddling prig.

But it excited him, nevertheless. He thought he saw his chance of profit in it. His eyes were still bent on the letter when the handle of the door turned softly, and Baggy Trimble entered.

Crooke looked up with a start, and made a hasty movement to cover the letters.

"He, he, he! Reading Talbot's letters—eh, Crooke?" chortled Baggy. "I'm not surprised, I must say."

"Talbot's letters be blessed! I'm not doin' anythin' of the sort, you fat fool!" hissed Crooke savagely. "This is my own letter, of course."

"He, he, he! I'll believe that if you show me the envelope. At least, I'm not sure that I'd believe it then. I should like to know what you've got Talbot's desk open for, Crooke. I know that's his desk, I've been to it—I mean, I know it's his. Of course, I shouldn't think of going to another chap's desk on any account."

"Get out, you meddling fat toad!" snarled Crooke. "If Talbot leaves his desk open, it's no concern of mine, or yours."

"Still, a chap might have a look inside. He shouldn't be so careless; it's wrong to be so careless," said Baggy, with a solemn shake of the head.

"Clear, or I'll slish you!"

"Oh, will you, Crooke? I don't think you will, you know. I've got something up my sleeve about you. He, he, he!"

Crooke advanced upon him threateningly.

"Hands off!" squeaked Baggy.

"Hands off, Crooke, or I'll tell Tom Merry and Talbot about you and Racke and Racke's man, and that rope across the road! Oh, I know all about it; and I don't want to tell, unless I have to; but they'd be interested to know. He, he, he!"

Crooke dashed straight at Baggy, and clutched him by the throat.

"Yow-ow!" yelled Baggy. Then: "Gurrurr!" he gasped.

For Crooke was pressing hard and ruthlessly. There was a strain of savagery in him that was apt to rise to the surface when fear did not choke it down. And now he was not much afraid. Baggy would get no change out of telling that story to Tom Merry and Talbot. Talbot knew more about it than Baggy did, and what Talbot knew Tom Merry probably knew also.

"Think you're goin' to blackmail me, do you, you fat gad?" snarled Crooke, pressing Baggy backwards on to the table in a manner that threatened damage to his spinal column.

"Gurrurr!" gasped Baggy, the purple of his face growing every second nearer to black.

"My hat! Are you trying to kill the chap, Crooke?" spoke the voice of Talbot from the door.

Crooke relaxed his grip a little, but not enough to allow Baggy to speak. An

inspiration had come to Crooke—a lying inspiration.

"The fat thief was at your desk, Talbot!" he said, with well-pretended indignation. Then he loosed his hold.

Talbot did not doubt—at the moment, anyway. It was just the sort of thing Baggy did, as he well knew, and as Crooke knew. And Baggy's denial would carry no weight. Baggy always was ready to deny his guilt.

"Gurrri!" gasped Baggy again. "Ow, yow!" He clutched at his collar, and his goggle eyes rolled. "It's a lie, Talbot! I never did anything of the sort. I should scorn to do such a thing! Crooke's an unprincipled chap, and he'd say anything about a fellow."

Talbot glanced round. His desk was open, and a letter lay on the floor. It was, as he saw at a glance, his uncle's letter.

He had two liars to deal with; but he hardly remembered that. It did not occur to him, either, that Crooke was very unlikely to be so infuriated with Baggy for tampering with the papers of a fellow for whom Crooke had no liking. "Get out!" he said sharply. "If I catch you here again—"

"But it's a lie, Talbot! Crooke's lying, I tell you! I never touched your desk. He was reading that letter on the floor when I came in, and I don't know who it's from even; and I don't know anything about the remittance you had this morning—how should I? 'Taint in my line to go opening other chaps' desks and meddling with their private papers. I hope I'm too high-minded for such actions as that!"

Crooke shrugged his shoulders. It was no different part he had to play, and he carried it off very well.

"We know just how high-minded Baggy is, don't we, Talbot?" he said coolly. "If you like to believe his yarn, well an' good. All I have to say is that I came in an' found him at your desk."

"Get out!" snapped Talbot, swiveling round on Baggy—for once less guilty than he seemed.

Whether the fat Fourth-Former had any designs on Talbot's desk or not, he had not touched it. He may have gone to No. 9 to gladden his eyes with a sight of Talbot's remittance; but all he had done there was to attempt blackmail upon Crooke.

He went, volubly protesting innocence. "You might have throttled the rotter, Crooke, or broken his back!" said Talbot reprovingly.

"Well, I felt mad when I caught him at that game," replied Crooke. "Anybody would, y'know."

CHAPTER 7.

No Peace for Crooke!

"HERE, I say, Crooke, I want a word with you!" bawled Grundy down the passage.

"Can't stop just now. I'm in a hurry," returned Crooke, quickening his steps.

Your hurry can wait. Stop, I tell you.

"Do I hear the mellifluous voice of George Alfred the Great?" inquired Monty Lowther, turning the corner of the passage, with Tom Merry and Manners. "And did that sweet whisper convey the fact that his Royal Highness wanted you, Crooke, old sport?"

"What's that to you?" snapped Crooke. "Let me pass, can't you?"

"Not so, Crooke—not so. For I also yearn for converse with you!"

Crooke snorted. The Terrible Three barred his way in front, and behind him sounded the heavy footsteps of Grundy.

"Hang it all, a chap's not goin' to be held up like this by you bouncers!" snapped Crooke.

The big hand of George Alfred fell on his shoulder. He tried to shake it off; but the grip of Grundy was not so easy to shake off.

"I'm not going to put up with this bullying, Crooke!" growled Grundy.

"We're not bullying him, Grundy," said Tom Merry cheerily. "Quite a mistake, old top!"

"Who said you were? I'm, afraid you're not a very intelligent chap, Merry—more so, the pity. It's Crooke who's been bullying."

"That certainly sounds more likely," said Tom.

"Who's the giddy victim?" inquired Manners.

"Trimble. Trimble's a worm, of course, and he doesn't tell the truth, as he blacked the face."

"I've noticed that Baggy is no very zealous washer," put in Lowther.

"Rot! I mean, that's quite correct, of course. But that ain't what I mean at all. Jolly nearly black in the face, he was, and the marks of Crooke's fingers were still on his throat."

"Were they black, too?" inquired the irrepressible Lowther, glancing at Crooke's hands.

"Oh, dry up, you funny idiot! Now, then, Crooke, what have you to say for yourself?"

"Nothin' to you!" snapped Crooke. "What dashed bizney is it of yours what I do to Baggy?"

"It's my bizney, or it's nobody's," said Grundy firmly. "Merry's altogether too lax. As skipper of the Shell he's no better than a mere figurehead!"

"Thanks, Grundy!" said Tom, with a cheery smile. "I'm not exactly handing over my job to you yet; but I don't object to your dealing with Crooke. Come along, you fellows!"

"Half a mo," Lowther put in. "I also have affairs with Crooke."

"I don't see what," said Crooke morosely. "Anyway, I haven't any with you."

"You're mistaken, old sport! I'm the bearer of a challenge from the great Skimmer. It has just dawned upon his powerful mind that he has not yet put you through the mill, as he put your dear friends, Racke, Scrope, & Co."

"Oh, rot!" replied Crooke uneasily.

Trouble seemed to be thickening fast around Crooke. There was no peace for him.

"Not at all," said Lowther. "Skimmer's in earnest, and your high reputation for dare-devil courage won't allow you to back down."

"I don't want to fight the potty idiot!"

"So it appears. But the potty idiot wants to fight you, dear boy."

"Oh, all right! I suppose you think I funk him, by gad? You're wrong there, anyway!"

"Who's your second?" asked Lowther.

"I need trouble you no further if you name him. Racke, I presume?"

"Then you presume dashed well wrong!" Oh, I don't know! Mellish, say."

"I will wait with all promptitude upon the noble Percy," replied Lowther. And he passed on with his chums.

"Well, what have you got to say for yourself, Crooke?" demanded Grundy, in his severest tones.

"Nothin'. It's no concern of yours. But if you must know," continued Crooke weakly, "I came into our study an' caught that cad Trimble at Talbot's desk. So I gave him somethin' as a warnin'."

"That's queer," said Grundy thoughtfully. "Trimble says he went in and caught you at the same game."

"It's a dashed lie!" snapped Crooke. "You know what a liar the chap is!"

"Yes, I know. You're another!" replied Grundy bluntly. "I believe you're the liar this time, for I happen to know that you were in No. 9 when Trimble went in. I saw Cutts come out, and heard your voice, and I'm jolly sure you hadn't gone along the passage before Trimble came a few minutes later."

"You're all wrong there, Grundy. Hallo, Gilmore! Want to see mes-

sh. Gilmore of the Fifth was not at the fellow Crooke really desired to see at that moment; but the conversation with Grundy had taken a turn far more awkward than any question of bullying, and just then Crooke felt that even Gilmore was welcome.

"I do," said Gilmore. "You can sheer off, Grundy!"

"Well, I like that!" gasped the great George Alfred.

"Like it or lump it, you can clear! Or you can come along with me, Crooke."

"Look here, Gilmore—"

"No, thanks, Grundy! Your face hurts! Come along, Crooke!"

"I'll see you again, Crooke!" said Grundy darkly.

Crooke went downstairs and out into the quad with the Fifth-Former.

"You're goin' to dun me, I suppose?" he said sulkily, when they were outside. "Why can't you fellows give a chap time?"

"No, it's not exactly that, though I should be glad of the oof, an' I mean to have it! I've a message for you from Banks. Says he can't, an' won't, wait longer. Strikes me, young Crooke, you've got yourself nicely tied up!"

"Oh, I say, what rotten luck, Gilmore!"

Crooke was genuinely dismayed. Of all his creditors Banks, the bookmaker, was the one he feared and dreaded most.

Mr. Banks made quite a nice little income out of the sporting young gentlemen of St. Jim's. He could well afford to write off a bad debt now and then rather than risk the loss of that income. But it seldom occurred to any of his dupes that it was really not to Mr. Banks' interest to kill the goose that laid the golden egg by giving them away to Dr. Holmes.

Cutts might be capable of bluffing when faced with a threat of that sort, and Racke might have cunning enough to see its emptiness. But Crooke lacked both the boldness of Cutts and the astuteness of Racke.

"Well, it's your funeral, Crooke!" said Gilmore, not altogether unsympathetically. "I can't help, even if I would. You'd better trot over an' see the dear bookie. As everyone else has to give you time, p'aps he'll see his way to doin' so, too. But he talks as if he were in a hurry."

Crooke groaned as Gilmore strode off. Crooke could see no help anywhere. Cutts & Co. might allow him to hang on to them. They would bet with him. But they were not pals, ready to help at a pinch.

Crooke had no such pal. Racke, Scrope, Clampe—all were utterly selfish, as selfish as he himself was!

The only fellow he could ask was Talbot. Would Talbot help? His face was set hard against the kind of thing which had landed Crooke in this hole. No one in the Shell despised the ways of the black sheep more than did Reginald Talbot.

Why ask Talbot, exposing himself to the chance of a rebuff?

There was an easier way, and the risks did not seem too heavy.

Cadet Notes.

The appointment recently made of H.R.H. the Prince of Wales as Colonel-in-Chief of the Cadet Corps in the United Kingdom has attracted attention to the good work quietly and gratuitously carried on by these organisations for the good of the country. These Cadets' Corps include the Territorial Cadets, the Boys' Brigade, the Church Lads' Brigade, the Naval Cadets, the Jewish Lads' Brigade, and there are several similar bodies not subject to military law drawn from various classes of working boys. They are carried on under officers holding commissions or by the lords-lieutenant, by command of H.M. the King, through the Secretary of State for War.

Owing to the great influx of lads to join the Cadet Movement, and the creation of a considerable number of new corps in the last year or so, steps are now being taken to regularise the establishment and organisation of such bodies more thoroughly than they have been in the past. In London a joint committee for the regulation of the county has been formed, and in future no new Cadet Corps will be recognised without the authority of this committee. Something of the sort was necessary, as a great deal of overlapping was taking place in various directions.

The War Office gives notice that General Sir Malcolm Grover, K.C.B., has been appointed as the War Office Inspector of recognised Cadet units. General Grover is a distinguished officer, who is giving his services voluntarily in the effort to promote and extend the efficiency of the Cadet units. Undoubtedly, a visit from him to inspect any local corps will be productive of good results, and Cadets should be grateful to the general for his efforts on their behalf.

The rush of boys anxious to join Cadet Corps continues, and full details and information are being sent to all who apply as rapidly as we can manage. A little delay is caused sometimes when the rush is exceptionally heavy; but every boy who writes for information about the nearest corps to the Central Association, Volunteer Regiments, Judges' Quadrangle, Law Courts, W.C.2, will receive a reply in the course of a few days after the receipt of his letter.

Suppose he helped himself?

The money was probably in Talbot's desk. But for Baggy it might have been in Crooke's hands already. And but for Crooke it might have been in Baggy's.

What had Baggy been after in No. 9? What, if not that remittance?

And Talbot had believed Crooke's yarn about catching Baggy at his desk. If the money went, Baggy would be the first to be suspected. And it ought not to be difficult to provide something in the way of circumstantial evidence against Baggy.

A plan for doing that flashed into Crooke's mind at once. It was not so watertight a plan as Crooke thought it; but Crooke's schemes usually had that fault. He brought to his villainous brains inferior to those of Aubrey Racke.

There was Grundy in the way. Grundy seemed to have elected himself Baggy's champion. But it was not likely he would persist long in that role. And no one took much notice of Grundy, anyway.

CHAPTER 8. Baggy in Clover.

"I SAY, 'Trimple'!" Crooke's tone was quite unusually friendly as he hailed Baggy. But, after what had happened in No. 9 the day before, Baggy

was suspicious. His goggle eyes wandered all round, seeking a rescuer in the event of an attack. Baggy was not really at all fond of George Alfred Grundy, but he would have been delighted to see him just then.

But there was no one in sight along the road. Crooke had dosed Baggy out of gates and down Rylcombe Lane.

"Look here, Crooke, none of your bullying!" quavered Baggy. "If you touch me I shall tell Grundy—mind that!"

"Oh, rats! You don't suppose I'm afraid of that lout, do you? Besides, I'm afraid to touch you, you ass! I only want a word or two with you."

"Right-ho! Perhaps you're going to be sensible, Crooke. I know a thing or two about you, you know, and I might tell, or I might not. That depends upon how you treat me."

Baggy was regaining his confidence, and hope renewed sprang up in his mind. There might yet be a chance for his blackmailing project with Crooke. Racke had forked out a pound-note only that morning to keep Baggy's mouth shut.

But that had more to do with the Scaife affair than the Marathon plot.

Thus far, Baggy alone knew of Scaife's presence at the Larches, and Baggy could be bribed to silence. As for the Marathon business, since nothing had yet leaked out, Racke felt fairly safe about that.

Crooke was also disposed to regard the foiled plot as a mere bygone—a trifle to his financial worries. If the plot had succeeded he would have won money at St. Jim's instead of losing it, and would have been able to pay Banks. It had failed, and he had been in sore straits through its failure.

But now he thought he saw light ahead. He could meet Banks without fear, and could pay off the money owing to the Fifth Form sportsmen. He had fifty pounds in ten and five-pound notes in his breast-pocket, and he intended to transfer ten pounds of that sum to Baggy!

It was worth ten pounds to avert suspicion from himself. Baggy had so often done shady things that there should be little difficulty in making him seem a thief.

And even if the worst came to the worst—if Talbot discovered the truth—there would be no exposure for Crooke. Talbot would not give him away, he felt sure.

Much pondering over Colonel Lyndon's letter had brought Crooke to that conviction. He saw now what Talbot's overtures towards reconciliation meant.

What soft fools they were, his uncle and his cousin alike!

That was how Crooke felt about it.

He was utterly incapable of appreciating either the relenting of the colonel towards him when under the shadow of death or the generosity of Talbot.

But he was quite capable of making his profit out of both.

Talbot would not give him away. For Colonel Lyndon's sake he would hide the fact that his cousin was a thief. But he was scarcely likely, in his first surprise and dismay at the loss of his remittance, to conceal that.

So a scapegoat must be provided—someone upon whom the theft could be fixed. And Crooke had chosen Baggy for the scapegoat's part.

"I am willin' enough to treat you fairly, Baggy," he said ingratiatingly.

"You didn't treat me fairly yesterday," whined Trimple.

"Well, you see, you took me by surprise. Never mind about that. What's this yarn about me an' Racke an' Racke's man an' the Marathon—eh? You seem to have got hold of a fine old mare's-nest there!"

"Oh, have I? Then I know better. If I told all I knew—"

"But you're not goin' to, old chap, are you?"

"You can't soap me like that, Crooke! I don't forget that you nearly choked me yesterday."

"I'm sorry. I s'pose I was a bit rough on you, Baggy."

"I should jolly well think you were!" said Trimple, feeding his fat throat.

It was still sore from the savage grip of Crooke's fingers.

"But I'll put that right. An', see here, Baggy—how much do you reckon you know about that bizney?"

"He, he! All there is to know," chorled the fat Fourth-Former.

"What will you take to keep dark about it—eh? You haven't told anyone yet, have you?"

"Not likely, Crooke! I never give away a pal," said Baggy, waxing friendly. "And we've always been good pals, haven't we? I'll take ten—"

"Ten quid—eh? Oh, all serene!" Crooke struck in.

Baggy gasped. He had been going to say ten shillings; though, of course, he had not intended that to be a first and final dividend, so to speak.

His greed overpowered his suspicions. A thought did cross his mind that Crooke must have some deep scheme in view; but he dismissed it. Here was ten pounds waiting to be handled! Baggy's fingers itched to handle it.

"I've had a big remittance to-day," said Crooke. "The lean times have come to an end. I'm settling up with everybody I owe anything to, an' in future I'm goin' straight by gad! Of course, you know that Talbot an' I are quite chummy now."

He was taking a rubber band from quite a wad of notes as he spoke. Baggy's eyes glistened.

"He, he! I know you're pretending to pal up with Talbot," he said. "No more of that, old chap. We're really chummy," replied Crooke.

The band snapped in his fingers. He took two fivers from the wad, and gave them into Baggy's eager clutch.

"Oh, if you say so, Crooke, of course, that's all right," said Baggy, his eyes



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glistering at this unexpected stroke of luck.

He gazed at the notes in rapture. This seemed too good to be true.

He had been rolling off in glee to spend the pound extorted from Racke. Now that pound had become a mere trifle. Here was enough to keep him supplied with too much to eat for days and days!

Baggy was in clover. He did not thank Crooke, for he considered that he owed this small fortune to his own surpassing cleverness. But as he rolled on down the lane he really felt quite a glow of friendliness towards the fellow, who, being blackmailed, had played up in so magnificent a manner. It was really enough to make one contemplate the adoption of blackmailing as a regular profession for the future.

And Crooke, watching him go, grinned an evil grin, and muttered:

"You won't change them both, my fat tulip, an' findin' one on you will be good enough to prove where the rest have gone! You think you're dashed smart with you rotten blackmail, but you've run up against somebody smarter than yourself this time!"

CHAPTER 9. Talbot's Loss.

"**A**NYTHING wrong, old chap?" asked Tom Merry anxiously, as Talbot, with knitted brows, strode into Study No. 10.

Manners and Lowther looked up from their prep.

"Yes, something's very wrong, Tom! I've had money stolen from my desk—a whack of it!"

"Not guilty, my lord!" said Lowther, who was given to jesting in season and out of season.

"Oh, don't rot!" snapped Talbot. "This is confoundedly serious!"

"Well, I don't see what better you could expect when you shunted Gore for Crooke," remarked Manners.

"Rats! Crooke wouldn't steal."

"Wouldn't he, though! I'd trust Crooke just as far as I can throw him, and he's heavier than I am," replied Manners drily.

The faces of Tom Merry and Monty Lowther showed that they were in agreement with their chum. And Talbot could not really resent their doubts of Crooke, though Crooke was his kinsman.

"How much?" asked Tom.

"Fifty quid," answered Talbot.

"Whew!" whistled Tom softly.

"I've never had so much before, or anywhere near it. My uncle sent it to me for a special purpose," explained Talbot, flushing.

It occurred to him now that his chums—Tom, at least, who stood nearest to him of all at St. Jim's—might wonder that he had not mentioned earlier such a remittance as that.

"Where was it?" inquired Manners.

"And the desk wasn't locked, I suppose?"

"No. As a matter of fact, I've lost the key. It doesn't matter, because I can trust Gore and Skinny all the way; and Skinny's nearly always in the study out of class hours."

"Skinny's above suspicion," agreed Tom. "And Gore's not concerned, old man. The question is, can you trust Crooke all the way?"

"He wouldn't do a thing like this, I'm sure—well, almost sure. He was as mad as a hatter with Trimble for poking into my desk yesterday."

"Trimble is a different man, Talbot. And Grundy and Gore both back him up, more or less," said Manners. "Crooke says he came in and found Baggy at it; but there seems to be a doubt whether



Colonel Lyndon and His Nephews.
(See Chapter 14.)

he was ever out of the study after morning lessons."

Talbot looked uneasy. He wanted to believe in Crooke's innocence. But he knew that his cousin was in desperate straits. The Marathon plot had owed its origin to that; and Crooke had confessed his pight to Talbot, who had not even answered him at the time. But that was not because he was unwilling to help. It was because just then he was unable.

"Who could have boned it if Crooke didn't?" asked Lowther bluntly.

"That's a fair question!" said Tom.

"Crooke isn't the only—I mean, I really don't think Crooke would do that."

"Talbot, old son, don't pretend the viper you've taken to your breast is an innocent dove!" said Lowther.

"I don't. Crooke isn't as straight as he might be, I know, but—but—"

"It might have been Baggy," put in Tom. He did not like to see Talbot so distressed.

"We've really no right to take it for granted that it was Crooke any more than Baggy. Might not have been either of them, come to that; might have been somebody else."

"Did those two know about your remittance?" asked Manners.

It was plain to Talbot that the Terrible Three were disposed to regard the guilt as being between Crooke and Trimble, and that they all leaned to the theory that Crooke was the culprit. His chance of committing the theft had apparently been the greater.

Talbot's face brightened. He was as fair-minded as any fellow in the Shell; but quite naturally he would have preferred the thief's turning out to be the despised Trimble rather than the cousin for whom he was doing his best.

"Crooke didn't!" he said. "But Trimble did. He was there when I opened the registered letter, and I heard him gasp as I turned over the notes and saw how many there were. I almost gasped myself."

"H'm! Rather dangerous to keep fifty quid in an unlocked desk when

Baggy knew you had it," remarked Manners.

Talbot bit his lower lip. Manners' practical way of looking at things annoyed him just then. And he realised that he had been grossly careless. If Crooke turned out to be the thief he would blame himself heavily. It was as though he had deliberately put temptation in his cousin's way. Yet nothing could have been further from his thoughts than that.

"I did it in a hurry," he said, almost humbly. "A fellow can't always be careful. Matter of fact, I thought I was being careful at the time. I changed into my blazer, and I wouldn't put the notes in the pocket of that, and it didn't seem the thing to leave them in the jacket hanging on the wall, so I shoved them into the desk right under everything else. No one could have seen them there by accident."

"No one did. Whatever it was, there wasn't any accident about it," replied Tom Merry drily. "Have you the numbers, Talbot?"

"Yes, I took them. They're on a paper in my desk."

"Praps—praps not!" said Lowther. "The beauty who bagged the notes might have twigg'd the paper, too."

"I never thought of that! I say, come along with me, you fellows! There's only old Skinny in the study."

"Just as well Crooke shouldn't be there," whispered Manners to Lowther, as they followed Talbot and Tom out.

"Not so sure! The sooner Crooke's tackled the better," replied the humorist of the Shell, very serious now, and not at all disposed to joke.

Skinpole looked up as the four entered. But if it occurred to him that there was anything at all unusual in their aspect, the impression was but a fleeting one. He made a fresh dive into the enthralling pages of Professor Balmyn-crumpet, and forgot all about them.

Talbot opened his desk. His forehead

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drew into a frown as he turned over its contents.

"The paper's not there!" he said at length.

"I'm not surprised!" Tom answered. "Looks more like Crooke than Baggy," whispered Manners to Lowther.

The four went back to No. 10.

"What's to be done?" asked Talbot. "I don't fancy having this cried from the house-tops exactly. But we can't let it rest."

"I should jolly well think not!" said Manners.

We might find out, on the quiet, whether Baggy's been getting rid of much money to-day," Tom said. "That would show something."

"And Crooke, too!" added Lowther. Tom shook his head.

"That wouldn't really prove anything," he said. "Crooke isn't the poverty-stricken beggar Trimble is. Crooke has money to burn often enough. And he might have had a remittance."

"Why, he mentioned that he'd had a remittance this morning!" cried Talbot. "This bizney has muddled my brains, I think. I didn't take much notice of it at the time. He spoke quite casually—not as if it was a whack."

But the faces of the three told Talbot that Crooke's story of a remittance carried no weight with them. It was just the kind of story Crooke would tell if he had been the thief.

Baggy might be the thief. But Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther did not seem to believe that he was. And Reginald Talbot felt a heavy cloud of doubt oppressing him.

What would Colonel Lyndon say if Crooke were proved guilty?

CHAPTER 10.

Between Two Thieves.

YOU haven't reported it, Talbot," asked Tom Merry, as Talbot came into No. 10 again, between twelve and one next day.

Talbot shook his head. He was looking worried and almost haggard. It was not so much the loss of the money that troubled him as the doubt as to whether his cousin was the thief.

"Said anything to Crooke?" inquired Manners.

"How could I? I can't start in accusing a fellow without a scrap of evidence, any more than I can start in on Trimble."

"You haven't told him about your loss?" said Tom.

"No. I haven't told anybody but you fellows."

The Terrible Three all had the same thought. Talbot's reluctance to speak of the loss to Crooke showed how little confidence he had in his new study-mate. Had Gore still been in No. 9 he would have been told. In these days Talbot trusted Gore.

"Yow-ow! Yoop! Lemme be, Grundy!"

The voice was the voice of Trimble, and it came from the passage. Tom arose, opened the door, and thrust out his head.

"What's the row, Grundy?" he asked. Baggy's outcries had attracted a crowd. Blake and D'Arcy, Herries and Digby, Cardew, Clive, Levison major, Noble, Dane, Gunn, Wilkins, Gore, Reilly, and half a dozen others were on the spot.

"Nothing that I can't attend to myself, Merry!" snapped the great George Alfrie.

"Retire, Thomas, an' sit in the seats of the humble!" drawled Cardew. "You ought to be aware by this time that THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 552.

you're deposed, by gad! Grundy's deposed you, dear boy. Grundy's now tyrant of the Shell, like Themistocles an' the other jolly old Greeks, y'know, before the word meant just what it means to-day."

"So I'm out of it?" Tom said, smiling cheerily.

"Quite out of it, dear boy!" returned Cardew blandly. "Ask Grundy, if you doubt."

"Grundy's a silly idiot!" snapped Kangaroo.

"Hear, hear!" said Jack Blake warmly.

"That's all very well," Grundy said doggedly. Grundy had Trimble by the ear in a tenacious grip. "You fellows can't alter facts by calling me names. That isn't argument."

"Nobody wants to argue with you, chump!" said Levison.

"I know that. And why? Because you fellows blessed well know that I'm more than a match for anybody here in an argument! But my point's this. Tom Merry's supposed to be junior captain."

"He's not supposed to be—he is!" put in Talbot.

"You mean, he was!" snapped Grundy.

"I haven't heard that Raitlon or the Head has taken the job from him," remarked Roylance.

That isn't it. I've settled all that myself. Merry's too slack—that's what the matter with him. As he won't do his duty, I'm taking on his job. That's why I'm attending to Trimble."

"Yow-ow! Lemme be! I haven't done anything!" squealed Baggy.

"Anyway, Trimble's Fourth, not Shell!" growled Herries.

"Thanks be!" said Monty Lowther fervently.

"That's nothing to do with it. Tom Merry's junior captain—at least, he was. The Fourth hasn't a captain. So—"

"Well, what's Trimble done?" asked Tom pacifically.

He did not appear at all inclined to put himself out about Grundy's absurd pretence. But that may have been partly because his mind was busy with matters of more importance.

"He's been chucking away any amount of money on grub," answered Grundy sternly. "That's unpatriotic in war-time, for one thing. And it's blessed suspicious, too, for we all know that Trimble never has any cash of his own."

"What a beastly crammer!" hooted Baggy. "My remittances from Trimble Hall—Yaroooh! Leggo my car, Grundy, you beast!"

"Your remittances from Trimble Hall are all lies, and you know it!" hooted Grundy. "That fiver you've been flashing about never came from Trimble Hall!"

"Looks as if we were wrong, Manners," whispered Lowther. "Baggy's bloated and greasy with high feeding. Baggy's been flashing a fiver about. Baggy's the thief. Ergo, Crooke can't be!"

"It does look rather that way," admitted Manners, half reluctantly.

"So Baggy's been flashing a fiver about?" said Tom Merry.

"Yes. And I want to know whose fiver it is!" snapped Grundy.

"Startin' from the fair assumption that it can't possibly be Baggy's own," put in Cardew.

"Well, is that likely?" growled Blake.

"Wathah—not! Twimble, you mis-cweant!"

"Shut up, D'Arcy! I'm attending to Trimble!" roared Grundy. "Question is, Who's lost the fiver?"

"Or more?" put in Digby. "Baggy's been gorging, too."

"Time to speak out, old man," said Tom, in low tones, to Talbot.

"It's no affair of Grundy's!" objected Talbot.

"That's true, in a way. But it's more or less everybody's bizney now. You can't keep it dark any longer."

Talbot saw that. He had been silent about his loss, to all but the Terrible Three, for close upon twenty-four hours. But now the time had come to speak.

"I've lost money," he said.

"Oh, have you?" snapped Grundy. "Then, why on earth didn't you report it to me?"

"My hat! If that isn't the giddy limit!" gasped Clifton Dane.

"Yas, wathah! Gwunday weally is—"

"Shut up, you asses! Have you lost a fiver, Talbot?"

"Yes. Not that it's any bizney of yours, Grundy!"

"I should blessed well like to know whose bizney it is, then! Have you lost more than a fiver?"

"As a matter of fact, I have. But—"

"I don't want any 'buts'! Trimble's gorged the rest of course. Hand over that fiver to Talbot! I shall have to report you, you know. This matter's a little too serious for me to deal with myself. But we may as well start by letting Talbot have what belongs to him."

The whole crowd gasped.

George Alfred's autocratic assumptions were not new to them. But this summary method of settling an affair, in which his concern was really no more than that of any other fellow present, was really too high-handed, even for Grundy.

"Yah! I ain't going to do anything of the sort!" howled Trimble, wriggling in Grundy's grasp. "Yoop! You'll pull my ear off, you rotter! The note's mine."

"Ain't—"

"That sounds a little too steep," said Clive.

"It was given to me, you fathead!" shrieked Baggy.

"Steeper still," remarked Levison.

"Crooke gave it to me!" squealed the fat Fourth-Former.

"That's Alpine," said Lowther.

"Positively Himalayan," Cardew capped him.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the crowd.

The notion of Crooke's giving Baggy a fiver really did seem too absurd for anything. The general opinion among those who heard was that even the obtuse Baggy might have been expected to think out a more plausible lie than that.

"I don't do then, you ask him. He gave me two fivers."

Baggy seemed very much in earnest, and he was sticking to his story.

"What for?" asked Manners bluntly.

"For keeping something dark. But I'm not going to keep it dark any longer, not if the oof's to be taken away from me!" belowered Baggy.

"What was it you kept dark?" inquired Levison.

"Where's Crooke?" was Kangaroo's query. "Crooke ought to answer this, I consider. It's probably a lie, but he ought to answer it."

But no one knew where Crooke was.

George Gore pushed his way to the front.

"Baggy's a beastly liar!" he said. "I haven't a word to say for Baggy. But if it's a matter of chucking oof about, Baggy ain't the only one who's been doing that."

"What do you mean?" demanded Tom Merry.

"Crooke paid Cutts a fiver last night, and he changed a tenner to do it; and cashed up two pound ten to Gilmore," answered Gore.

"But Crooke had a remittance yesterday," said Talbot.

"He says so, you mean," retorted Gore. "Can he prove it? Baggy said he had a remittance, but no one would believe him without proof. Now he's telling a different yarn. I dare say Crooke could tell more than one yarn. But I shouldn't believe any of them!"

"You haven't any right to accuse Crooke of—"

"Rats, Talbot! You've lost money, and it would have been a jolly sight easier for Crooke to bone it than for Baggy. Isn't that so, you fellows?"

"I didn't bone Talbot's off!" wailed Baggy. "That fiver's mine. Crooke gave it to me. I didn't know Talbot had had a remittance."

"That's a lie, anyway!" snapped Talbot. "You did know, for you were there when I opened the letter at the rack."

"Between Two Thieves!" murmured Lowther to Manners. "It's the title of a novel, but it describes exactly the present situation."

"There goes the dinner-bell!" said Tom Merry. "We'll have to look into this later on."

"Don't trouble yourself, Merry. I'll do that!" replied Grandy loftily.

CHAPTER 11.

Crooke versus Skimpole.

"COME along, Skimmy!" said Lowther, putting his head in at the door of No. 9.

"I regret extremely, my dear fellow, that I cannot possibly—"

"But you must, old thing. You're dead due in the gym at this precise moment."

"Dear me! I had completely forgotten the circumstance, Lowther. I will come with all speed."

"I'll escort you, old top, for fear you might forget again," answered the humorist of the Shell, seizing Skimmy's arm.

Skimmy raised no objection. He walked like one in a dream, his mind still busy with the train of thought it had been pursuing when Lowther had popped his head into No. 9.

"Hallo! Here you are, then, Monty," said Tom Merry, with whom were Manners and Talbot. "What are you up to with Skimmy?"

"Why, Thomas, you're as bad as he is! Both of you have forgotten that he has an engagement to put Crooke through it in the gym at two o'clock sharp."

Tom frowned.

"That rot's hardly worth while," he said. "Not just now, anyway. Crooke's got to be tackled on a much more serious matter."

"Well, that can wait, can't it?" returned Lowther. "We shall want plenty of time if we're to decide whether Baggy or Crooke is the biggest liar or the worst thief. Better leave that until after classes, and let the dear Skimmy mop up Crooke now."

"What do you say, Talbot?"

"Oh, I don't know! I want the affair cleared up, of course; but—but— Oh, let Skimmy have his way, as he's so keen on it!"

Skimpole did not appear particularly keen. He was still in a state of abstraction. But he woke up as he was piloted into the gym.

Crooke was already there. He had come in late for dinner, and as yet he had not heard what had happened before the bell went. Some whisper that Grandy had found Baggy Trimble in possession of a fiver that appeared to be Talbot's property had reached him; but he had not been forced to talk about it,

and he preferred not to talk. His game was to lie low as long as possible.

Because of that he rather welcomed the conflict with Skimmy. His willingness to figure in the public eye there ought to tell in his favour, he fancied. But somehow, during the few minutes he had had to wait, uneasiness had seized upon him.

There were whispers about, and they concerned him. He began to be sure of that.

Racke's sneering face told him something. Racke was talking to Clampe and Scrope, and all three were sniggering. But he struck Crooke, who knew Racke so well, that his former pal was feeling far from comfortable.

Baggy was not present. But Melish, who was to second Crooke, was there, of course, and Melish's manner was peculiar.

He looked sidelong at Crooke every now and then, and glanced from him to Racke and the other gay dogs. Melish had not chanced to be present in the Shell passage before dinner, but he had heard things. Melish had a way of hearing things; there was not much going on that he missed.

"What's the giddy row?" growled Crooke at length, when he had begun to feel that keeping silence longer might seem suspicious.

"Oh, haven't you heard Baggy's latest?" asked Melish, with a leer.

"Haven't heard anything. I came in late to dinner, an' haven't spoken to anyone since. What is it?"

"Baggy's been found with a fiver!"

"I'll bet you it ain't his own!" growled Crooke.

"Well, you ought to know! He says you gave it to him!"

Crooke's heart stood still for a second or two.

He had never dreamed of this! Any contingency so unlikely as Baggy Trimble's telling the truth had not occurred to him. People usually kept silence about their success in extorting blackmail. Crooke had forgotten that to the obtuse mind of Baggy blackmail might not seem a crime, or, at worst, might seem a more venial crime than theft.

But in another moment Crooke recovered himself. He had to bluff, and he bluffed.

"What rot!" he snarled. "Can you see me givin' Baggy a fiver?"

"Well, hardly," replied Melish. "It doesn't sound very likely."

But going through the nose to have your dark deeds kept dark is another matter—eh, Crooke?"

It was Gore who spoke. Crooke turned upon him fiercely.

"You ought to know something about that kind of thing, Gore!" he snarled.

"You've done plenty of things you wanted kept dark in your time!"

"Here comes old Skimmy!" cried Jack Blake. "Where's your cornet, Herries? 'The Conquering Hero' is the correct card, I consider."

"But Skimmy has not yet proved himself the conquerin' hewo, Blake," objected Arthur Augustus.

"He's going to, though," said Dig. "Crooke's finkin' it! Look at his face. It's a beautiful lemon colour!"

"He looks savage enough, though," remarked Durrance. "I don't fancy he's exactly funking it."

And, in fact, Crooke was not. He was hardly thinking about Skimmy at all. He had too many other things to occupy his mind, and Gore's gibe had hit him hard.

"Get your jacket off!" breathed Melish in his ear.

Tom Merry and Manners and Talbot took their stand close by Crooke and

his second. As Crooke pulled off his jacket, with an angry jerk, a crumpled scrap of paper fell out of his breast-pocket at Talbot's feet.

No one but Talbot saw it. He stooped quickly and picked it up.

For the life of him he could not have helped glancing at it. As he did so he started, and his eyes gleamed. For upon that paper he saw figures in his own handwriting! It was his memorandum of the numbers of the notes.

There was no longer any doubt in Talbot's mind as to who the thief had been. He knew—as others did not—that Baggy's story might be true, for Baggy had a secret of Crooke's.

For the moment Talbot was tempted to speak out. Words of accusation trembled on his lips. He was very angry with Crooke, and bitterly disappointed.

Then he thrust the scrap of paper into his waistcoat-pocket, and made up his mind to hold his peace—for the present, at least!

He told himself that he was a fool to be disappointed. What better could be expected of Crooke?

Yet during the last few days there had been times when Talbot had hoped something better.

Crooke at his best was not a very pleasant person; but, such as his best was, he had been showing it to Talbot. He had not been near Racke; he had shunned Scrope and Clampe also; in a sulk, he had seemed to have agreed to be making some effort to go straight.

Talbot knew now how much that seeming had been worth!

He hardly saw the first exchanges between Skimmy and Crooke. But he did not miss much worth seeing. Crooke was nearer to being a match for Skimmy, even after Talbot's coaching, than was Scrope or Clampe or Chowle.

Neither combatant had taken much damage, when Skimpole called time at the end of the round.

"You aren't half going it, old top!" said Lowther to his principal.

"Is that your considered opinion, Lowther? Possibly you are correct. I find that I have difficulty in—er—going it to any marked extent until my combative instincts have been thoroughly aroused."

"Tell you what, old freak. Let Crooke give you one really good, hefty punch on the proboscis—Crooke can punch pretty hard, though he's not clever—and you'll wake up no end."

"Do you really consider that that would be a profitable device, Lowther?" returned Skimmy anxiously. "It appears to my judgment that there might be a modicum of pain, and even of risk, associated with it. If Crooke's blow came to cause an effusion of blood from my—"

"Time!" rapped out Harry Noble.

Skimmy, looking thoughtful, and Crooke, looking savage, approached each other again.

Crooke lunged out recklessly, and Skimmy took a rattler on the jaw that, as he might have expressed it, hardly conduced to his comfort.

His eyes gleamed now, and he went for Crooke as if he really meant it.

The blows he got in would not have daunted any stout-hearted fellow. But Crooke had little more liking than Racke for being hurt, and his heart was not in this fight.

He gave ground before Skimmy. He made little attempt at hitting back, and his guarding was clumsy and feeble.

The blows of the round were undoubtedly Skimpole's.

"Did I perform in a manner more satisfactory to you, Lowther?" asked

Skimmy, panting a little as he rested on Lowther's knee.

"Rather, old dear! Go it again, my hero!"

Skimmy looked across at Talbot, and Talbot gave him an encouraging smile. But there was something sad in that smile, too—or so it seemed to Skimmy. He wondered whether Talbot quite liked the prospect of seeing him defeat Crooke.

The third round had scarcely begun when George Alfred Grundy rushed into the gym, and pushed his way through the ring of spectators.

"Here, stop that rot!" he cried authoritatively.

"Oh, cheese it, Grundy!" protested George.

"You can't butt in like that, you know!" added Wilkins.

Grundy paid no heed to his chums. But he found himself obliged to pay heed to others. Tom Merry, Manners, Dane, Glyn, Levison, Clive, and Cardew barred his path. He could not reach the ring.

He tried another way, and found himself being hustled and jostled by Jack Blake and Herries and Digby, Figgins, Kerr, and Fatty Wynn.

"You silly asses!" he hooted. "That fight ought not go on! Crooke's—"

But at that moment Crooke toppled backwards. By accident or design—most likely by accident—Skimmy had landed him one on the point of the jaw.

It was enough for Crooke. Possibly he could not get up. Anyway, he did not. He lay there, and let Kangaroo count him out.

The gym rang with cheers for Skimpole. Some cheered in mockery, perhaps. It really had not been much of a fight. But nearly everyone was glad to see Skimmy victorious, for all that.

CHAPTER 12.

One Crime Brought Home!

"HOLD that rotter!" roared Grundy.

Crooke had staggered to his feet without aid from Mellich. "He doesn't look to me to need much holding," said Kangaroo critically.

"Unless it's holding up," put in Lowther.

"Hold him! Hold Racke, too!" hooted Grundy. "I've got something to tell you fellows about those two scamps!"

Racke turned, with a savage scowl, and tried to push his way through. Scrope and Clampe fell away from him at once. But others closed round. It was not the way of the Shell and Fourth to take much notice of Grundy, as a rule. But just now all could see that Grundy was very much in earnest.

"You may consider yourself under arrest, Crooke!" said Kangaroo.

"Don't be too modest, Racke!" glibed Monty Lowther. "You appear to be one of the leading figures in the next act. Don't dodge the limelight!"

"I've nothing" to say to Grundy!" snarled Racke.

"But Grundy appears to have a good deal to say to you, or about you," said Levison major.

"I've been talking to Trimble!" howled Grundy.

"Queer taste—dashed queer taste!" yawned Cardew. "Did you talk to him in that tone, old sport? Reminds me of my dear old pal Shakespeare—Bottom the Weaver, you know. 'Roarin' like any suckin'-dove,' by gad!"

But no one paid any heed to Cardew's gibes.

"I've been talking to Trimble. I've made the fat rotter confess; he's let it all out," shouted Grundy. "Crooke did bribe the podgy beast. I don't know where Crooke got the money, though I

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have my suspicions. And Racke bribed him, too!"

"It's a dashed silly lie!" Racke snarled.

"Go on, Grundy!" cried Roylance. Grundy had gained the attention of the crowd. The faces of Racke and Crooke showed that there was something behind his story.

"Where's Baggy?" asked Julian.

"He's here somewhere. I made him come along," answered Grundy. "There he is."

Trimble, lurking miserably on the fringes of the crowd, was collected by Gore and Lumley-Lumley and thrust forward.

"I—I don't want to say anything at all about it!" he wailed, moistening his dry lips with his tongue.

"You needn't!" snapped Grundy. "I'll tell it. I know all about it now. You chaps may remember—you can't be off it, I should think—that Talbot brought me up to the scratch at the last minute for the Marathon. Why?"

"Because he was silly ass enough to think you'd make any difference!" growled Blake.

"Because he knew the Shell hadn't a chance without me!" snorted Grundy. "He wasn't really running himself—he only started to avoid talk. I reckon—and he wanted me to take his place."

Fifty pairs of eyes were turned upon Reginald Talbot. He flushed under the collected gaze. Then he squared his shoulders and faced the crowd.

"You're wrong, Blake," he said quietly. "Grundy did make a difference—all the difference, as it happened. And Grundy's right. I only started. I knew that there wasn't any chance of my being in at the finish, for I'd something else to do. Perhaps I'd better tell the story."

"Shut up, Talbot!" snapped Grundy. "I'm going to tell it! Seem to me that if it was your job it ought to have been done earlier. Fact of the matter is the Shell—yes, and the Fourth, too—would just about go to rack and ruin if it wasn't for me! What with Merry's slacking, and Talbot's keeping secret things he ought to tell—"

There came a murmur from the crowd. The great George Alfred was again adopting somewhat too high-handed a tone.

Tom Merry spoke out.

"I don't know whether you fellows will blame Talbot," he said. "I rather fancy you will. But if you do, some of our us must share the blame. Manners and Lowther and I, anyway."

Kerr nudged Figgins, and then stepped forward.

"And Figgis and Fatty and I," he said. "We know all about it, and we agreed to keep it dark."

Skimpole blinked around him.

"If I correctly apprehend what is the subject of this altercation," he said mildly. "and if Talbot is to be blamed, then I also am guilty, for I knew the circumstances, though I confess that the whole concatenation of events had passed into the dim recesses of my memory."

"My hat! Some secret, with Tom Merry & Co., and Talbot, and Figgis & Co., and Skimmy all knowing it!" remarked Ernest Levison.

"Don't forget Baggy, dear man!" said Cardew. "Skimmy forgot—he's dashed good at that. As for the other fellows could keep a secret. But it's a miracle that Baggy should have kept it dark all this time."

"Not a bit of it, when the rotter was bribed to keep his mouth shut!" said Kangaroo bluntly.

"Will you listen to me?" roared Grundy. "If Talbot or any of the other

fellows meant to speak, they ought to have spoken before now."

"You have the platform, Grundy!" said Monty Lowther. "But don't be too rough on us, old bean! We meant well."

"Oh, I dare say! You're no judgment—that's the long and short of it, Lowther! I mean all of you. Everybody knows you're only a silly ass! But Talbot and Tom Merry and Kerr and Manners are supposed to have some sense!"

"Get on with the washing, Grundy, do!" urged Clive.

"I'm going to. Racke and Crooke plotted to spoil the chances of their own Form in the Marathon. They—"

"It's a dashed lie!" protested Racke.

"I know nothin' of what Crooke—"

"Shut up, you sweep!" howled Grundy. "They had been betting against their own Form, the dirty hounds! So they made up their minds that I shouldn't win—"

"Taking a lot of unnecessary trouble," put in Blake. "Who ever thought you would?"

"I did! I meant that none of us should win—I or Tom Merry or Talbot or Noble or Dane. They fixed it with some rotter to trip up the leading runner, if he was a Shell chap. Baggy heard them plotting, and he told Talbot. I don't know why. He'd much better have come to me."

"It was through me that Trimble laid bare the plot to Talbot," said Skimpole to the surprise of all who heard. "I also chanced upon some intelligence of the plot."

"That's right!" put in Talbot. "Most of the credit is due to old Skimmy."

"My dear Talbot!"

"Oh, do shut up!" roared Grundy. "I can't get a giddy word in."

"At present there really doesn't appear to be much credit knockin' around for anyone," remarked Cardew.

"Hear, hear!" said many voices.

Fellows in both Forms resented the matter having been kept dark. They had a feeling that Talbot and those who had shared the secret with him were more or less on trial, as well as Racke and Crooke.

"I don't know about that," said Grundy deliberately. "Mind, I'm not saying that Talbot did exactly the right thing. He ought to have come straight to me. But, all the same, he deserves some credit. He fetched me out to compete—"

"Not much credit due to him for that!" snarled Blake.

"None at all!" agreed Herries. Blake and Herries were always in arms against Grundy's swank.

"You're wrong," Tom Merry said. "We should have been nowhere without Grundy. He and Dane saved the situation for us."

"Well, you helped, Merry," said Grundy, graciously. "I'll admit that much."

As Tom Merry had run first, and scored thirty-five points, it was really not very much for Grundy to admit.

"I think Talbot saved it!" put in Kerr.

"Talbot and you, Kerr," George Figgins corrected him.

"How was that?" snapped Grundy. "I didn't know Kerr was in it; but there were two fellows—I know that much. They stopped the game of the rotter Racke and Crooke had turned on to the job. That was how it happened that they didn't finish in the race. And, to my mind, there some credit due to them."

"I still think they ought to have put the whole bizness into my hands."

"You would think so!" murmured Wilkins.

"Then the trick was tried on?" asked Kangaroo, staring at Tom and Talbot.

"Yes," replied Tom.
"How?" demanded Levison and Blake together.

"Rope across the road in Rylcombe Lane."

"The wottahs! The low wetches!" gasped Arthur, Augustus D'Arcy indignantly. "Weally, Wacke—weally, Crooke—"

"Shurrup, Gussy!" growled Blake. "We'll attend to Racke and Crooke, you bet! Did you twig the rope, Tommy?"

"Didn't twig a blessed thing!" answered Tom frankly. "I couldn't see much just then. Tell you the truth, I'd gone all out to get ahead of the rest of you, and my eyes were bungled up, and I was wondering whether I could hold on to the finish. It wasn't such an easy win for me as some of you fancied."

"My hat! To think Talbot and Kerr should have stopped the trick, and Tommy never know till afterwards!" said Digby in astonishment.

"Seems to me," said Clifton Dane, "that the Shell owe a vote of thanks to the two, and especially to Kerr, Kerr's Fourth, and it wasn't up to him to help."

"I think it was," Kerr said quietly. "Figgly thinks so, too, and old Fatty. So will all the Fourth, when they've thought it over. We didn't want to win the race or the competition through a rotten trick like that, did we? We wanted a fair field and no favour."

"Hear, hear!" came from nearly every Fourth-Former present, and Dick Redfern clapped Kerr hard on the back, crying:

"Bravo, the New House!"
"But what made you ask Kerr to help, Talbot?" inquired Kangaroo. "I'd have come like a shot!"

"I know you would, old chap. I didn't ask Kerr; I didn't mean to ask anyone. It was Skimmy who let on to Kerr."

"Out of the two Forms the august Skimmy chose me—me!" said Kerr dramatically. "Never ask me again, What is fame? I know now!"
"Will you chaps let me get a word in?" howled Grundy. "You've forgotten that we've got to settle with Racke and Crooke. Of course, an explanation's due from Talbot and the rest of them; but that's a minor matter, after all. We know now what those two rotters tried to do. And we know that they both bribed Baggy to keep it dark. This is a case for a Form trial, and I vote we start on it this moment! I'll be judge, of course."

But at that moment the bell for afternoon classes clanged out, and the Form trial had to be deferred. Shell and Fourth trooped off to their respective class-rooms, discussing the matter as they went.

Baggy Trimble shunk in the rear of the Fourth, in a very disconsolate frame of mind. All his hitherto schemes had gone awry, and Racke had impounded his ill-gotten gains!

CHAPTER 13. Crooke Bolts!

BOTH Mr. Linton and Mr. Lathom had trouble with their flocks that afternoon. Shell and Fourth alike were plainly occupied with something other than their lessons.

Racke, Crooke, and Trimble were avoided as if they were pariahs. Possibly Baggy did not realise his position. He had no very heavy conviction of guilt. But quite certainly Racke and Crooke realised theirs.

Lies would not serve them now. Part of the truth had been brought to light; the rest would follow.

Racke foresaw trouble in the matter of Scrafe. He had more than one warn-

ing as to what would happen if he did not get rid of the fellow. Now Nemesis was on his track.

But Crooke's worry was far greater than Racke's.

The Form would deal with Racke. The Form could not deal with Crooke's crime. It was too heavy for that.

In the excitement of Grundy's revelations Talbot's loss had been forgotten. But it could not stay forgotten. The question would arise as to whence Crooke had got the ten pounds with which he had bribed Trimble; and Crooke did not hope that his story of a remittance would carry any weight.

It would all come out, and he would be expelled! And Talbot would rejoice, of course. There would be no hope that Colonel Lyndon should ever own Crooke as his nephew again.

The two hours of afternoon classes dragged their slow length to an end at last.

Crooke had managed to get a seat near the door, and he was first out. But as he was stealing away he felt a firm grip on his arm.

"He turned, and saw his cousin.
"I want a word with you, Crooke," said Talbot quietly.

Crooke had no courage to resist. He went cowering and ash-faced, to No. 9.

"Here, I say!" howled Grundy. "We want Crooke, you know, Talbot!"

"Don't butt in, Grundy," said Tom Merry. "There's more in this bizney than you know of, old chap—more than you'll ever know, perhaps."

"Well, I like that, hanged if I don't!" roared Grundy. "Who's got a right to know if I haven't? And what about the Form trial? We're bound to hold that."

"Better have it to-night, in the dorm, don't you think?" said Tom diplomatically.

"Well, yes; that's an idea. It will give me time to marshal the evidence and make my verdict," replied Grundy. "I'm judge, you know."

Still diplomatic, Tom did not contest that. But it was really not at all likely that the Shell and Fourth would consent, when the time came, to the assumption by George Alfred Grundy of the office of judge.

Racke fled to his study, and locked himself in. He did not go altogether undisturbed; but no attempt was made to force the door.

In No. 9 Talbot, stern-faced and pale, fronted the frightened Crooke.

"The game's up, Crooke!" he said. "Do you see this?"

He took from his pocket the crumpled scrap of paper which had dropped from Crooke's jacket. Crooke had meant to destroy that, he did not know how he had come to forget.

"I see it," he muttered. "What about it?"

"It's a bit of evidence you can't get round," said Talbot. "Grundy holds one of the notes you gave Trimble. The number of this note's here. I've no doubt you paid away notes to others. You were up to your ears in debt, I know. The numbers of those notes are here, too!"

"I may as well own up," replied Crooke, his eyes unable to meet Talbot's. "I collared your oof; that's all about it."

There was sullen resentment in his voice. He spoke almost as though Talbot had done him a wrong. All his certainty that his cousin would keep silent about the theft for Colonel Lyndon's sake oozed out of him. He wondered how he could ever have dreamed that—could ever have thought that Reginald Talbot was soft enough to mean well by him. There was the letter, of course; but what did that prove on Talbot's side? And yet, somehow, rascal as he himself was, Crooke

could not quite believe that his cousin had meant to trap him.

Talbot, on his side, almost felt that he had trapped Crooke, though unwittingly, and in a trap which a decent fellow would have shunned.

It had been grossly careless of him to leave the money where Crooke could get at it; he felt that bitterly. But if Crooke had been honest—

"You must have been in a desperate hole, Crooke!"

Talbot's voice was harder than he knew. It certainly expressed more hardness than he really felt. Even now he wanted to shield his cousin.

But Crooke did not guess that.

"Yes, I was," he answered sullenly.

"You might have asked my help, I should think!"

"Was it likely you'd give it?" snarled Crooke. "Think I wanted to be turned down by you?"

"You couldn't be sure I should turn you down."

"Oh, couldn't I, by gad? I was, then!"

"You might have given me a chance, Crooke."

"A chance to preach—to refuse me—to tell old Lyndon the scrap I'd got into! Besides, I did give you a chance. I said I was in a hole. You didn't even answer."

"I couldn't help you—then."

"But you could have done when that whack of cash came along."

"No, not at once. I meant— But never mind that. It's too late now."

Crooke stared at him stupidly.

"What are you goin' to do about it?" he snarled, at length.

"I don't know. I don't know what to do," replied Talbot, pacing restlessly up and down the room. "Oh, go away, Skimmy, do!"

Skimpole was trying the locked door. But he went at Talbot's request.

"If you kept it dark—"

"How can I? Everybody knows now that I've lost money."

"You could say you'd found it again."

Talbot's eyes flashed. He walked to the door, unlocked it, and flung it open.

"Get out!" he snarled. "Do you think I'll be for you?"

Crooke slunk out. To him all hope seemed at an end.

"Here is a letter for you, my dear Talbot," said Skimpole, returning five minutes later.

Talbot snatched it, and opened it eagerly. It was from Colonel Lyndon, and in answer to one he had written a couple of days earlier. The colonel was now at home for a brief spell.

It was a long letter. Talbot's forehead drew into a frown more than once as he read it. But before he had reached the end his face cleared.

There was a chance for Crooke, after all!

He waited for Crooke to reappear. But the black sheep missed prep, or did it in some other study. The latter alternative was unlikely, however. Crooke was hardly likely to find a welcome in any other study.

Crooke showed up at supper, but disappeared again directly afterwards. He did not seek for him. After that, there was no particular reason why Crooke should know in advance what he meant to do.

But Colonel Lyndon's letter had made the situation easier for Talbot. Nothing could alter the fact that George Gerald Crooke was the thief. After that, fact might be deduced from the rest of St. Jim's, even from Talbot's best chums. It was still up to him to do his best for his worthless cousin, and still more for his gallant old uncle. He would hardly have lied for Crooke's sake; but

for the colonel's sake he was ready to play a part that would entail something very like lying.

When the Shell mustered in their dormitory at bed-time one of their number was missing. Racke was there. He was in for a bad time, he knew; but he had made up his mind to go through with it. Crooke was the absentee.

Nobody remarked on his being away until Kiddare had been in and put out the lights without noticing anything. But as soon as the skipper had closed the door behind him the voice of Grundy made itself heard.

"Where's that rotter Crooke?" demanded Grundy. "We'd better get on with the trial. Shin out of bed, Racke!"

"Better wait until Crooke turns up, hadn't we?" said Gibbons. I guess he'll sink in when he thinks we're all safely asleep."

"The Fourth aren't coming along for half an hour," Tom Merry said. "We can give him that much before we begin to worry about him, anyway."

"It's my belief he's bolted!" said Gore.

"Oh, rats!" came from Wilkins. "Crooke and Racke have done worse things than trying to trip up a runner in a race. I'm not saying it wasn't a foul trick; but they've done worse things and faced them out."

"That isn't all, though," said Gore meekly.

"What else is there?" asked Dune. "Oh, I remember now. You haven't found your cash, I suppose. Talbot?"

Just for one moment Reginald Talbot hesitated. His instinct were all for open dealing. But he thought of his uncle's pride, and the wound that would be inflicted upon it were Crooke convicted of theft, and he said:

"As a matter of fact, that trouble's at an end. It was due to my own silly carelessness entirely. I'm glad it went no further than that."

"You mean you've found the oof?" asked Kangaroo bluntly.

"Yes," answered Talbot.

"There was no way out of it for him but the direct lie that he hated telling. He felt ashamed of it, but he must bear the shame. And, after all, it was not so very black a lie. The letter from his uncle had altered things. Crooke's guilt was unqualified, true. But, in a sense, the ownership of the money was."

"Well, it's blessed queer how Crooke got a tender to buy Baggy off with!" growled Grundy.

"He told Talbot he had a remittance," said Tom quietly. "Crooke often does have bigish remittances, you know. And there was need for him to write home for cash, it seems."

Racke laughed sneeringly, and Gore muttered something; but the rest seemed convinced. Talbot wondered whether Tom did not suspect the truth, however. It would be like Tom to help him out. And like Tom, too, to be ready to share the burden of deception with him, as it were. Tom would know how he hated the lie, even as Tom himself would have hated it; but Tom would understand how, even in lying, he was doing his best.

"Oof, he doesn't turn up," remarked Gore, after a few minutes of silence.

Talbot slipped silently out of bed. He had begun to feel very anxious about Crooke. Perhaps it would have been better had the fellow been told that he might expect mercy.

Outside, a full moon shone high in the sky; but the blinds were all down, and not one but Tom saw Talbot's movements.

Tom said nothing until Talbot had stolen out of the door. Then he got out of bed and whispered to Manners and Lowther.

"They said out, too. But now others noticed what was going on."

"What are you chaps after?" asked Grundy sharply.

"Going to look for Crooke," replied Tom.

"Well, I don't see any particular objection to that. These Fourth Form boundaries will be along directly, and we ought to be able to produce the sweep. I'll come with you, if you like."

"Oh, don't trouble, old scout!" said Tom.

Grundy didn't trouble. Perhaps he felt that the task was beneath his dignity.

"Rather a wild-goose chase!" grumbled Manners, as the three stole downstairs.

"Can't help it. Couldn't let old Talbot go alone," Tom replied. "He's gone after Crooke because he thinks Crooke's bolted. I'm inclined to think the same."

And Talbot and Tom were right. Crooke had bolted!

CHAPTER 14.

Out of the Jaws of Death

CROOKE had not dared to face the tribunal in the dormitory.

The Marathon plot—the bribing of Baggy to keep the guilty secret—these things were small compared with what he feared. It would have been bad enough to have had to answer for them; but the theft was a crime that could not be expiated by a Form ragging.

Of what use to face the wrath of the Fourth when the wrath of the Head and expulsion were certain to follow?

Yet he hung about for a long resolution for taking a decisive step. He lurked in the shadows of the moonlit quad, trying to make up his mind.

When he did at last nerve himself to it he was too late to get away undetected. For Talbot was just in time to see him clamber over the wall.

Talbot followed at once. He did not shout. That would have been too risky so near the school buildings.

The Terrible Three saw from an upper window Talbot's exit.

"Jolly risky!" murmured Manners. "Anybody might have seen!"

"No time for thinking of risks," returned Tom, with a touch of impatience.

"There's more in this affair than you may think."

"Come on, and hang the risk!" said Lowther.

Down the road Crooke turned his head, and saw someone in a St. Jim's cap behind him. He did not recognise Talbot; but he knew that he was followed, and he quickened his pace.

Dropping from the wall, Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther could just discern Talbot in the moonlight. They could not see Crooke, but they guessed that he was ahead.

"The chase is up!" said Lowther.

Neither Tom Merry nor Manners hesitated, but they held on.

It was for Wayland Moor that Crooke made. He had broken into a shambling run now.

Talbot could have caught him up without much difficulty. But he did not put on pace enough for that. There was no cruelty in his nature; but he felt very bitter with Crooke. Let the fellow run till he had run himself out. It would be time enough then to tell him that his worst fears were vain.

So while Crooke puffed and panted and laboured, spurred by his own craven spirit to heedless flight, Talbot jogged

along in his tracks, not attempting to overtake him, yet, not troubling even if his lead increased, so that he remained in sight.

And the Terrible Three followed Talbot, but did not try to catch him up. That was due to Tom Merry. Tom felt, somehow, sure that Talbot would be glad of a few words alone with Crooke first.

Across Wayland Moor Crooke held on his way. He had ceased to run now; he was stumbling and gasping. Fear and doubt urged him on. He knew not where he was going; he had no plans at all.

Talbot had little notion of the strait of body and mind in which his cousin was. The run, which had almost exhausted Crooke, had hardly breathed the fit and muscular Talbot.

Crooke struck off the road across the moor towards the higher ground behind. Talbot followed, and the Terrible Three held on in Talbot's wake.

Now and then Crooke glanced round. Talbot never did. All that he awaited now was Crooke's halting. He imagined that Crooke had recognised him.

Perhaps Crooke did guess who it was behind. Perhaps his belief that it was Talbot helped to urge him forward.

He crossed the road that ran from Wayland to Westwood, on the northern side of the moor, and clambered breathlessly up the steep slope that rose above it.

His figure showed clear against the sky to all four of those who followed, as he went haltingly, painfully, along the top of the ridge. He was moving now almost as a blind man moves, as if groping his way.

Now Talbot ran—ran his hardest. For on a sudden he remembered danger. Crooke was nearing the quarry. In a minute or two, if he held straight on, he would be treading its rocks.

"Stop, Crooke—stop!" shouted Talbot. Crooke looked back, then began to run stumblingly forward. His head was in a whirl; he could neither think nor see clearly.

"Oh, stop! For goodness' sake, stop!" yelled Talbot again.

For now Crooke, swaying uncertainly, was within a few yards of the quarry's edge.

Talbot ran as he had never run in his life before, and that spirit of his saved Crooke's life.

For Crooke stumbled and fell, and rolled over the edge of the quarry with a horrible shriek of fear. But even as he rolled over Talbot dashed up, threw himself down, and somehow gripped his cousin's right wrist.

The weight almost dragged Talbot over. The shock came near to dislocating his arm. But he did not lose his nerve.

He reached down quickly and grabbed Crooke's other arm. Crooke's feet scabbled at the face of the quarry for foothold; as they slipped, and he hung limply, all his weight thrown upon Talbot's strong arms and straining body.

And Reginald Talbot gritted his teeth, and tried to dig his toes into the turf, and held on desperately, feeling himself slipping inch by inch nearer the edge, seeing no hope of dragging Crooke up, yet never for a second thinking of letting him go.

"It's no use!" panted Crooke. "Might as well drop here! I'm not going back to be sacked! I'd as soon be killed!"

"You fool!" snapped Talbot. "Try to get a foothold. Don't give in! You won't be sacked. I wrote to Uncle Lyndon. He says you can have the money to clear your debts. It's yours now. They won't touch it before it was. Nobody will know."

"It's no good!" panted Crooke. "I

can feel you comin' over. Better let go!"

Perhaps in that awful moment some unselfish impulse moved Crooke—perhaps he really felt that it was hardly fair that Talbot should perish with him. But Talbot would not loose his grip; and it is doubtful whether, had Crooke had a grip on him, Crooke would have loosed his.

Inch by inch nearer! Teeth set hard, arms racked with pain, body tense with strain, toes striving vainly, Talbot struggled, despaired, yet would not let go.

"We're coming!" yelled a voice behind him, and the Terrible Three rushed up—not a second too soon!

Manners and Lowther seized Talbot's legs; Tom Merry threw himself by his chum's side. Even yet, for all he had done and suffered, Talbot had fight left in him. Tom may have borne more than half the toil of dragging Crooke into safety, but it was not much more; Talbot did a manful share.

Then he fainted dead away, and

Crooke lay, moaning and gasping, by his side.

Before they reached St. Jim's, Crooke carried on Tom Merry's sturdy back, Talbot propped up by Manners and Lowther, they met a score or more of the Shell and Fourth, under the leadership—as Grundy imagined—of Grundy. And when they went in it was by the gate. Crooke's condition rendered the affair past hiding.

Talbot spent a couple of days in santry. Crooke was there over a week. On the day that he came out Colonel Lyndon visited St. Jim's and saw his two nephews. What passed no one was ever told; not even Tom Merry, who, with Manners and Lowther, heard the rest of the story. But Gore returned to No. 9, and Crooke went back to No. 7, and the congenial companionship of Racke; and from that it might be guessed that Colonel Lyndon saw no further hope from anything Talbot could do for Crooke.

He had heard the whole story, though,

and he knew that Talbot had done his best. One could have done more; few would have done as much.

Somehow, in spite of Grundy, neither Racke nor Crooke was ever brought to that Form trial. The excitement simmered down while Crooke lay in santry, and it did not seem worth while to stir in the matter when he came out. The cash taken from Trimble by Grundy went to the Red Cross funds, much to Baggy's disgust. But Baggy also got off more easily than he deserved.

More than one fellow suspected—three knew—that there was more behind Crooke's flight than was ever told. But, though Crooke could hardly be more despised, Talbot was even more highly honoured because of the happenings of that moonlight night in July.

THE END.

(Don't miss next Wednesday's Great Story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's—"TOM MERRY & CO'S TRIUMPH!"—by Martin Clifford.)

THE TWINS FROM TASMANIA.

FOR NEW READERS.

The twins are Philip Derwent, of Highcliffe, and his sister Philippa, of Cliff House. Flip has made an enemy of Gadsby, who is plotting against him with Vavasour. His best chums, Merton and Tunstall, are away from the school for a time, owing to a serious accident to one of Merton's eyes in a fight with Ponsonby. In their absence Flip gets too friendly with Pon and the rest of the nuts, and, without any real taste for the warping "Police" is heard. Flip comes to himself in a cellar, bound hand and foot. He is let out, however. He makes up his mind that the only thing for him to do is to run away, as returning to Highcliffe means certain expulsion. Then he meets Peter Hazeldene, who has run away from Greyfriars. Goggs of Frankingham comes to Highcliffe. Flip and Hazel go to London, and make for Weyland. They are there on a steamboat. By a trick Pon, Gadsby, and Vavasour are sent to the Head, and Vavasour confesses. Flip and Hazel are found in an exhausted state by St. Jim's fellows. Ponsonby stops Flip and Marjorie, and is insulting. Goggs fights and thrashes Pon before the girls and several Highcliffe and Greyfriars juniors. Flip is gradually recovering,

and his sister Philippa, of Cliff House. They have a cockatoo, named Cocky, which has been until recently with Flip (Philip) at Highcliffe, but is now at Cliff House. Flip has made an enemy of Gadsby, who is plotting against him with Vavasour. His best chums, Merton and Tunstall, are away from the school for a time, owing to a serious accident to one of Merton's eyes in a fight with Ponsonby. In their absence Flip gets too friendly with Pon and the rest of the nuts, and, without any real taste for the warping "Police" is heard. Flip comes to himself in a cellar, bound hand and foot. He is let out, however. He makes up his mind that the only thing for him to do is to run away, as returning to Highcliffe means certain expulsion. Then he meets Peter Hazeldene, who has run away from Greyfriars. Goggs of Frankingham comes to Highcliffe. Flip and Hazel go to London, and make for Weyland. They are there on a steamboat. By a trick Pon, Gadsby, and Vavasour are sent to the Head, and Vavasour confesses. Flip and Hazel are found in an exhausted state by St. Jim's fellows. Ponsonby stops Flip and Marjorie, and is insulting. Goggs fights and thrashes Pon before the girls and several Highcliffe and Greyfriars juniors. Flip is gradually recovering,

with such charmin' and distinguished politeness!"

Goggs also arose.

"Sit down!" snapped Mr. Mobbs.

But the bull-bellow of Chiker drowned his voice, and possibly Goggs and De Courcy failed to hear the order. Anyway, they did not sit down. They moved forward.

"There's three more of you as I'm wantin'!" roared Chiker. "A galloway young swell what they call Pon—there 'e is! An' a cunning young 'ound by the name of Gadsby—I see 'im, too! An' a white-livered, sneakin' cur what answers to the moniker of Vava-sore—an' it's sore 'e'd 'e 'e got 'is deserts! Come out 'ere, the force of you!"

"You be banged, you low cad!" snapped Cecil Ponsonby.

Gadsby and Vavasour did not speak. But they stuck to their seats.

"If you don't come, I'll fetch you—an' I shall art you!" bellowed Chiker.

"Really, my good man, really, I cannot allow this!" fumed Mr. Mobbs.

"You? Do the blazes do you think cares what you allow?" roared the intruder.

"I cannot give my permission—"

"You ain't asked for it, old cock!"

"You must certainly ask for it when—"

"Right—so I did! That was my mistake! I 'ad too much bloom'n' politeness, funny face! I took you for some sort of a man instead of a blessed stuffed monkey!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled the Fourth. But Frank Courtenay frowned. No one liked Mr. Mobbs less than he did; but Chiker seemed to him to be carrying things too far.

He got up.

"Excuse my interference, sir—"

"I shall not excuse it, Courtenay!" rapped out the master.

"I'm sorry for that. But I feel bound to speak. This man appears to have something to say that concerns the Form."

"He has nothing whatever to say that I shall allow to be said here!" snapped Mr. Mobbs.

"That's where you make your error, codfish-mung!" said Chiker politely.

"Kiss me, and call be Albert!" murmured Cocky.

"I would suggest that you might allow him to speak, sir, as long as he refrains from insults or violence," said Courtenay. "We all know that Derwent wasn't given fair play; but

Trouble in the Form-room.

"COME in!" rapped out Mr. Mobbs. The door opened, and a figure in khaki appeared.

For a moment no one recognised the new-comer. Then Gadsby gave a gasp.

It was Mr. Bert Chiker—or, to be quite up to date, Private Chiker, of the Kentish Fusiliers.

"By Jove!" breathed Ponsonby, also recognising him. "What's that dashed out want here, Gaddy?"

Chiker groined something in Mr. Mobbs's ear. No one else heard what he said. It did not appear to please Mr. Mobbs.

"I say, Goggs," whispered Tunstall, "Cocky never did all that talkin', did he?"

"No. Cocky did not talking at all until the cloth was taken from his cage. I understand that he seldom talks in the dark."

"Then—"

"I did it with my little voice, Tunstall."

"By Jupiter! What a chap you are! Well, Smithson ain't the rest of them ought to be satisfied. They wanted Mobbs ragged, an' you fair ragged him, old top!"

"I rather fancy, Tunstall, that they will be still happier before the afternoon finishes. I know the—er—gentleman in khaki, and the dear Mr. Mobbs does not appear to be hitting it off too well. And when the gentleman in khaki disagrees with anyone he has—to judge by my slight previous acquaintance with him—a tendency to be violent. I do hope and trust he will not be violent with the dear Mobbs!"

"I hope he will, by Jupiter!" answered Tunstall.

But possibly what Goggs meant was not so very different from what Tunstall meant.

There were signs about Private Chiker of possible violence. He did not seem to like his face was almost purple with anger. That of Mr. Mobbs was scarlet. They were plainly not of the same mind about the matter under discussion.

All eyes were upon them. Cocky was quite forgotten for the time being. As the Caterpillar remarked to Frank Courtenay, a new turn had begun.

The Caterpillar had now tumbled to Chiker's identity, though he only remembered the fellow from his encounters with him on the football-field. He could hardly be said to have

seen him on the dark night when Chiker had learned something of Goggs' skill at jujitsu.

And Vavasour knew him also, and felt quite as uncomfortable as Pon or Gadsby. Trouble seemed to Vav to have made a positive target of him recently—and to have got in some very good shooting, too. Pon and Gaddy had at least each other's moral support; but both of them were down upon Vav.

Now Chiker spoke out. The wonder was that he had not done so earlier. Persuasion was very little in his way. But it seemed that he had used persuasion vainly upon Mr. Mobbs.

"Look 'ere!" roared the burly fellow. "I ain't goin' to 'ave no more of this, so that's straight, sparrer-legs!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the Fourth.

"How dare you talk to me like that, you low fellow!" squeaked Mr. Mobbs.

"Here, chook! That's the man in khaki! We do call all chaps in khaki names!" came a voice which sounded like Smithson's.

"But when a man in khaki calls us 'sparrer-legs,' y'know, he means 'the Caterpillar,' with a grin of complete enjoyment."

"I ain't goin' to pick an' choose my bloom'n' words to a thing like you!" retorted Chiker hotly.

"Whatever that is, I never come here to talk to you. You're about as fit nothin', I reckon, 'ere or anywhere!"

"Our friend in khaki may not be a great mathematician, but he would appear to be a good judge of character. Goggs, by gad!" said the Caterpillar, leaning forward to speak to the Frankingham junior.

The move drew Chiker's attention to them.

"'Allo! The glass-eyed curate!" he roared, aiming affection in his growling at Goggs.

"Come out, 'ere, my lucks!" An 'im with the yellin' 'air—that's the lord duke as talks through 'is 'at all the time! Will you be good enough to step forward also, me lord duke!"

"Shall we go, Goggs?" inquired the Caterpillar languidly. "It will annoy Mobbs, at least, an' that, I take it, is the programme for tonight, afternoon."

"Ought we not to ask Mr. Mobbs' permission, De Courcy?" returned Goggs mildly.

"I think not, dear boy! I rather fancy, y'know, that he wouldn't give it. I have my suspicions that the dear Mobbs is not pleased."

"Are you coming, you two?" roared Chiker.

"Oh, certainly!" replied the Caterpillar, arising. "We could not refuse a request made

we don't all know the whole story. If this man has anything to tell us—

"I refuse to allow him to speak, and I order you to be silent, Courtney!"

"Cheerio, comrade!" shouted Chiker, slapping Goggles on the back with a force that caused him to cough, in his approval of Frank Courtney's attitude. "You're a man, you are—ten men like this beauty here that calls itself your mouth might be cut out of you without you missin' of it!"

"Courtney, if you add and abet this extremely impertinent scoundrel—"

"You shut up, spindlegigs! You 'old your blessed rosy, fox-face' rooster, Chiker furiously. "Look ere, young sir," he addressed Courtney now—"I don't want to be insulting personal, come to that, I ain't been really personal. I want to tell this lantern-jawed land-pirate the truth, an' where's the 'arm in that'?"

"Courtney, go at once to the Sixth Form-room, and request the presence of Landy, Roper, and Ingram!" commanded Mr. Mobbs. "Better sent for a dozen or so, while you're about it," said Chiker truculently. "Three of 'em won't never shift me!"

But Frank Courtney did not move.

"I think the man should be heard, sir," he said. "There's a strong feeling in the Form that is bad for discipline. We know that there isn't any such thing as equal justice with you, and we're fed up with it. Derwent's suffered cruelly through the treachery of fellows here, and we know that they have been shielded by you. We want to bear telling this lantern-jawed land-pirate the truth. This is flat rebellion!"

"I don't consider it so, sir. If it is, we have been guided to it."

"Hear, hear!"

"There was no mistake about the feeling of the majority of the Fourth."

Ponsonby, Courtney refuses obedience, will you do me the favour of taking my message?" asked Mr. Mobbs, almost pleadingly.

"If I can't quite see Franky being ordered an' Pon being politely requested," said the Caterpillar quite audibly.

"It's the rotten way the rotter always does things," howled Smithson, almost beside himself with excitement.

"If young Pon comes near that door I'll break it 'ead," roared Chiker. "An' as for Goggles an' Xava-sore, let 'em try it, that's all! I'll wring their necks like blessed chickens!"

Pon did not stir. Gaddy and Vav also kept their places. Neither of them had the least disposition to volunteer his want evidently be a dangerous mission.

Chiker's tongue, once he got a chance to let his story word be painful to them. But they considered that, on the whole, Chiker's fists were likely to be even more painful.

Mr. Mobbs was in a very difficult position. He did not really want the Sixth to know anything of this affair; it was only in desperation that he had thought of sending for Langley and the other boys' knowing.

But he fairly dreaded the Head's knowing. Mr. Mobbs could do much with Dr. Voysey, but he had realised during the last few days that he could not do everything. He had saved Pon & Co. with difficulty. This stirring-up of the scandal in which they had been concerned might cost him his place if it came to the knowledge of the Head.

The feeling of the Form was dead against him. He could count on no one. Pon and Gaddy and Vav, whom he had laboured to save, were useless in this crisis. The rest of the nuts, all but one, had fallen away from them.

Monson minor alone was loyal in this strait. He had few good qualities, but he could stick to a pal, and he had done more in the way of backing up Pon than Pon would ever have done for him.

But as for Drury and Pelham and the rest of the nuts, they went with the stream. After all, they had never profited by Mobby's sympathy as had Pon, and those other three. For a brief time, at least, they felt that Frank Courtney was a worthier leader than Cecil Ponsonby, even if a far inferior "sport"—as they understood that word of diverse meanings.

"I wash my hands of it all!" fumed Mr.

the evil look on his face told the wrath that burned within him.

Long past noon seemed the days when he had lorded it over the whole Form, when such as Smithson and Benson and Yates had trembled at his nod.

Now he was in a tight corner, and they were ready to buy him, as hounds buy the stag who turns to meet them.

There was some dignity about Pon, seeing no better might be, he left his place and went forward. False pride upheld him. Even so he had felt shame, for what he had done. He was a law unto himself, and even though his face still bore the marks of Goggles' fists, there was nothing absurd in the way in which he held his head high.

The Caterpillar approved his bearing. It was not often Cecil Ponsonby collapsed utterly, and when he did Rupert de Courcy always had a queer feeling of disappointment.

"Lucifer, after a turn-up with a heavy weight champion, by gad!" breathed the Caterpillar in the ear of Goggles.

Gaddy had little shame in him. He had some misguided pride, but less than Pon. His comrade was not high, but it could serve him at pinch. Shamelessness and pride, and what of courage he had helped him, and though his cheeks faded, he did not look wholly craven.

But Xava-sore, white-faced, shifty-eyed, cringed behind Gaddy like a coward hound. Least guilty of the three, perhaps—though his guilt was black enough—he looked the guiltiest.

Chiker crooked a finger at Frank Courtney.

"If you'd be so good as to come out 'ere, sir," he said, "an' stand close up to me, you might give me a ower in the ribs whenever I slung 'ard words at that 'eatthen image there!"

He nodded towards Mr. Mobbs. The respect with which he treated Courtney was in marked contrast to his contempt for the Form-master. But Chiker, even at his worst, had had some dim notion of the qualities that make up manhood. And he was at his worst now. He had donned the King's khaki, and he had come to Highcliffe out of some confused notion of seeing justice done.

Chiker was a burly brute, with a rough and coarse and violent, but he looked "a man beside Mr. Mobbs."

Frank Courtney, smiling, came out, and stood beside the visitor. He took no notice of Mr. Mobbs' scowl.

"You're pretty beauties, you three, ain't you?" roared Chiker, pointing a finger at Pon & Co. in scorn. "Oh, I ain't much better myself, I dare say; but I ain't a poor education nor your chances—ave I, now?" played it now down on young Derwent; "an' thought nothin' much of it at the time. 'E wasn't no pal of mine, an' I was game to earn a bit, though I never got paid what I earned."

"If that's your grievance," sneered Ponsonby.

"It ain't—not now! Don't you go offerin' me any of your dirty money, or somebody's face will be gettin' smashed up worse now what it is already—and there ain't much more need of that, I should say."

The Fourth roared, and Pon bit his lip in fury.

(To be continued.)

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Mobbs, fairly choking with rage. "But some of you will suffer for this later on!"

"No one," Chiker appeared greatly alarmed at that dire threat. For some time after this Mr. Mobbs was likely to be rather an ineffective tyrant.

"Now, the you there," roared Chiker.

"Step up in front, and look cheerful, Pon!" chuckled Smithson.

"Are you comin', or ain't you not?" howled the man in khaki.

"Look here, Courtney."

"It's no use appealing to me, Ponsonby," snapped the skipper of the Fourth. "You have brought this on yourself. Mr. Mobbs can't protect you, it seems, and I'm certainly not going to try."

"Step up!" howled Smithson.

"That's it. Stand out, or you'll be ranked out!" shouted Yates.

A dozen of the Form were on their feet. Ponsonby got up. He did not hurry, but

The Editor's Chat.

For Next Wednesday:

"TOM MERRY & CO'S TRIUMPH!"

By Martin Clifford.

This is a story of the old, rollicking, japing type which I know some of my readers prefer to the more modern type they would get tired of the dish if they had it at every meal. The jesting rivalry between St. Jim's and the Grammar School is an old theme which never wears, and the particular story is as good as any of its predecessors telling of the rivalry. That the title indicates who comes out on top in the end does not matter much; it is the process of the lead before the end comes, and Tom Merry & Co. triumph. The whole all the time. Impersonations play their part in the yarn; and paint is applied to faces; and the story of the Grammar School, is shocked by the guile in which some of his pupils return to the home fold after things have happened to them; and Lacy comes in again; and Cardew and Lowther are prominent; and—But I think that is enough.

IN A GOOD CAUSE.

You may have heard before that the Government want fruit-stones and hard nutshells saved.

The war has taught us a good deal about the value of what have in the past been looked upon as waste substances. Here is one more instance.

That you will all be glad to do what you can to help in the collection asked for when you know for what purpose the shells and stones are needed, I am sure. For it is one that must appeal to us all.

They will be converted into charcoal, to be used in respirators for the protection of troops against poison gas assaults.

It has been discovered that the charcoal made from these things has quite an unusual power of absorption.

Fruit is scarce this year, and nuts can hardly be plentiful as usual. But that is all the more reason for taking care that none shall be wasted—not a stone or a shell. It is a middlesome sort of job, the collecting them,

I know; but, after all, one has pockets, and sacks will be found in many shops with placards showing that they are for the collection of stone and nutshells. The Stone-and-Shell Clubs are being formed. No doubt that you will be able to join one of these. Boy Scouts will help. When are they not ready to help? Many of you are Scouts, of course. Here is your chance. Schoolboys and good girls will also give their aid, and there again many of you come in. Date-stones, prune-stones, cocoanut-shells—all are of use.

Tell your friends about this, and where you can deliver your collections, and do what you can to aid so good a cause!

Your Editor