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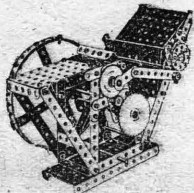


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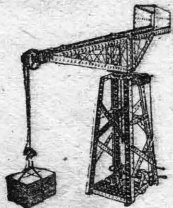
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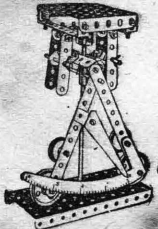
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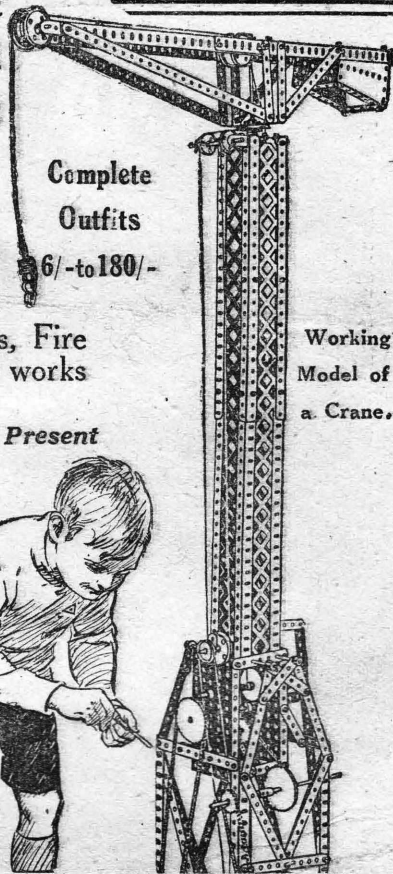
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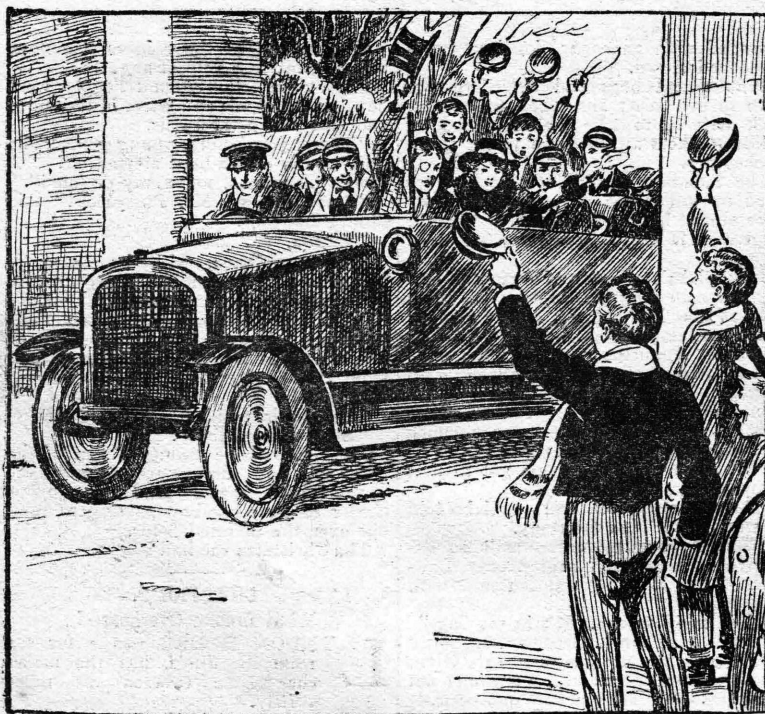
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Tom Merry and Co. away for their Christmas Holiday.

CHAPTER 1. Breaking Up!

"GREAT news, you fellows!" Talbot of the Shell made that announcement from the doorway of Tom Merry's study. There was a letter in Talbot's hand, and a healthy flush on his cheeks.

Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther—the Terrible Three—looked up inquiringly. They were taking their ease in their study, for there was no prep. to be done that evening, owing to the fact that St. Jim's broke up on the morrow for the Christmas vac.

The holiday spirit prevailed everywhere. And discipline, on this last night of the term, was at a discount.

From the dusky quadrangle came the shrill battle-cries of the snow-fighters, as they bombarded the fortresses of their rivals.

In Tom Merry's study the conditions were cosy and cheerful. A log-fire blazed and crackled in the grate, on the bars of which a number of chestnuts were ranged in a row. But the chestnuts were forgotten now, and the eyes of the Terrible Three were fixed upon Talbot.

"Trot out the joyful tidings, old sport!" said Monty Lowther.

"Have you fellows made your arrangements for the vac?" asked Talbot.

"We'd arranged to go to Gussy's place, unless something else turned up," said Tom Merry. "But we don't like poaching on Lord Eastwood's generosity too much. We were there last Christmas, and in the summer as well. And Lord Eastwood will begin to get sick of the sight of our chivvies."

"Then what do you say to coming to my uncle's place?" said Talbot.

"Eh?"

"He's sent me an invitation, and he says I'm to bring as many friends as I like."

"Oh, ripping!" said Manners. "You mean Colonel Lyndon, of course?"

"Yes."

"We'd simply love to come!" said Tom Merry, his eyes sparkling.

"Good!" said Talbot. "We'll call it settled, then. I'll arrange for a char-a-banc to take us over to Lyndon House."

"A char-a-banc?" echoed Monty Lowther. "Why, you're not taking the whole giddy family of us, are you?"

"There will be a dozen, at least," said Talbot. "I shall invite Blake, and Gussy, and Herries, and Digby, and, of course, I can't leave Figgy & Co. out of the picture. Then there will be Bernard Glyn, and Miss Marie, and Crooke."

The Terrible Three made wry faces at the mention of the last name.

"I know what you fellows are thinking," said Talbot. "You're not exactly pining for the society of a black sheep. But Crooke's my cousin, and I'm bound to count him in. Besides, it's the time of peace and goodwill, and all the rest of it; and I've no doubt Crooke will behave decently. If he doesn't, we shall know how to deal with him."

"That's so," said Tom Merry.

At that moment the door of the study opened, and Crooke of the Shell looked in.

"Talk of angels, and you're bound to hear the flapping of their giddy wings!" said Monty Lowther.

Crooke scowled.

"I've been hunting for you high and low, Talbot!" he said.

"Well, here I am," said Talbot good-naturedly. "What do you want?"

"I hear that uncle's invited you to his place for the vac."

Talbot nodded.

"Well, why didn't he invite me?" growled Crooke.

"I'm not good at conundrums," said Talbot. "I expect he thought that one invitation covered both of us. Anyway, you're welcome to come."

"Thanks!" said Crooke bitterly. "The favourite nephew condescends to invite the despised one. Such kindness is touching!"

"Don't be a cad, Crooke!" said Tom Merry sharply. "It's jolly decent of

Our Record- Breaking Story

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CHRISTMAS BOMBSHELL!

Grand Long Yarn
of the Chums of
St. Jim's, by

MARTIN CLIFFORD.

Talbot to invite you, and you ought to be grateful!"

"I am," said Crooke. "I'm simply oozing with gratitude. But Talbot knows as well as I do that I shall have a jolly thin time during the vac. When it comes to currying favour with uncle, Talbot's an easy first, and I'm nowhere!"

"That's enough, Crooke!" said Talbot, his eyes gleaming. "Don't try my patience too far, unless you want to leave this study on your neck!"

Crooke was about to make an angry retort, but he checked himself, and strode out of the study, closing the door with a slam which echoed the length of the Shell passage.

"Charming polite sort of customer, isn't he?" said Monty Lowther. "It's not surprising that he isn't the apple of the colonel's eye."

"I hope, for his own sake, that he plays with a straight bat during the vac," said Talbot. "If he starts any of his caddish tricks, he'll find himself in Queer Street!"

After further conversation with the Terrible Three, Talbot went along to Study No. 6, in the Fourth Form passage, and communicated the good news to Jack Blake & Co., who were transported into the seventh heaven of delight.

"This is weally wippin' of Colonel Lyndon!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I'm suah we shall have a toppin' time! Did you say you were awwagin' for a char-a-banc, Talbot, deah boy?"

"Yes."

"Better make it a pantechnicon, old chap," said Jack Blake. "Gussy will have about a gross of hat-boxes to go on board!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, weally, Blake——"

"You'd better start packing right away, Gussy," said Herries. "If you begin now, and work steadily through the night, you'll be almost ready by ten o'clock to-morrow morning!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

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"I take it you've no objection to my bringing Towser along, Talbot?" Herries went on.

"Sorry, but I've a very rooted objection!" was the reply.

"Heh! heh!" chimed in Arthur Augustus. "Towsah has no wespect whatevah for a fellah's twousahs!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Why, that bulldog of mine's as harmless as a—a conscientious objector!" shouted Herries.

"Then he'd better follow the example of a conchy, and stay behind!" chuckled Jack Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was finally decided, by a majority of four to one, that Towser should remain at St. Jim's, in the care of the house dame.

After soothing the ruffled feelings of Herries, Talbot made his way to the New House, and extended his invitation to Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn.

That cheery trio was delighted beyond measure.

On his way back across the dusky quad, Talbot spotted Bernard Glyn, whose inventive genius was leading him to construct a gigantic snow-man.

"I've been working on this for hours," he explained to Talbot. "And every time I get the figure complete, a volley of snowballs comes along and beheads it!"

Talbot laughed.

"Made your arrangements for the vac yet?" he asked.

"I'm going to my pater's place. It will be ripping, of course. All the same, I'd rather be with a crowd."

"I'm taking a big party to Lyndon House," said Talbot. "Care to come?"

"Rather!" said Glyn joyfully.

"All serene, then. Char-a-banc leaves here at ten o'clock in the morning."

Talbot passed on, leaving Bernard Glyn to make yet another attempt to complete his snow-man. He went up to the sanatorium, where he found Marie Rivers, his girl chum, seated before a blazing fire. She had no patients to attend to—nobody dreamt of falling ill on the eve of the vac—and she was looking rather gloomy. She had arranged to spend the vacation in London, with her father, but John Rivers had been summoned to take up a case on behalf of Scotland Yard, and so the arrangement was squashed.

"Wherefore that worried look, Marie?" asked Talbot.

Marie looked up.

"I've been brooding," she said, with a smile. "I know it's awfully selfish of me, but I've been thinking that my Christmas will be what you would call a wash-out."

"Rats!" said Talbot. "You're coming to Lyndon House with the rest of us. My uncle told me to invite as many friends as I like, and I'm not leaving you out, Marie. You'll come, of course?"

Marie said she would be delighted. And Talbot, his party complete, telephoned to the garage at Wayland and made arrangements for the char-a-banc to be at St. Jim's next morning.

The last evening of the term was a very merry one.

There was a concert in Big Hall, and when it was over there was plenty of speechifying. Even Mr. Ratcliff, the usually sour, ill-tempered master of the New House, unbended to the extent of wishing everybody a really good time. Then Mr. Railton made a happy speech, which was cheered to the echo.

But these scenes were as nothing to the scenes which took place next morning.

The snow-covered quadrangle was

thronged with an eager, jostling, good-humoured crowd.

Trunks and bags and travelling-rugs were in evidence; and when the station hack arrived, to take the first batch of holiday-makers away, there was a storm of cheering.

The members of Talbot's party were lined up under the old archway. They were almost hidden from view by Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's enormous stack of luggage.

Jack Blake's estimate of a gross of hat-boxes was an exaggerated one; but there were at least half a dozen, to say nothing of a tremendous trunk.

Arthur Augustus was not the only junior who was well equipped with luggage.

In addition to his gladstone bag, Bernard Glyn had a large hamper, which excited the curiosity of his schoolfellows.

"What on earth have you got in that hamper, Glyn?" asked Figgins.

"Ask no questions, and you'll be told no whoppers!" was the reply.

"Surely your wardrobe isn't so extensive as Gussy's?" said Monty Lowther. "Not bringing a dozen suits with you, are you?"

"I'm bringing one. It's in my bag."

"Then what's in the hamper?"

"I'll give you six guesses," said Glyn, "and you must promise that if you're not successful you'll ask no more questions."

"Right you are! Is it clothes?"

"No."

"Grub of any sort?"

"No."

"A collection of oddments?"

"No."

"Then I give it up."

"I believe he's smuggled Herries' bulldog into the hamper!" said Manners.

"No, he hasn't," said Herries. "Towser's down in the kitchen."

The contents of Bernard Glyn's hamper remained a mystery. It was only too obvious that the schoolboy inventor had a secret of some sort. But he refused to enlighten his school-fellows as to the nature of it.

Just as ten began to chime from the old clock tower, a large motor char-a-banc swung in at the gateway of St. Jim's.

"Here we are!" said Talbot. "Everybody's here, I take it?"

"All present, sergeant-major!" murmured Monty Lowther.

The char-a-banc rumbled to a halt. Marie Rivers was assisted into the vehicle, and the juniors followed. Willing hands hoisted their luggage up after them.

"Good luck, you fellows!" said Harry Noble. "Mind you take care of Gussy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I twist, Kangawoo," said Arthur Augustus severely, "that I am quite capable of lookin' aftah myself!"

"Hallo! What does Taggy want?" said Tom Merry, as the school porter came shuffling on the scene.

"A tip, you bet!" muttered Fatty Wynn.

"Which I 'opes as 'ow you'll 'ave a good 'ollerday, young gents," said Taggles. "I should like to drink yer 'ealth on Christmas Day."

"That's all right, Taggy," said Monty Lowther. "There's plenty of water in the fountain!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Which I've served you young gents faithfully durin' the term," said Taggles. "An' it's the custom to show some slight rekkernition of my services."

"Quite wight, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus. "Catch!"

And he tossed a two-shilling piece to the porter.

Taggles caught the coin on his nose, and he emitted a yelp of anguish.

Other coins followed, and Taggles went down on his hands and knees in the snow, and scooped up the spoils.

"Thank you kindly, young gents!" he said, as the char-a-banc started off. "A Merry Christmas, an' many of 'em!"

"Same to you, Mr. Pusseyfoot!" said Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The char-a-banc, with its cargo of happy passengers, rumbled away towards the school gates. And the St. Jim's fellows who had not yet taken their departure set up a ringing cheer, which was answered by an even louder cheer from Tom Merry & Co.

"Hurrah!"

"Au revoir, you fellows!"

"See you next term!"

The char-a-banc swung through the gateway, and disappeared down the snow-covered road. And the joyous cheers of its schoolboy passengers rang out over the mantled fields.

The Christmas vac had begun.

CHAPTER 2.

What Croke Overheard!

LYNDON HOUSE was a far cry from St. Jim's, but the motor char-a-banc covered the miles swiftly.

When the fine old Georgian mansion came in sight, the high spirits of the juniors rose even higher.

There was an atmosphere of warmth and welcome about the cheery old place, and Colonel Lyndon's tall, military figure could be seen on the front steps.

But when the juniors clambered down from the char-a-banc, and exchanged greetings with the colonel, they were rather startled to observe that he was looking thin and wan. The last time they had seen him his cheeks had been bronzed, and he was the picture of health.

Talbot commented on the colonel's changed appearance.

"You aren't looking fit, uncle," he said anxiously.

Colonel Lyndon smiled.

"I'm not growing younger," he said. "The years are beginning to tell, and mine has been a strenuous life. But don't let us talk of morbid things. I am delighted to see that you have brought a big party, Reginald."

And the colonel shook hands all round.

It was noticed that he greeted Croke rather coldly; and that was hardly to be wondered at, for the colonel had made inquiries from time to time concerning the progress of his two nephews, and he had learned from the Head that whereas Talbot had done well and was an outstanding figure in class and playing-field, Croke had been involved in more than one shady escapade.

The colonel felt that there was a great difference between the two boys—that Talbot was deserving of praise and encouragement, but that Croke was a ne'er-do-well. Croke had had the advantages of a good upbringing, and Talbot hadn't; and yet Talbot was far and away the better fellow of the two.

Croke saw that he was not being received with open arms, and his was the only scowling face among the whole party as Colonel Lyndon led the way to the dining-room, while the manservants dealt with the juniors' luggage.

Lunch was a merry meal.

Although far from well, the colonel threw himself heart and soul into the task of entertaining his guests. And within a few moments of their arrival everybody felt at home.

When the meal was over the colonel lighted a cigar.

"You must make your own plans for this afternoon, my boys," he said. "Unfortunately, I shall not be able to be with you, as my family lawyer is arriving for an important consultation."

Crooke pricked up his ears.

What did this mean?

Did the important consultation mentioned by the colonel affect him—Crooke—in any way?

"I feel sure you will not be at a loss as to how to enjoy yourselves," said Colonel Lyndon, with a smile.

"No jolly fear, sir!" said Monty Lowther. "The lake's frozen over, I believe?"

"Yes."

"Then we'll go and teach Gussy how to skate!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Lowthah, I wegard that as bein' the suggestion of a cwass ass!" said Arthur Augustus. "You know jolly well that I can skate you off your feet!"

Shortly afterwards, Tom Merry & Co. set out on their skating expedition.

Marie Rivers accompanied them, but Crooke remained behind, partly because he wasn't keen on outdoor sport, but mainly because he wanted to find out what his uncle wanted with the family lawyer.

The latter gentleman arrived in due course, and was shown into the library.

As soon as the butler had ushered the lawyer in, Crooke tiptoed along the corridor, and took up his position outside the door.

He heard the two men exchange a few commonplace. Then Colonel Lyndon remarked:

"I propose to draw up a new will, Winfield. As you know, I am in failing health, and although I may have another ten years of life in front of me, it is as well to be prepared for eventualities."

"Then the present will—the one you drew up a year ago—is not to stand?" said the lawyer.

"No."

The two men continued to converse, but in so low a tone that Crooke could not catch their conversation. He edged closer to the door, and applied his ear to the keyhole in true Baggy Trimble style. He caught the murmur of voices, but could not distinguish what was said.

Presently, however, he heard the colonel thump the table with his fist.

"No!" he exclaimed angrily. "I am quite determined on that point, Winfield. The young rascal shall not inherit a single penny of mine!"

Crooke's heart beat quickly. He could not doubt that he was the object of the colonel's wrath.

The kindly old lawyer began to protest.

"Come, Lyndon, that is rather hard on the boy! It is true that his school career has not been all that it should be. It is true that he has played fast and loose, and sown his wild oats. But that is merely a phase. He will grow out of it, as many others have done. Why, you yourself, Lyndon, when you were at Eton, could hardly be called a paragon of all the virtues!"

"That is true," admitted the colonel.

"Well, then, you should temper justice with mercy. To cut the boy off without a single penny will be the surest way of sending him to the dogs. His character will not be improved by your taking such a step. Rather the reverse."

There was an interval of silence. Then the colonel said:

"Well, what do you suggest, Winfield?"

Crooke tried hard to catch what followed, but he could not hear a word,

for the old lawyer spoke in a very low tone.

But the junior's curiosity was roused to its highest pitch.

He knew what was in the wind. He knew that Colonel Lyndon contemplated drawing up another will, and that, but for the intervention of the lawyer, he would have cut off his errant nephew without a penny.

Even now the colonel might adhere to his original intention, and make no provision whatever for Crooke.

The junior set his teeth. And he resolved, there and then, that he would get a glimpse of the will somehow, and discover if he was to benefit thereby, or if all the colonel's money and property were to go to Talbot.

He heard the colonel ring the bell, and presently the butler and another manservant came on the scene.

Crooke managed to dodge into the room opposite without being seen. He could guess why the servants had been summoned. They were required to witness the signing of the will.

As soon as they passed into the library, Crooke again took up his position outside the door. But he could hear nothing of what transpired. And presently he walked away.

"I expect the will will be put in the safe," he muttered to himself. "I must get hold of it somehow. But how?"

There was only one way. He must go down to the library by night, when the household was asleep.

But the key of the safe would have to be obtained, and it was probably on Colonel Lyndon's person.

This meant that Crooke would have to visit his uncle's room, and go through the pockets of his clothing.

It was a risky undertaking, but the cad of the Shell was not altogether lacking in nerve. And he was intensely curious to know whether he would benefit under his uncle's will, or whether he would be cut off without a penny.

"I'll do it—I'll do it to-night!" he

muttered. "Uncle's a sound sleeper, and once I get hold of the key of the safe the rest will be easy!"

Having formed this resolve, Crooke wandered round the grounds of the mansion until his schoolfellows, flushed with their exertions on the ice, came trooping in to tea.

When It Was Dark!

WHEN bed-time arrived, Crooke found himself allotted to the same bed-room as Bernard Glyn. He was not best pleased

at this, for Glyn was a very cute fellow, and if he discovered his schoolfellow getting up in the middle of the night, he would ask awkward questions.

Crooke had hoped to get a bed-room to himself. But in this he was disappointed.

Glyn chatted quite cheerfully to the cad of the Shell as they undressed; but Crooke was not in a conversational mood. He answered sullenly and in monosyllables.

"Cheerful sort of boulder, aren't you?" said Bernard Glyn, in tones of exasperation. "You can't even say a civil word."

"If you don't like my company," said Crooke, "you can clear out!"

He hoped that Glyn would take him at his word, and decide to spend the night in another bed-room, with a more amiable companion.

But Bernard Glyn did not budge.

There were two beds in the room, and Crooke bagged the one nearest the door. He hoped to be able to slip out during the night without Glyn being any the wiser.

"Ready for the light to go out?" he asked.

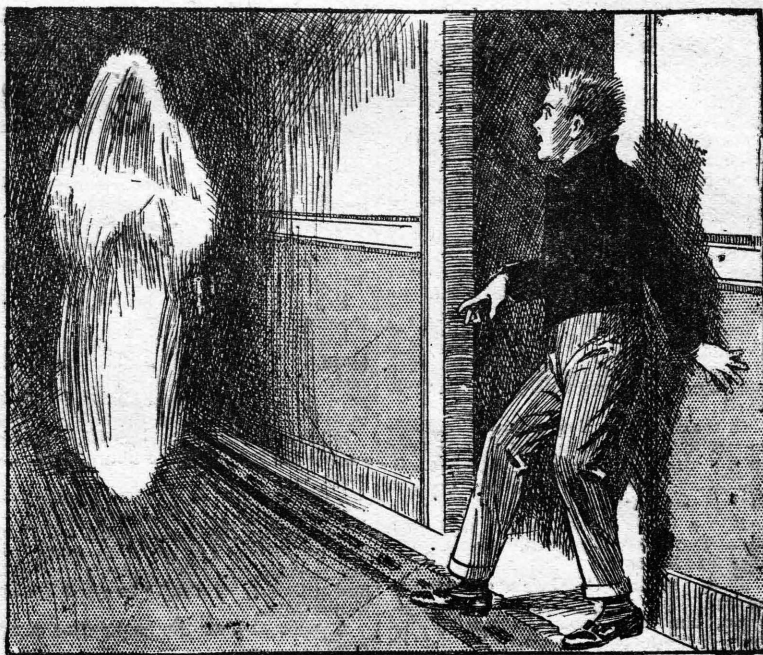
"Yes."

Crooke reached out for the switch, and plunged the room into darkness. Then he got into bed.

"Good-night, Crooke!" said Bernard Glyn.

"Good-night!" growled Crooke.

Within five minutes the cad of the



Coming towards him—it was barely half a dozen yards away—was a figure mantled in white, heading straight for the wretched junior. (See page 7.)

Shell pretended to be asleep. He went to an unmusical snore, but when Glyn threatened to hurl a boot at him he subsided, and contented himself with breathing deeply.

And presently, after he had been feigning slumber for some time, he actually did fall asleep.

He awoke suddenly, and heard a distant clock chime out the hour of midnight. Then he remembered his plans, and sat up in bed.

The room was dark and still. It was very warm and comfortable in bed, but when Crooke was sufficiently wide awake to turn out, he shivered violently. For a chilling gust of wind blew in from without, and a hard frost had set in.

Crooke didn't turn on the electric-light for fear of waking Glyn. But he had a torch in his pocket, and this he brought into use, shading the rays with his hand. Then he uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"My only aunt!"

For Glyn's bed was empty!

The discovery dismayed Crooke, for he could not carry out his scheme while Glyn was up and doing.

He stepped to the door, and peered into the dark corridor. But there was no sign of the fellow who shared his room.

"Hang him!" snarled Crooke. "He's knocked my plans on the head! Wonder where he is?"

It would be unsafe to venture forth in the circumstances, so Crooke got back into bed.

For upwards of half an hour he remained awake, but Glyn did not return. And finally Crooke fell asleep.

When he awoke a shaft of winter sunlight came in at the window.

Bernard Glyn was sitting up in bed, yawning. Crooke regarded him curiously.

"Where did you get to in the night?" he inquired.

"Mind your own bizney!"

"I woke up at midnight and found your bed empty. What were you up to?"

"It's no concern of yours," said Glyn.

"Hallo, there goes the brekker-gong. We shall have to put a jerk in it."

And Crooke's curiosity remained unsatisfied.

All through the day Crooke's thoughts were centred upon the will which his uncle had drawn up. He was determined to get hold of it and study its contents. So eager was he that, had the coast been clear, he would have visited the library in the day-time. But Colonel Lyndon remained in the library for the greater part of the day, and Crooke had no chance.

Tom Merry & Co. saw very little of Crooke that day. And they were glad that he kept out of the way, for they had nothing in common with the cad of the Shell.

In the afternoon they got up a football-match with the village team, and they routed the rustics by five goals to nil. Talbot had been in irresistible form, and he had bagged three goals.

In the evening the juniors went to a concert at the village hall, while Crooke remained indoors.

That night Crooke's opportunity arrived. He stayed awake until midnight, and then, after ascertaining that Glyn was sleeping soundly, he put on some clothes, and stole out of the room. Out in the corridor he paused, with chattering teeth.

It was very dark and very cold, and the stillness of the great house was uncanny.

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Crooke's nerves were none too steady, and he was half-inclined to go back to bed.

But his desire to see the will proved stronger than his fear. He crept noiselessly along the silent corridor, and halted at length outside the door of his uncle's room.

The door was slightly ajar, and the sound of deep breathing came to Crooke's ears.

"He's asleep!" he muttered.

For some moments he could not muster up sufficient nerve to act. And, after all, it required a great deal of nerve to go into his uncle's room by stealth, and purloin the key of the safe.

Supposing the colonel were to wake and find Crooke in the room?

Presently Crooke hit upon a good excuse in the event of this happening. He would tell his uncle that he fancied he had heard burglars, and had therefore come to rouse him.

Finally, Crooke screwed his courage to the sticking-point, and stepped into the room.

He did not need to go far.

The colonel's coat was hanging up behind the door, and with feverish fingers Crooke went through the pockets.

Fortune favoured him, for the second pocket he explored contained a small Yale key—the key of the safe!

CHAPTER 4.

The Thief!

CROOKE'S heart was thumping furiously. He did not remain in his uncle's room a second longer than he could help. Having obtained the key, he hurriedly and noiselessly withdrew, and made his way down the dark staircase.

Although the most difficult part of his undertaking—gaining possession of the key—had been successfully accomplished, Crooke hesitated quite a long time outside the door of the library.

His former nervousness had returned to him. He knew that there would be nobody in the library at that hour of the night, yet could not nerve himself to enter.

Before going to bed Crooke had devoured a volume of ghost stories—scarcely a fitting preparation for the task which confronted him.

His imagination played him tricks as he stood there in the darkness. He fancied he heard the clanking of chains and the swishing of ghostly garments. A great fear laid hold of him, and the perspiration stood out in beads on his forehead.

Presently, however, he pulled himself together.

"What a beastly funk I am!" he muttered. "As if there could possibly be such things as ghosts! Those yarns I read were fictitious—absolutely! There wasn't a single fact in them."

Having reassured himself, Crooke turned the handle of the library door, and entered.

The room was in darkness, save for a subdued, grey light from the window.

Crooke had his electric torch with him, but he did not bring it into action yet. He groped his way towards the safe, and with some difficulty inserted the key in the lock.

A moment later the heavy door swung open.

Crooke had dropped on to one knee in front of the safe, and he was delighted at his success.

Suddenly, however, he heard a sound which utterly unnerved him.

It was a rustling sound, and it seemed to come from the ivy outside the window.

It could not have been caused by the wind, for the atmosphere was still.

The rustling continued, and Crooke fixed his eyes upon the window. But he could see nothing.

Nevertheless, he was scared beyond measure.

His original intention had been to remain in the library and read the will. But now his one desire was to get away from the place as swiftly as possible.

He switched on his electric torch, and its rays illuminated the contents of the safe.

There was a black tin box, similar to a cash-box, on one of the shelves. Crooke promptly pounced upon it.

For a moment he feared that the box might be locked. To his delight, however, the lid flew open at his touch.

An important-looking document was revealed. Crooke unfolded it, and caught sight of the words:

"THE LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT OF ARTHUR WILMSLOW LYNDON!"

The rustling in the ivy continued, and was louder than before.

Crooke did not dare to read any further. He tucked the will into his pocket, replaced the tin box in the safe, and closed the door. But he did not lock it. He snatched the key, and hurried out of the room.

His mission had proved successful, but he was thoroughly terrified. And, in spite of the darkness, he went up the stairs three at a time. He did not breathe freely until he had gained the sanctuary of his own room.

Two minutes later he was in bed, with the will clasped in one hand and his electric torch in the other. He switched on the light, and it showed that Bernard Glyn was still asleep.

Then, with fast-beating heart, Crooke commenced to read the document which had such an important bearing upon his future.

He saw that the major portion of his uncle's money and property was bequeathed to Talbot, and he could not repress a savage exclamation.

There were numerous bequests to servants and to charities, and then Crooke came upon the following clause:

"Should my death occur whilst my nephew, Gerald Crooke, is still at school, I bequeath to him a sum sufficient to pay his term-fee, with an additional sum of two hundred pounds to start him in business when he leaves."

That was all. And but for the intervention of the kindly old lawyer, Crooke would have been cut off altogether.

Instead of being thankful for small mercies, Crooke was furious.

Why should Talbot have all the plums? Why should he inherit the best part of the colonel's wealth, whilst his cousin had next to nothing? It was unfair—monstrously unfair!

"I don't profess to be a plaster saint," muttered Crooke. "I've sown my wild oats pretty freely; but I don't deserve this!"

He crumpled the will almost savagely in his hand. And at that moment Bernard Glyn stirred in his bed, and awoke.

"What are you up to, Crooke?" he asked drowsily.

"Reading," was the sullen reply. "Well, buck up and put that light out. It woke me up."

Crooke slipped the will under the bed-clothes, and switched off the electric torch. He was very anxious not to arouse Glyn's suspicions. For if it was discovered that he had gone downstairs

in the night, and opened Colonel Lyndon's safe, there would be ructions. "What's the time?" inquired Bernard Glyn. "Don't know, and don't care!" growled Croke. "I'm going to sleep!" And he turned over, and drew the bed-clothes about his head. But sleep was not destined to visit his eyes that night!

CHAPTER 5.

Ghosts that Pass in the Night!

CROOKE waited until he concluded that Bernard Glyn was asleep. Then he sat up in bed. "You awake, Glyn?" he asked softly.

There was no response. For the second time that night Croke slipped out of bed, and put on his clothes. He had a difficult mission to perform—equally difficult as the one he had already accomplished.

The will had to be returned to the safe, and the key of the safe had to be replaced in Colonel Lyndon's coat pocket. Croke didn't relish the prospect of going down stairs again. But it had to be done. He dared not leave it till the morning, or Colonel Lyndon would find that his safe had been opened, and awkward inquiries would follow.

Noiselessly the cad of the Shell groped his way to the door, and stepped out into the corridor.

No sooner had he left the room than Bernard Glyn, who had been awake when Croke questioned him, sprang out of bed, and threw a dressing-gown over his pyjamas.

"Wonder what Croke's little game is?" he muttered. "He's up to some shady dodge or other, that's certain. I'll follow him, and give him a scare!"

Glyn chuckled softly, and went out into the passage. Further along the corridor he heard the faint shuffling of Croke's slipped feet.

Opening the door of a small lumber-room opposite his bed-room, Glyn dodged inside, and he was out again in a few seconds, armed with a shrouded figure.

This was a new invention of his—a clockwork ghost.

Unknown to his schoolfellows, Glyn had been busy with the invention for some time. In the small workshop at St. Jim's he had carried out his task undisturbed; and the mechanical ghost, when practically completed, had been packed in the hamper which had excited so much curiosity. The head and limbs had been unscrewed, thereby rendering the packing a simple matter.

On the previous night, when Croke had discovered Glyn's absence from the bed-room, the schoolboy inventor had been perfecting his new device. He had tested it, and had found that it worked admirably. It made a metallic, clanking noise while it was in motion; but this was no drawback, for ghosts were generally reputed to drag clanking chains behind them.

Bernard Glyn hurried down the stairs as Croke's wake, and as he went he wound up the clockwork ghost.

At the foot of the stairs he halted. Faintly through the gloom he could discern the figure of his schoolfellow, going towards the library.

Then, smiling grimly, he set the ghost in motion.

The mechanical figure shot forward at a very unghostlike pace, in hot pursuit of Croke.

When the cad of the Shell reached the door of the library he stopped short.

Clank, clankety, clank!

Croke's heart almost ceased to beat. What was that?

He stood rooted to the floor in terror.



Kneeling on the floor at the foot of the bed was a thick-set, lantern-jawed man—obviously a burglar. "Collar him!" rapped out Tom Merry. (See page 1'.)

Events seemed to be conspiring to unnerve him. First there had been that mysterious rustling in the ivy, outside the library window; and now the silence of the night was broken by a weird, clanking noise.

The clanking drew nearer, and Croke's hair seemed to rise on end.

At that moment he could have sworn that ghosts actually existed, and that this was a visitation of the family ghost of Lyndon House.

He could see nothing as yet. But, with a convulsive movement, he whipped out his electric torch, and pressed the switch.

The next moment Croke started back in terror, and his cry of alarm echoed along the corridor.

Coming towards him—it was barely half a dozen yards away—was a figure mantled in white. It was a tall, ghastly figure, and it clanked along with measured tread, heading straight for the wretched junior!

For a few seconds Croke was utterly incapable of action. He stood as if turned to stone. He was not capable of thinking calmly, or he would have realised that this shrouded figure was merely a toy, and not a phantom.

Those few seconds were a perfect nightmare to Croke.

The white-robed figure came steadily on, with its incessant clank-clank, and when it was almost upon him Croke uttered yet another startled cry, and then he turned and fled.

He came to a flight of stairs which descended to the domestic regions, and he plunged down them as if all the furies of the underworld were in pursuit. He was scared out of his wits, and he dared not look back over his shoulder.

He dashed into the kitchen and shut the door. There was a key in the lock, and he turned it. Then he dropped, half-fainting, into a chair.

"Oh, it was awful—awful!" he groaned. "I've never had such a scare in my life!"

He strained his ears to listen. But the clanking noise was no longer audible.

But at least half an hour elapsed before Croke dared venture out of the kitchen.

And during that interval, Bernard Glyn had retrieved his clockwork ghost and restored it to the lumber-room. Then he went back to bed, chuckling. He meant to stay awake until Croke returned, and then question him on the subject of his midnight prowling. But he was very drowsy, and he fell asleep before Croke got back.

As for the cad of the Shell, he still had the colonel's will and the key of the safe in his possession. But he hadn't the pluck to return them just then. He surmised that the ghostly figure he had seen had gone into the library, and he would not have followed for a whole term's pocket-money. He rushed past the library-door in frenzied haste, and then bounded up the stairs and entered his room.

To his relief he saw that Bernard Glyn was asleep. He had been afraid that his cries of terror might have aroused the household; but apparently Tom Merry & Co. had not been disturbed, for the place was hushed and silent.

Croke turned in, but he didn't sleep a wink.

"I can't put the will back to-night," he muttered. "I simply can't go downstairs again! I might meet that—that awful thing!"

The only thing to be done was to seek an early opportunity, on the morrow, of replacing the will. Bitterly he repented ever having tampered with it. But it was now too late for regrets.

The long hours dragged slowly by, and at length the first grey gleam of dawn dispersed the shadows.

Croke stepped out of bed, and, crossing to the window, he followed the example of Good King Wenceslaus, and looked out.

A snowy landscape greeted his gaze. The broad park lands which stretched away as far as the eye could see were mantled in white. Icicles glittered upon the branches of the trees, and there was frost on the window-panes. It was seasonable weather, and Tom Merry & Co., who had arranged a tobogganing expedition, would fairly revel in it. But it had no delights for Gerald Croke.

He glanced at his watch, and the hour was later than he thought.

"I must get a move on!" he muttered. Bernard Glyn was still asleep. And Croke, who had passed a sleepless night, and whose face was pale and haggard, envied his schoolfellow.

As he stepped out into the corridor, he knew that he was not the only fellow astray. For he heard the shrill tones of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"I've lost my collah-stud! Lowthah, you feahful wottah, I believe you've bagged it!"

"Go hon!" chuckled Monty Lowther. "I will administrah a feahful thwashin'—"

—said the swell of St. Jim's. But Croke didn't wait to hear more. He passed on down the stairs.

Now was his chance to return the will to the safe. If he failed to take advantage of it, he might not get another.

On reaching the foot of the stairs, however, he found that his entrance to the library was barred.

A servant was polishing the linoleum outside the door, and she was taking her time over it. It would be impossible for Croke to go into the library whilst she was there.

Croke's brain worked swiftly. He must overcome this obstacle somehow, he reflected.

Presently he advanced towards the maid.

"Will you do me a favour, Janet?" he said.

"Cert'nly, Master Croke."

"Go out and see if you can see any sign of the postman. I'm expecting an important letter."

"Postman won't be 'ere for another hour, sir," said Janet.

"Well, I wish you'd go and look, just to make sure."

"Very well, Master Croke."

To the junior's dismay, Janet did not go to the front door, as he had hoped. Instead, she entered the library, and crossed over to the window.

"You won't see him from there," said Croke.

"I can get a clear view of the drive from 'ere, Master Croke," was the reply. "An' the postman ain't comin'."

Croke could cheerfully have seized the girl by the shoulders and shaken her. He wanted to get her out of the way, but his subterfuge had proved futile.

He was trying to think of another plan, when Tom Merry & Co. came clattering down the stairs.

They were a healthy, happy, good-humoured crowd. And in their present mood they felt favourably disposed even to Croke.

"Come along, Croke!" said Tom Merry, taking the cad of the Shell by the arm.

"Where?"

"We're going to climb Steephill Down, and put in some tobogganing before brekker."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus, who was perfectly happy now that he had recovered his collar-stud. "You simply must come along, Cwooke. You've been moonin' an' mopin' evah since we came heah, an' we're goin' to take you out of yourself."

"Hear, hear!" said Talbot. "Be a sport, Croke, and come along!"

"He's got no choice in the matter," said Jack Blake. "If he doesn't come willingly, we'll bring him along by the scruff of the neck!"

"I—I'm not coming!" panted Croke. "Your mistake. You are!" said Blake cheerfully.

And Croke was marched off, willy-nilly, with the rest of the party.

He was fuming and furious, for the will was still in his pocket, likewise the

key of the safe. And now he would have to wait until after breakfast before he could return them.

Meanwhile, supposing Colonel Lyndon discovered that his safe had been opened during the night, and the will taken? Croke shuddered at the thought.

A mile's brisk walking brought the juniors to the lofty eminence known as Steephill Down.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was in charge of the toboggan, and he insisted on making the first descent. He rather regretted his insistence afterwards, for the toboggan overturned before it was half-way down the slope, and the swell of St. Jim's rolled the remainder of the distance. When he managed to sort himself out and scramble to his feet, he resembled a snowman.

A roar of laughter came from above. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"This reminds me of that poem we had to learn the other day," said Monty Lowther.

"On Linden, when the sun was low,
All bloodless lay the untrodden snow,
And dark as winter was the flow
Of Iser, rolling rapidly."

"Why does it remind you of that, fathead?" asked Tom Merry.

Monty Lowther chuckled.

"Didn't I hear Gussy say just now, 'Tis I, sir, rolling rapidly!'"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus flourished his fist at the hilarious juniors on the top of the slope; then he commenced to climb, hauling the toboggan up after him.

For upwards of an hour Tom Merry & Co. enjoyed themselves to the full.

But Croke did not share their enjoyment. He was suffering agonies of mind. He almost feared to go back to Lyndon House, for he felt certain that Colonel Lyndon would have discovered, by this time, the absence of the will. And he felt that he could not face the inquiries which would surely follow.

However, he did go back. He had no alternative, for Jack Blake took one of his arms, and Digby the other.

"Buck up, Croke!" said Blake.

"Let's see you smile! Dash it all, anyone would think you were staying at a reformatory, instead of at a country mansion!"

Croke uttered no word all the way back. He felt, as he walked between Blake and Digby, like Eugene Aram must have felt when he walked between his two warders, with gyves upon his wrists.

Something seemed to tell him that the will had been missed; and his heart was like lead when the gates of Lyndon House came in sight.

CHAPTER 6.

Startling News!

WHEN the juniors trooped in to breakfast, they found Colonel Lyndon looking very pale and worried. They could see at a glance that something was seriously amiss, and although their host greeted them cheerfully, he was unable to disguise the fact that he was sorely troubled.

Tom Merry & Co. asked no questions. They simply waited for the colonel to unburden himself. And this he did, directly the meal was over.

"My boys," he announced, "I have made a most startling discovery!"

The juniors looked up inquiringly. Croke fidgeted uneasily in his seat.

"During the night," the colonel went on, "the key of my safe was appropriated from my coat pocket."

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

And the rest of the juniors looked gravely alarmed.

"On entering the library this morning," said Colonel Lyndon, "I found the door of the safe wide open, and I knew at once that a nocturnal marauder had been at work."

"My hat!"

"On investigation," the colonel went on, "I found that a most important document was missing"—Croke's fingers nervously clutched the edge of the table—"and also that a considerable quantity of notes and bonds had been stolen."

Croke gave a jump.

He had been prepared for the first part of the colonel's statement, but not for the second.

Notes and bonds stolen! Then there must have been another night marauder besides himself.

Croke remembered the rustling he had heard in the ivy, outside the library window. That could have meant only one thing. A burglar had been in the act of breaking into the house!

"I have been the victim of a wholesale robbery, my boys," Colonel Lyndon went on. "And I will not deny that the affair has hit me very hard—very hard indeed!"

"It—it's awful, sir!" said Tom Merry.

"Appallin', bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus. "Have you any ideah who the thief was, sir?"

Croke hung upon the colonel's reply. When it came, he drew a deep, almost a sobbing breath of relief.

"I have not the faintest notion, D'Arcy!" said the colonel.

"It wouldn't have been one of your guests, uncle?" said Talbot.

"No, no! It is unthinkable that I have been robbed by anybody here. The only conclusion one can come to is that a burglar broke into the house."

Bernard Glyn darted a searching glance at Croke.

The cad of the Shell looked as if he were going to faint. The colour had ebbed from his cheeks, and his hands were trembling.

Croke was suffering all the agonies of an inferno at that moment.

Supposing suspicion fell upon him, and he was searched? The will would be discovered, likewise the key of the safe, and it would be thought that he had also taken the notes and bonds which the colonel said were missing.

It was a terrible prospect. And if such a search were made, disgrace and ruin would follow in its train. Croke would be hounded out of the house—perhaps sent to prison.

The cad of the Shell felt Glyn's eyes upon him, and he lowered his own. He could not meet his schoolfellow's searching glance.

The rest of the juniors were condoling with Colonel Lyndon on his misfortune.

"I suggest, sir," said Kerr, "that you engage a detective. The burglar's had a good start, but I think a cute 'tec would soon run him to earth!"

"Hear, hear!" said Figgins.

Croke shivered. He didn't relish the idea of a detective coming to Lyndon House.

"I am afraid I must do as you say, Kerr," said the colonel.

Then, turning to Marie Rivers, he added:

"I understand, Marie, that your father is a representative of Scotland Yard?"

Marie nodded.

"I'm afraid he will be unable to give his services in this case," she said. "He has been called away to Cornwall, and I expect he will be there until after Christmas!"

"That is unfortunate," said the colonel.

"What about Ferrers Locke, uncle?"

suggested Talbot. "He's one of the finest sleuths in the country!"

"Yes, rather!" said Tom Merry. "Ferrers Locke will clear up the affair in a brace of shakes!"

"I will get into communication with him," said the colonel, "and ask him to come down as quickly as possible. If I put through a trunk call to London, I have no doubt he will arrive this morning."

Colonel Lyndon's decision made Crokee feel even more uneasy. He well knew the penetrative powers of Ferrers Locke, and he dreaded the arrival of the great detective.

Searching questions would be asked, and Crokee felt certain that suspicion would rest upon him.

And what then? Why, he would be searched, and the will and the key of the safe would be brought to light.

He must get rid of them, he told himself. It was too late now to return them, for the library would be occupied all day. But he could hide them. Yes, that was it. He would conceal them in some out-of-the-way place where it was not likely that they would be found.

Colonel Lyndon left the dining-room in order to telephone to Ferrers Locke. And the juniors dispersed, excitedly discussing the affair of the burglary.

As Crokee was passing through the hall, a hand fell upon his shoulder. He spun round with a start, and found himself confronted by Bernard Glyn.

"I want to ask you a question, Crokee," said the schoolboy inventor.

"G-go ahead!" said Crokee nervously. "What were you doing out of bed last night?"

The question startled the cad of the Shell, for he had presumed that Bernard Glyn knew nothing of his movements in the night.

"I'm waiting!" said Glyn grimly. "You got up in the middle of the night and went downstairs. It's useless to deny it, because I saw you. I want to know what you were up to!"

Bernard Glyn spoke in low but insistent tones. And Crokee knew that he would have to frame some sort of an answer, or Glyn would raise Cain about the affair.

"I—I had an attack of toothache!" he stammered. "It was simply awful! I woke up with it, and couldn't get to sleep again. So I went downstairs to the kitchen in the hope of finding some toothache balm."

It was a feeble explanation, and Crokee realised the lameless of it, even as he spoke.

Bernard Glyn eyed him steadily.

"Are you telling me the truth, Crokee?"

"Of course!"

"You're sure you didn't go into the library?"

"Quite sure!" said Crokee, with a fine show of indignation. "Why should I want to go into the library? You don't suppose I should pinch the notes and bonds and the will, do you?"

"The will?" echoed Bernard Glyn sharply. "How do you know it was a will that was taken? Colonel Lyndon merely said it was an important document."

Crokee bit his lip. He realised that he had said too much.

"I—I just guessed," he stammered. "Will you assure me, honour bright, that you know nothing of this business?"

"I know nothing!" said Crokee earnestly. "I swear it!"

To his infinite relief, Bernard Glyn accepted his assurance.

"I think you ought to apologise for ever hinting at such a thing!" said Crokee, growing bolder. "As if I should rob my uncle!"

"Well, you must admit your actions seemed jolly suspicious to a looker-on," replied Bernard Glyn.

And he walked away.

During the morning, Crokee endeavoured to carry out his intention of hiding the will and the key.

Everywhere he went, however, he seemed to be shadowed. Either accidentally or by design, Tom Merry & Co. did not let him out of their sight.

Did they suspect anything? Crokee thought. And his uneasiness increased.

Shortly before midday, Ferrers Locke arrived, and was shown into the library.

Crokee was thoroughly alarmed by this time. For he well knew that the detective would move heaven and earth to discover what had happened during the night.

The cad of the Shell had had no opportunity of returning the will, nor of hiding it. And if Ferrers Locke were to suspect him and have him searched—

The thought was terrible.

When lunch-time arrived, Ferrers Locke sat down to table with the guests. Indeed, Colonel Lyndon had insisted upon treating him as a guest while he remained at the house.

"Do you think you will be able to clear the case up, Locke?" asked the colonel. The detective looked dubious.

"It presents difficulties," he said. "Owing to the heavy fall of snow in the night, any footmarks which might have been made beneath the library window have been obliterated."

"But you think it was a burglar—someone from outside the house, I mean?"

"Yes, I do! It is inconceivable that one of your guests should have robbed you."

"Oh, quite! But I merely wanted your assurance!"

Crokee looked relieved. Evidently the detective's suspicions did not turn in his direction.

All the same, the cad of the Shell felt very uncomfortable. The will and the key seemed to be burning holes in his pocket. He longed to get away to some quiet place where he could bury them in the earth. He would then be easier in his mind. He was running a grave risk so long as they remained in his pocket, for if they were discovered, everybody would jump to the conclusion that he had not only purloined the will, but the notes and bonds into the bargain.

There was further conversation between Colonel Lyndon and Ferrers Locke. But Crokee was seated too far away from them to hear what was said.

But he could tell, from the resolute expression on Ferrers Locke's face, that the detective meant to do all in his power to solve the mystery of the burglary.

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CHAPTER 7.

Talbot to the Rescue!

CROOKE'S opportunity for disposing of the will and the key arrived after lunch.

He left the house when the meal was over, and made his way with rapid strides across the estate.

Glancing back over his shoulder, he saw that for the first time that day his movements were not under observation. Tom Merry & Co. had retired to the drawing-room for a chess tournament, and Crokee was evidently far from their thoughts.

The junior halted at length by a secluded lake.

Here was an ideal spot, he reflected, for carrying out his design.

The lake was frozen over, but he could soon puncture a hole in the ice. Then he could wrap Colonel Lyndon's will round a stone, and drop it into the aperture. It would thus sink to the bottom of the lake, and be lost for ever. The same with the key of the safe.

It was a perfectly simple plan, and yet Crokee hesitated for quite a long time before he attempted to put it into operation. Perhaps he realised the gravity of the proceedings, for it was no light offence to deliberately dispose of a highly important document.

"Still, it'll be out of the way," he muttered. "I can't possibly carry the beastly thing about with me any longer! They'd be certain to find out I had it."

After a great deal of deliberation, and a struggle with his conscience—for even Crokee possessed a conscience—he went into the boathouse near by and obtained a boathook, with which he intended to make a cavity in the ice.

His fingers trembled as they grasped the implement. Simple though the task was, it was as much as he could do to nerve himself to carry it out.

At last, however, after a furtive glance round, he stepped on to the ice and walked out to the middle of the lake. Then he proceeded to bore a hole by means of the hook.

He struck the ice so recklessly that it very nearly gave way close to where he was standing.

He had made a much bigger hole than he had intended to make. Still, it didn't matter.

"Now for a stone!" he muttered.

There was one lying on the ice, a few yards away. Crokee picked it up; then he drew out the will and unfolded it.

Before he could proceed further, a voice hailed him from the bank.

"What are you up to, Crokee?"

The junior spun round with a guilty start. And then he saw Talbot coming towards him across the ice.

Had Crokee retained his presence of mind, he would have hurled the will into the lake before his schoolfellow could prevent him. But he was thrown into a state of utter confusion by the sudden arrival of Talbot, whom he had supposed to be playing chess at Lyndon House.

Crokee was too bewildered, in fact, to slip the document into his pocket. He stood clutching it in his hand, and he looked as guilty as anybody could possibly look.

"I saw you make that hole in the ice," said Talbot breathlessly, as he came up. "What's the little game?"

"I—I—" stammered Crokee helplessly.

"You were going to chuck something into the lake, weren't you?"

"Nunno!"

"But you were!" persisted Talbot. "What have you got there?"

Crokee clutched the will almost convulsively.

"Mind your own bizney!" he said sullenly.

"You're up to some shady trick or other," said Talbot. "And I mean to find out what it is!"

So saying, he caught Crooke's wrist in a crushing grip.

"Leggo!" gasped the cad of the Shell. But Talbot was grimly determined. He forced Crooke to relax his hold on the will, and the next moment it was in his possession.

He glanced curiously at the document. "The last will and testament of Arthur Wilmslow Lyndon—" he read.

And then he gave a violent start. "Why—my hat! This is uncle's will! How did it come into your hands?"

Crooke saw that the game was up, and that denial would be futile. So he decided to tell Talbot the full facts of the case, and urge him not to split.

"Come into the boathouse," he said hoarsely, "and I'll tell you everything!"

Talbot followed wonderingly. And when they were inside the little shanty, Crooke told his story. He spoke freely, and Talbot had no difficulty in seeing that he also spoke the truth.

"You remember that on the first day we were here, uncle said he was having an important consultation with his lawyer?" said Crooke.

Talbot nodded.

"Well, I was jolly curious to know what they were going to jaw about. So I stayed indoors while the rest of you went skating, and listened outside the library door. Oh, yes, I know it was a rotten, mean thing to do, but my curiosity got the better of me. I heard uncle say he was going to draw up a fresh will, and also that he intended to cut me off without a penny. Then the lawyer chipped in, and told him not to be too hard on me, and uncle seemed to relent. But I couldn't hear much more of their conversation, and I was simply dying to know what was in the will."

Crooke paused.

"Go on!" said Talbot quietly.

"Well, I made up my mind to get hold of the will, somehow. I couldn't manage it that night because Glyn was awake, and I didn't want to arouse his suspicions. But the next night my chance came. I went along to uncle's bedroom, and took the key of the safe from his pocket. Then I went down to the library, and—"

"You rifled the safe?" said Talbot, looking very grave.

"No, no! I simply took the will out of a tin-box. I didn't touch anything else, I swear! Surely you don't think that I made off with the—the notes and bonds?"

Talbot looked long and searchingly at Crooke.

"No, I don't," he said at length. "You're several sorts of a rotter, but you're not a thief!"

"Thanks!" muttered Crooke gratefully. "I'm glad you believe that, anyway. How the notes and bonds came to disappear, I don't know. But while I was at the safe, getting the will, I heard a rustling in the ivy outside the window."

"The wind?" suggested Talbot.

"No, it couldn't have been. There wasn't a breath of wind that night. It sounded just as if somebody was climbing up the ivy. I suppose it must have been a gidly burglar!"

"More than likely," said Talbot. "Did you leave the door of the safe unlocked?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's not difficult to see what happened. After you had left the library, the burglar got in through the

window and looted the safe. He got away with a good haul, too."

"But the other fellows would never believe it was a burglar," said Crooke. "If they knew that I'd taken the will, they'd think that I stole the notes and bonds at the same time. So you won't tell them, will you? Promise me you won't breathe a word of this to anybody!"

"But the facts ought to be made known," said Talbot. "After all, you've not committed theft. All you did was to take the will, with the intention of putting it back."

"Yes, but that in itself is quite enough to get me kicked out of the house," said Crooke. "Do you think uncle would let me stay in the place a moment longer, if he knew? Of course not! He'd send me packing, and he'd think I was guilty of stealing all his money! If you breathe so much as a whisper about this, Talbot, you'll ruin me! Don't tell them—don't tell a soul! Promise me—promise me!"

Crooke spoke in tones of passionate pleading. His face was haggard, his limbs were trembling. And Talbot knew that the wretched fellow must have suffered agonies of mind. He felt really sorry for Crooke, for he could guess that the cad of the Shell had been practically cut off by his uncle, whilst he—Talbot—would benefit enormously by the will.

"Promise!" repeated Crooke.

"All serene!" said Talbot slowly. "I promise not to repeat this conversation to a soul."

"You—you're a brick!" said Crooke huskily. "I know I deserve to be booted out of the place. I know I oughtn't to have tampered with the will, but my curiosity was altogether too strong. I couldn't curb it."

"But why were you going to chuck the will into the lake?" asked Talbot.

"Because there was no chance to put it back in the safe. I tried to return it in the night, but when I got to the library door the—the family ghost swooped down on me, and I scooted!"

Talbot stared at the speaker in blank amazement.

"The family ghost?" he echoed.

"What rot is this?"

"It isn't rot! I distinctly saw a ghost coming along the corridor. It was making a horrible clanking row, and it—sent cold shivers down my spine! I tell you, it was ghastly!"

And Crooke shuddered at the recollection.

Talbot laughed outright.

"Your imagination was playing you tricks," he said.

"No, it wasn't. I know how absurd my yarn must sound in the daytime, but it's true enough."

"So you scooted without replacing the will?"

"Yes, I bunked down into the kitchen, and stayed there for about half an hour. Then I went to bed. I didn't have the nerve to go near the library again. And this morning, when I might have had a chance to put the will back, you fellows came along and insisted on my going tobogganing with you."

"Then you've carried the will about with you all the time?"

Crooke nodded.

"The will and the key of the safe," he said. "I knew that I daren't carry them about much longer, so I decided to chuck them in the lake."

"A mad thing to do!" said Talbot.

"But what else could I do? It's hopeless to think of putting them back now—now that Ferrers Locke's in the house."

"They shall be put back, I promise you," said Talbot.

Crooke looked up eagerly.

"How?" he exclaimed.

"You leave it to me. Hand over the key of the safe!"

Crooke did so, and Talbot slipped it into his pocket, together with the will.

"This—is this awfully decent of you!" faltered Crooke. "But I don't see how you're going to wangle it."

"I shall return the will to the safe to-night and the key to uncle's room. I only wish I was in a position to return the notes and bonds as well! This affair has hit uncle jolly hard."

"I expect the burglar's well away by this time!" said Crooke. "It'll be almost impossible to trace him, because a fresh fall of snow covered up his tracks. But look here, Talbot! Supposing you're caught in the act of replacing those things? You won't give me away, will you?"

Talbot could not help feeling contemptuous towards the cad of the Shell, whose one consideration seemed to be to save his skin.

"I've given you my promise," he said, "and I shall keep it! If I'm caught I sha'n't implicate you in any way."

"You're a brick!" said Crooke again. "You're taking on a jolly risky job, you know. Keep your eyes open for Ferrers Locke—and the ghost!"

Talbot laughed.

"The ghost doesn't worry me," he said. "I'd rather meet a clanking spectre than Ferrers Locke. He's the danger. But I sha'n't carry out the job until three in the morning, and I hope Locke will be in bed and asleep then. Come along! We'd better be getting back to the house."

They walked back together. A great load had been removed from Crooke's mind. The will and the key of the safe had changed hands, and nobody was likely to suspect that they were in Talbot's possession. And if Talbot played his cards carefully all would be well.

As for Talbot, he had promised to help his wayward schoolfellow, and he had also promised not to betray him.

But he little dreamed, as he tramped back with Crooke through the snow, how much those promises were to cost him.

CHAPTER 8.

Cast Out in Disgrace!

GERALD CROOKE slept soundly that night.

He had implicit faith in Talbot, and before he closed his eyes he told himself that the will would be replaced in the safe before dawn; and that no one would suspect that it had ever been in his possession.

As for Talbot, he had a long vigil in front of him. But the first part of it passed pleasantly enough, for he shared a large room with the Terrible Three and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and that cheerful quartette didn't go to sleep until after midnight. They had been discussing all manner of things, but the main topic of conversation was, of course, the amazing burglary at Lyndon House.

"Good-night, deah boys!" murmured Arthur Augustus.

And he promptly went to sleep. The Terrible Three were not long in following his example.

Talbot propped himself up on the pillows, and lay staring into the darkness.

He would have liked to carry out his mission there and then, but he dared not, for he knew that Colonel Lyndon and Ferrers Locke were sitting up late, smoking and chatting.

Presently he got out of bed, and, quietly opening the window, he glanced out.

Overhead, myriads of stars shimmered in the sky. It was a keen, frosty night. The tall, snow-covered trees on the estate stood like ghostly sentinels.

Talbot glanced downwards, and he saw a beam of light stretching out across the snow. He knew that the light came from the library window.

"They haven't gone to bed yet," he muttered. "Wish they'd buck up!"

He crept back to his own bed, and lay, half-dozing, for an hour or more.

Then, rousing himself with an effort, he again went over to the window and glanced out.

All was dark down below, and Talbot concluded that the colonel and the detective had retired for the night.

"The coast is clear," he murmured. "Still, I'll wait another hour. One can't be too careful when Ferrers Locke's about."

It was between two and three o'clock when Talbot rose again.

The night was so intensely cold that the junior donned all his clothes, and his greatcoat in addition. The task he had set himself to accomplish might occupy him some time, and he didn't want to get his death of cold in the process.

The will was tucked in his breast-pocket, and in the same pocket nestled the key of the safe.

Talbot made sure that his schoolfellows were fast asleep, then he made his way cautiously into the corridor.

The great house was as silent as the grave.

Talbot paused for fully a minute, and listened intently. But no sound came to his ears.

He had his boots on, but they were rubber-soled, and he made no noise as he groped his way along the corridor to the landing.

Talbot had an electric-torch, but he didn't intend to use it until he was inside the library.

It was dark as pitch on the staircase. But Talbot had counted the number of steps in the daytime, and he made no false move.

On reaching the foot of the stairs he again paused, and he fancied he heard the sound of a door being opened up on the first floor.

His heart beat quickly, and he expected to hear the sound of footsteps. But all was silent.

"My imagination, I suppose?" he muttered. "I'm getting as bad as Crooke! Wonder if I shall meet the family ghost?"

Pulling himself together, he made his way towards the library.

The scent of cigar smoke greeted his nostrils as he entered. It seemed as if the room had been occupied quite recently. But Talbot knew that his uncle and Ferrers Locke must have retired over an hour since.

Closing the door carefully behind him, he switched on his electric-torch, and crossed over to the safe.

It was unlocked, and it was the work of a second to swing the heavy door open.

Talbot took the will from his pocket. Although the document had been in his possession for some hours he had not read it. For one thing, it would not have been safe, and it would also seem like prying.

But now, as he fingered the will, Talbot became possessed of a keen desire to become acquainted with its contents. After all, the desire was natural, for was not he the person most intimately concerned?

He unfolded the document, and the rays of his electric-torch illuminated Colonel Lyndon's bold, clear handwriting.

Kneeling before the safe, Talbot started to read.

He had barely perused a couple of paragraphs, however, when there came a dramatic interruption.

The door opened suddenly, and a figure in a dressing-gown came briskly into the room.

It was Ferrers Locke!

Talbot seemed too paralysed either to move or speak. He stared helplessly at the detective, who looked very grim.

It was Ferrers Locke who broke the painful silence.

"Talbot, what are you doing here?"

The junior tried to speak, but his tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth.

"Perhaps my question was superfluous," said the detective. "It is only too obvious what you are doing here. You were reading your uncle's will, which you were about to return to the safe. Am I right?"

Talbot nodded. He was still too dazed to speak.

"You doubtless have the key of the safe in your possession, also?" said Ferrers Locke.

Talbot again nodded.

"Ah! And where are the notes and bonds?"

The junior was at last spurred to action, as this last question was fired at him. He sprang to his feet, his eyes gleaming.

"I don't know! I don't know anything about them!" he exclaimed. "Dash it all, man, you surely don't imagine that I'm a thief, that I robbed my uncle?"

"There is no need to imagine anything of the sort," said the detective dryly. "It is a fact!"

The colour mounted to Talbot's cheeks. He seemed to be fighting to keep himself under control.

"You do not deny, I suppose, that you came here last night?" said Ferrers Locke.

"I do deny it!" said Talbot hotly.

"Then would you mind explaining how the will came into your possession?"

Talbot was silent. He had given his word that he would not implicate Crooke in any way. And Talbot's word was his bond.

Ferrers Locke took the junior's silence to mean guilt.

"You stand self-condemned!" he said. "You have no explanation to offer."

"I tell you I know nothing of last night's robbery!" protested Talbot.

The detective shrugged his shoulders.

"I will summon Colonel Lyndon," he said. "And if you are wise you will make a clean breast of everything, and throw yourself upon his mercy."

So saying, Ferrers Locke pressed a bell, which communicated with the colonel's bed-room.

Talbot heard its muffled peal overhead.

No further word passed between the junior and the detective whilst they awaited Colonel Lyndon's arrival.

Talbot's tongue was tied. Whatever happened, he told himself, he must not give Crooke away.

He cherished the hope that his uncle, when he came on the scene, would scorn the suggestion that his nephew was a thief. Talbot did not fully realise how black the case looked against him.

The colonel arrived at length—a startled figure in dressing-gown and slippers. He stared at Ferrers Locke, and then at his nephew, in blank amazement.

"What does this mean, Locke?" he exclaimed.

"It means, sir, that my work here is finished. The matter of last night's



The man seemed to mesmerise Talbot as he spoke, and the junior's power of resistance grew feebler and feebler. "Come, Toff! Make your choice!" Talbot was about to make his fateful reply, when somebody answered for him. "He will not!" came an exclamation in ringing tones. And the head of Gerald Crooke bobbed up over the partition. (See page 1.)

robbery has now been brought to an issue."

"What!"

"I regret to state that your nephew—Talbot here—was responsible for the outrage."

The colonel reeled as if he had been struck.

"It's not true, uncle!" exclaimed Talbot.

Colonel Lyndon recovered himself with an effort, and turned to Ferrers Locke.

"Tell me the details," he said.

"Ten minutes ago," said the detective, "I discovered Talbot in the act of reading your will. He admitted that he had come here for the purpose of returning it to the safe. Obviously, he must have taken the document last night. He also has the key of the safe in his possession. Whether the notes and bonds are on his person, or whether he has disposed of them, I can't say. But if you wish, colonel, I will search him."

Talbot had been watching his uncle's face whilst the detective was speaking; and, to his horror, he saw that the colonel believed him guilty. There was no mistaking the expression on the old soldier's countenance.

"What have you to say?" asked the colonel.

Talbot met his uncle's stern gaze unflinchingly.

"As I've already explained to Mr. Locke, I know nothing of last night's robbery!" he said.

"I cannot believe you," was the cold reply. "The key of the safe is in your possession, and you could only have got it by visiting my bed-room last night and ransacking my pockets. Having obtained the key, you came down here, unlocked my safe, and carried out a wholesale robbery. Come! It is futile to deny it!"

"But I do deny it, uncle!" persisted Talbot earnestly.

The colonel, however, remained unconvinced. He beckoned to Ferrers Locke. "Kindly search him, Locke, and ascertain if any of the notes or bonds are in his possession."

Talbot offered no resistance as the detective came towards him. He submitted quietly to the search.

Apart from the key of the safe, however, Ferrers Locke found nothing of importance.

"The notes and bonds have doubtless been disposed of, sir," he said. "Naturally, your nephew would be too cute to keep them on his person."

Colonel Lyndon seemed scarcely to hear. He paced up and down in a state of great agitation.

"This is a great blow to me!" he muttered. "A crushing blow! And yet," he added, looking at Talbot, "perhaps I ought not to be surprised, bearing in mind your early upbringing. You were raised and reared among a gang of cracksmen and lawbreakers, who had no conception of honour. You reformed—you became a decent member of society—you rose high in my estimation; but it is evident that your reformation was never meant to be permanent. What is bred in the bone cannot easily be stamped out. You have descended to the lowest depths to which it is possible for anyone to sink. You have deceived and robbed me—your uncle! It is shameful—it is monstrous!"

Talbot made no reply to the colonel's vehement outburst. He realised that nothing he could say would shake his uncle's opinion.

Both these men thought him guilty; both regarded him with loathing and contempt. He could only clear himself

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at the expense of Croke; and this he resolutely declined to do.

What was to happen now? He would be given marching orders, he supposed. His uncle might even go so far as to have him arrested, and let the law deal with him.

There was a long and painful silence in the library of Lyndon House.

At length the colonel stopped short in his stride.

"I have been debating whether or not I should hand you over to the police," he said. "It would be no more than you deserve. But I cannot bring myself to take such a step. However, you shall not remain another hour under my roof. Pack your belongings, and go!"

Talbot listened like a fellow in a trance. He had expected this; he had anticipated that his uncle would send him packing. And yet it seemed hard—terribly hard. For all the time he was innocent!

"Go! And never contaminate this house by your presence again! I have nothing more to say to you!"

Talbot darted one wild glance at the hard, relentless face of his uncle. Then he groped his way blindly from the room.

He did not go upstairs. He had no belongings worth troubling about. Besides, he could not bear the thought of Tom Merry & Co. waking up and asking him questions.

He stumbled along until he reached the hall. Then he unbolted the front door, and opened it.

A chilling gust of air swept in from without.

Talbot shivered, despite the fact that he was wearing his greatcoat.

A moment later he stood outside in the snow. He was stunned, and could scarcely realise what had happened. It all seemed like a hideous nightmare.

Boom!

Three o'clock was striking from the church-tower in the near distance.

A shaft of light from the library window stretched across the snow.

Talbot walked towards the window, and glanced through.

Ferrers Locke had gone, but his uncle remained. The colonel was seated at the table, in an attitude of utter dejection, with his head buried in his hands.

Talbot was possessed of a burning desire to rush into the room—to assure his uncle that he was not a thief, and to convince him of his innocence. For he knew that the colonel's heart was well-nigh broken by the thought that his favourite nephew had deceived and robbed him.

But the junior did not go in. He could not. He could only clear himself by dragging Croke's name into the business; and this he had promised not to do. He would be true to his promise, no matter what the cost.

A lump came into the junior's throat. A mist swam before his eyes. He could not bear to look any longer at the bowed figure of his uncle.

So he turned, and stumbled blindly away through the snow and the darkness.

CHAPTER 9.

Colonel Lyndon Tells His Story!

TALBOT'S up with the lark!" It was Monty Lowther who made that observation. He glanced in surprise at Talbot's vacant bed.

"He's stolen a march on us!" growled Tom Merry. "Why didn't he wake us up, so that we could all have gone out together?"

"He's gone for a stroll with Miss

Mawie, I expect," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with a yawn.

"Well, it's certainly a topping morning," said Manners, crossing to the window. "Real Christmassy weather. I vote we go skating before brekker."

"Hear, hear!"

The juniors dressed rapidly, and as they clattered down the stairs they were joined by Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn, and Blake, Herries, and Digby.

They did not remain long on the ice, but hurried back to the house for breakfast. They hoped to find Talbot in the dining-room, but they were disappointed. They questioned the butler, but he knew nothing of Talbot's whereabouts.

The juniors were thoroughly agitated by this time.

Tom Merry made no further attempt to disguise his thoughts.

"Something's happened," he said, with conviction. "Talbot's missing from the house, and nobody seems to know where he is."

"Here's Glyn!" said Jack Blake, as the schoolboy inventor came into the room. "Seen Talbot, Glyn?"

Bernard shook his head.

"Have you mislaid him?" he asked.

"He hasn't been seen at all this morning."

"My hat!"

The juniors exchanged dismayed glances. They didn't feel like breakfast until the mystery of Talbot's whereabouts had been solved.

Then Colonel Lyndon came into the dining-room, and dropped a bombshell on the assembled throng.

"I have grave news for you, my boys," he said.

His face was haggard, and he looked more worn and ill than ever.

Marie Rivers darted forward, and caught the colonel by the arm.

"What—what has happened?" she gasped.

Colonel Lyndon told his story. He described the events of the night, and the juniors and Marie Rivers listened spellbound.

"This distressing affair has thrown a shadow over the Christmas celebrations," concluded the colonel. "I wish I could believe that the wretched boy was innocent. But he had no explanation to give. He was practically self-condemned."

"I don't believe it!" exclaimed Marie Rivers, in ringing tones. "I can't believe it! Talbot a thief? Impossible!"

The others were silent. It was the silence of sheer stupefaction.

Marie turned to Tom Merry, with a wild look in her eyes.

"You do not believe this, Tom? Surely you don't believe that he did this thing—that he robbed one who has been such a good friend to him?"

Tom Merry lowered his eyes.

"I—I scarcely know what to think," he muttered. "This has knocked me all of a heap."

"But you know Talbot; you claim to be his chum. Do you think for one moment that he could be so utterly base—so heartlessly criminal?"

"No," said Tom Merry slowly. "I don't."

"An' neithah do I!" chimed in Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Theah is a tewwible mistake somewheah."

"There is no mistake," said Colonel Lyndon quietly.

"But Talbot is the soul of honah—" "He was given every opportunity of making an explanation, but he remained silent."

"Then he must have been shielding somebody!" said Jack Blake.

And Croke, who was present, gave a shiver.

"Nonsense!" said Colonel Lyndon.

"Talbot is guilty, beyond all doubt or dispute."

"Where is he now?" cried Marie Rivers.

"I cannot say. I spared him the ignominy of arrest, and sent him from my house."

"You turned him out, without money, without shelter?"

"He left me no alternative."

Marie broke down.

"It is cruel—cruel!" she said, sobbing. "Talbot is innocent! There has been a ghastly mistake!"

And again the colonel said, in tones that were hard and cold:

"There is no mistake."

Kerr of the New House was the next to speak.

"Excuse me, sir," he said. "You have proof that Talbot had the will in his possession, also the key of your safe. But there isn't a tittle of evidence to show that he robbed you of your notes and bonds. Neither did he intend to steal the will, for when Mr. Locke saw him he was in the act of putting it back."

The colonel made a gesture of impatience.

"I am not prepared to discuss the subject any further," he said. "I am satisfied—quite satisfied—as to my nephew's guilt. We will now endeavour—though I fear we shall meet with poor success—to banish this affair from our minds. A dark cloud hangs over the festival of Christmas. We cannot disperse that cloud, but we can at least try to make the holiday as tolerable as possible."

"A happy Christmas is quite impossible without Talbot," said Tom Merry.

"Quite imposs!" said Arthur Augustus.

The juniors felt half-inclined to leave Lyndon House—to go to their own homes.

But they could not openly affront Colonel Lyndon in that way. After all, he could hardly be blamed for thinking as he did. What else was he to think?

CHAPTER 10.

Crooke's Confession!

BREAKFAST was far from a merry meal. The only person who did justice to it was Fatty Wynn, and even Fatty's appetite Talbot's departure had plunged the juniors into gloom.

Up to this stage they had enjoyed their holiday immensely. But there would be no more enjoyment until Talbot's honour was vindicated.

Everybody was unhappy. But the most unhappy fellow of all was Gerald Crooke.

The cad of the Shell realised that Talbot had made a tremendous sacrifice on his behalf. Was he worth that sacrifice? No! He was a cad and an outsider. He travelled by crooked ways, he deserved to be cut adrift from his uncle's hospitality, even as Talbot had been.

What ought he to do now? Surely, by all the rules of decency, he ought to make a clean breast of everything to Colonel Lyndon? He could not stand by and see Talbot's career and future prospects ruined.

And then the voice of the tempter spoke to Crooke.

"Sit tight and say nothing! Talbot has been cut off and disinherited, and your uncle will make yet another will, and leave everything to you. Don't be a fool! Don't confess to the colonel, or you'll be hounded out of the house, as Talbot was. And why should you suffer?"

But the voice of the tempter, persuasive though it was, could not drown the voice of conscience.

"Play the man! Go and confess to

your uncle!" urged the latter voice. "You can't let Talbot suffer. You can't let him face hardship and privation for your sake."

After a long mental struggle Crooke determined to confess.

But it was not until late in the day that he was able to nerve himself to go and visit the colonel in the library.

When he reached the door his courage seemed to ooze out at his finger-tips. But there was no retracting now, for at that moment Colonel Lyndon opened the door.

"Well, Gerald," he said, "what is it?"

Crooke moistened his dry lips.

"I—I want to tell you something, uncle," he faltered.

The colonel glanced curiously at the junior's flushed face.

"Come inside and sit down," he said.

Crooke followed his uncle into the library, but he did not sit down. He stood shuffling his feet, and his eyes sought the carpet.

"I am waiting, Gerald!" said the colonel, with a touch of impatience.

Crooke tried to speak, but for a moment, words refused to come.

Then he thought of Talbot, cast out in disgrace, and probably tramping the countryside. And, in low, faltering tones, he blurted out his confession.

"It—it was I who took the will from your safe, uncle."

The colonel started violently.

"You?"

"Yes. I—I knew you were drawing up a fresh will. I overheard the conversation you had with the lawyer on the day we came. And I was curious to know what was in the will, and whether I should benefit by it. So I got up in the night, took the key of the safe from your pocket, and went down to the library. I didn't read the will then—I heard a rustling in the ivy, and I was in a state of blue funk—but I took it up to my bed-room, and read it there. I meant to put it back in the safe, but I didn't get a chance. Ferrers Locke was here, and I was scared out of my wits. Then, in a fit of desperation, I tried to get rid of the will. I went to the lake, and made a hole in the ice. But Talbot came along, and saw what I was up to. I told him all about it, and he undertook to replace the will for me. I made him promise that, if he was caught, he wouldn't give me away."

Crooke paused. He had stammered out the sentences almost incoherently, and Colonel Lyndon could scarcely grasp their meaning.

"Am I to understand," he gasped, "that it was you who carried out that dastardly robbery?"

"I had nothing to do with the theft of your notes and things, uncle!" said Crooke quickly. "All I did was to take the key and the will, and I meant to put them both back."

"And you—you allowed Talbot to suffer in your stead?"

Crooke hung his head.

"This morning, at the breakfast-table, I branded Talbot as a thief. And yet you said no word in his defence!"

Crooke was silent.

"I—I am almost overcome!" muttered the colonel. "I did not think that any boy—least of all a nephew of mine—could behave so basely. Do you realise what this means? Do you realise that I have hounded an innocent lad out of the house?"

Still Crooke did not speak.

"You have acted abominably!" the colonel went on. "But I am glad, at all events, that you have at least had the manliness to come to me and confess—though I fear your confession may be too late to save Talbot. I know nothing

of his movements, and it may not be possible to find him."

Crooke looked up at last. His eyes were shining with a new purpose.

"I'll find him, uncle!" he said. "I'll go this very night!"

Colonel Lyndon waved his hand towards the door.

"Leave me now," he said. "I want to be alone—I want to think. Stay! You know nothing of the notes and bonds that were taken from my safe?"

"Absolutely nothing, uncle!"

To Crooke's relief, the colonel seemed to accept his assurance. But there was no mistaking the fact that he was very angry with his errant nephew.

"Go!" he said sternly.

And Crooke went.

CHAPTER 11.

A Night of Surprises!

WHEN Crooke had undertaken to find Talbot, he had not spoken idly. He meant to seek him far and wide, if need be, and bring him back to Lyndon House.

On leaving the library, he went up to his room and donned his greatcoat. He crammed a few necessaries into his pockets, and prepared to leave the house.

Tom Merry & Co. met him on the stairs, and they glanced curiously at Crooke's pale, resolute face.

"Going out, Crooke?" asked Tom Merry.

"Yes."

"Whither bound?"

"I'm going to find Talbot. He's innocent, and I'm going to fetch him back."

"My hat!"

"Every minute's precious," said Crooke. "If Talbot's gone to London, as I believe, I shall just be in time to catch the last train."

"But—but what the merry dickens—"

gasped the captain of the Shell.

"My uncle will explain everything," said Crooke.

And he passed on down the stairs. A few moments later he was striding swiftly through the snow.

"I'll find him!" he muttered. "If it takes me weeks and weeks, I'll find him!"

The signal was down when Crooke reached the little station. Away in the distance a puff of smoke heralded the approach of the London train.

Crooke went up to one of the porters, and caught him by the arm.

"Were you on duty here early this morning?" he asked.

"Yessir."

"Did you see anything of a fellow about my own age and height?"

The porter nodded.

"E caught the fast train up to town," he said.

"Thanks!"

Crooke slipped a coin into the porter's palm, and then stepped towards the train, which had rumbled to a standstill. The next moment he was being whirled away in the direction of the mighty city to which Talbot had gone many hours previously. He did not realise then the almost insurmountable difficulties which confronted him. He had resolved to find Talbot, and for once in a way he was thoroughly determined.

Back at Lyndon House, Tom Merry & Co. were listening breathlessly to the colonel's story of Crooke's confession.

They were amazed at the turn events had taken, and they were glad to think that they had not denounced Talbot as guilty.

Marie Rivers, in particular, was immensely relieved. Nevertheless, she looked anxious.

Talbot had left Lyndon House many THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 671.

hours before. Where was he now? Perhaps in London, where, among the teeming millions, it would be next door to impossible to find him.

Tom Merry voiced the thoughts that were passing through the girl's mind.

"We must find him, and bring him back," he said.

"Yaas, wathah!"

The juniors wished to start off in quest of Talbot there and then. But Colonel Lyndon's next words showed them that no useful purpose could be served by their leaving the house that night.

"The last train to London has gone," he said. "Nothing can be done to-night."

"You think Talbot has gone to London, sir?" said Jack Blake.

"I am practically certain of it. Already I have taken steps to find him. Ferrers Locke is searching, and I am confident he will be successful."

"Crooke's on the trail, too," said Figgins.

Colonel Lyndon compressed his lips. "Please do not mention the name of that wretched boy!" he said. "It is he who has been responsible for all the trouble."

"Still, he confessed, sir," said Tom Merry, "and that counts in his favour. If he hadn't owned up, goodness knows what would have become of poor old Talbot!"

The colonel nodded. His anger towards Crooke was gradually lessening.

"Well, we know who took the will, and the key of the safe," said Kerr. "But we're still in the dark about the notes and bonds."

"I am satisfied that Crooke did not take them," said Colonel Lyndon. "His confession was frank enough. I am convinced he was keeping nothing back."

"Then how do you account for the theft of the notes an' things, sir?" asked D'Arcy.

The colonel shook his head helplessly.

"It is a puzzle," he said. "Doubtless it will be solved some day."

The high spirits of the St. Jim's juniors had revived. Talbot's name had been cleared, and it would be only a matter of time before Ferrers Locke located his whereabouts, and brought him back to Lyndon House.

The juniors had almost forgotten that Crooke was searching, too. They had very little faith in Crooke's abilities as a sleuth.

That night there was a swopping over of rooms on the part of Bernard Glyn and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Glyn didn't relish sleeping in a room by himself. He preferred to be with the Terrible Three.

The swell of St. Jim's, however, was only too glad to have a room on his own, where his extensive wardrobe would not be tampered with by practical jokers of the Monty Lowther type.

Tom Merry & Co. were much too excited to sleep. They sat up in bed, chatting with Bernard Glyn, until long past midnight.

First of all their conversation had dealt solely with Talbot. But eventually, when the rest of the household had retired, and the house was hushed and silent, talk drifted round to the topic of ghosts.

Then Glyn described for the first time how he had scared Crooke on the night of the burglary.

"You fellows will recollect that I brought a big hamper down here with me," he said. "You tried to guess what was inside it, Lowther, but you were off the wicket."

"What was it?" asked Monty Lowther curiously.

"A ghost."

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"Eh?"

"It was my clockwork ghost. And it works like a charm. I've kept it in the lumber-room all the time, and Crooke's the only fellow who's seen it."

"My hat!"

"I should like to see it in action," said Tom Merry.

"Same here!" said Manners eagerly.

"Can't we play a jape on somebody?"

"Gussy!" said Monty Lowther, with a flash of inspiration.

"Ripping!" said Tom Merry, with a chuckle. "Can you arrange for the thing to walk into Gussy's room, Glyn?"

"Yes, rather!"

A muffled boom sounded through the house.

"One o'clock!" said Manners. "Gussy will be fast asleep by now."

The juniors proceeded to put their plan into execution. They donned dressing-gowns over their pyjamas, and Bernard Glyn led the way into the corridor. He carried a lighted candle.

"Shush!" he whispered warningly.

"Don't make a row!"

The schoolboy inventor halted outside the door of the lumber-room. Then he stepped inside the place, which was little bigger than a cupboard, while the Terrible Three waited in the corridor.

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Presently a clicking noise came to their ears.

"What are you up to, Glyn?" whispered Tom Merry, peering into the recess.

"Winding the thing up!" explained Bernard Glyn. "I daren't do it in the corridor, or the row might wake Gussy."

Tom Merry & Co. began to have their doubts as to the merits of Glyn's mechanical ghost.

The youthful inventor took such a long time to wind it up that they supposed something had gone wrong with the works.

The next moment, however, they started violently.

There was a whirring sound, and a shrouded figure emerged from the lumber-room, and came towards them.

The Terrible Three jumped back in alarm. But Bernard Glyn reassured them.

"It's all right, you fellows," he said.

"It won't bite!"

With measured tread the ghost proceeded along the corridor, and the juniors followed.

"This is Gussy's room!" muttered Manners at length. "Don't let the thing go wandering on!"

Tom Merry opened the door very softly, and Glyn wheeled the clockwork figure round, so that it would enter.

Then the four juniors stepped back into the shadows.

"Now for the giddy scare!" murmured Monty Lowther.

"I say, there seems to be a light in Gussy's room!" whispered Bernard Glyn. Tom Merry nodded.

"The silly duffer must have left his light burning!" he muttered.

Suddenly a wild yell of terror rang out.

It was not the sort of yell which Arthur Augustus D'Arcy might have been expected to utter. The voice was that of a man.

Instantly the Terrible Three and Bernard Glyn rushed into the room.

An extraordinary scene met their gaze.

Kneeling on the floor, at the foot of the bed, was a thick-set, lantern-jawed man, obviously a burglar, for he had been engaged in going through the pockets of D'Arcy's coat.

There was an expression of terror on the man's face. He was trembling in every limb, and his eyes were fixed upon the shrouded figure which was marking time against the farther wall.

"It ain't yewman! It ain't yewman!" he was muttering.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was sitting up in bed, blinking around the room in astonishment and stupefaction.

"What evah is the mattah, deah boys?" he inquired, in alarm.

But Tom Merry & Co. had neither eyes nor ears for Arthur Augustus. Their attention was riveted upon the burglar.

"Collar him!" rapped out Tom Merry.

And the juniors made a combined rush at the man who was kneeling on the floor.

The burglar made no resistance. He was scared out of his wits by Bernard Glyn's clockwork ghost, and the four juniors soon had him at their mercy.

"Better search him, I think," said Manners.

A search was accordingly made, and it revealed the fact that the burglar had transferred a leather wallet from D'Arcy's pocket to his own.

But an even more startling discovery was forthcoming.

In the breast-pocket of the man's coat a bundle of bonds and notes were found.

"My only aunt!" ejaculated Tom Merry. "This is the merchant who rifled Colonel Lyndon's safe!"

"Ow! Gerroff me chest!" panted the burglar.

"Do you deny that you broke into this house the night before last?" asked Tom.

"Of course I don't deny it!" growled the man. "I made a good 'aul, an' I wish I'd been content with it, instead of turmin' up 'ere again an' gettin' nailed."

Tom Merry & Co. were tremendously excited at having captured the burglar. And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy slipped out of bed and put on his dressing-gown.

"I'm goin' to fetch Colonel Lyndon, deah boys!" he said.

"Good!"

The colonel was fairly flabbergasted on being awakened at half-past one in the morning, and informed that a burglar had been captured, and that the notes and bonds had been recovered.

"Where is the man now?" he asked, scrambling out of bed.

"In my woom, sir," said Arthur Augustus.

"In safe custody?"

"Yaas, wathah!" Tom Mewwy & Co. are sittin' on him!"

Colonel Lyndon hurried along the corridor. On reaching D'Arcy's room, he was astonished to see a ghostly figure beating itself against the wall.

"What—what is that?" he gasped.

"My ghost, sir!" said Bernard Glyn proudly. "Ripping invention, don't you think so? We shouldn't have collared the burglar without it, anyway."

The burglar himself was almost obliterated from view, for Tom Merry sat on his chest, and Manners a little lower down, while Monty Lowther pinioned the man's legs.

"Let him get up, my boys!" said the colonel.

The burglar was allowed to rise. He stood blinking sheepishly at the colonel.

"So you are the scoundrel who carried out the robbery in my library?" exclaimed Colonel Lyndon.

"Well, you fairly asked for trouble," said the man sullenly. "You shouldn't 'ave left yer safe unlocked."

"An innocent lad was blamed for the outrage," said the colonel. "You shall pay dearly for this, my man!"

The burglar's defiance evaporated. He began to whine.

"Don't be 'ard on me, sir!" he pleaded. "I don't want to spend my Christmas in chokey."

"I fear you will have to, nevertheless," said Colonel Lyndon. "Give an eye to him, my boys, while I telephone for the police."

Half an hour later a burly police-sergeant arrived at the house. He identified the burglar as an old offender.

The precious scoundrel again appealed to Colonel Lyndon, vowing that he would go straight and lead an honest life, if only he were given a chance. But the colonel, who was thinking of the boy whom he had driven from the house in disgrace, showed no mercy.

The burglar was marched away under escort. And Tom Merry & Co. went back to bed.

But sleep did not visit the juniors' eyes that night. They had far too much to talk about.

The Christmas vacation was certainly yielding its full measure of adventure. And all that now remained to complete Tom Merry & Co.'s happiness was the return of Talbot.

CHAPTER 12.

Driven to the Wall!

TALBOT was in London.

He had come to the capital with the vague idea of getting a job. For after what had taken place at Lyndon House he would never be allowed to return to St. Jim's.

It was a dark, murky December morning when Talbot stepped out at the London terminus. He breakfasted at a modest restaurant close by, and then he set out on his quest for employment.

As he tramped along the gay thoroughfares of the West End, he saw that the Christmas shopping boom was at its height.

Christmas!

What did the word mean to him? Nothing! It was a sham and a mockery. He had been branded as a thief, and cast out from his uncle's house. He was now homeless and friendless, little better than a wandering vagrant!

And he was enduring all this for the sake of another, a far less worthy fellow than he!

Was it not madness that he should make such a sacrifice, that he should give up everything in order to save an outsider like Crooke?

Yes, it seemed a mad thing to do. It was folly, but it was a splendid folly.

Very few fellows would have cared or dared to do as Talbot had done.

"I'll keep my promise!" he muttered, as he tramped along. "I won't give Crooke away. But it's hard, and it's going to be harder still. Oh, the fool! Why did he ever want to meddle with uncle's will?"

During the morning Talbot called at some of the biggest and best-known establishments, and sought an engagement.

The people he interviewed, however, eyed him askance. His schoolboy's clothes went against him. It was presumed that he had run away from school.

Besides, he had no references, no testimonials as to his character. What big firm would be likely to give him employment, in such circumstances?

Talbot's heart grew heavy. He was badly up against it. He had a pound or so in his pocket—sufficient to tide him over for a day or two.

But what then? Supposing he failed to get employment? He would have no roof to shelter him. To use a police-court phrase, he would be without visible means of support. He would join the human stream of flotsam and jetsam that drifted like derelicts through the London streets, with nothing to live for, nothing to strive for.

The hour was late now. And the Strand, down which he passed, was thronged with people on their way to the theatres.

Nobody appeared to notice Talbot, as he trudged along. Umbrellas were jerked aside to allow him to pass, but no friendly faces surveyed him from beneath those umbrellas.

Presently, however, a hand descended upon the junior's shoulder, and a voice, which seemed strangely familiar, exclaimed:

"The Toff!"

That was the name by which Talbot had been known in the early days—in the days when he had belonged to a gang of cracksmen in Angel Alley.

Turning quickly, the junior found himself confronted by a well-dressed man of middle age. He was puzzled, at first, as to the man's identity, but presently he recognised him as Tony Masters, who had been one of the lesser lights of the gang.

"Well, this is a surprise, Toff, an' no error! I thought you were away at school, leadin' a highly moral and respectable life. What are you doin' in London?"

Talbot told the man as much as he thought necessary.

Tony Masters listened with interest.

"So you're down an' out, what?" he said at length.

"Yes."

"Well, I think I can soon fix you up with a job—a very remunerative job, too."

"What sort of a job?" asked Talbot doubtfully.

He was not sure whether Tony Masters was a reformed character, like John Rivers, Hookey Walker, and the rest, or whether he was still pursuing his former shady vocation.

"I think we'd better go to some quiet place where we can jaw in comfort," said Tony.

And he led the way down a side turning.

Talbot followed with some misgivings. He felt that he ought to have sent Tony Masters about his business. But he was in an exhausted state, and his vitality was at a low ebb. His companion's will was stronger than his own.

At length, Tony Masters entered a quiet-looking eating-house, the seats of which were divided by wooden partitions.

The latter reminded Talbot of cattle-pens.

The place was none too clean. Still, it afforded warmth and shelter, and Talbot followed his companion without demur.

They sat down side by side at one of the tables.

"Hungry?" inquired Tony Masters.

"I haven't long had a snack," said Talbot, "but I could do with another. But tell me, Tony, what's been happening to you all this time? Are you still following the old game?"

"Shush! We'll discuss supper first, an' other things afterwards. I'm glad I had the good fortune to meet you, Toff—doocid glad!"

But Talbot, noting the sinister smile which played about his companion's lips, felt far from easy in his mind. He asked no further questions just then, but he could guess what the man's intentions were.

Tony Masters was going to tempt him to return to the career of a cracksmen.

Would Talbot be proof against the temptation, or would he, weak and exhausted as he was, succumb to it?

That remained to be seen.

CHAPTER 13.

A Dramatic Meeting!

"TAXI, sir?"

"No, thanks."

Crooke of the Shell turned up his coat-collar and stepped out into the driving sleet.

He was feeling cold, hungry, and disconsolate.

On setting out in quest of Talbot, his hopes had been high. But now that he had actually arrived in London, he scarcely knew which way to turn.

For the first time, he realised the gigantic nature of the task which he had set himself. He knew that Talbot was in London; but of what use was that knowledge? He might as well have attempted to hunt for a needle in a haystack.

Crooke's determination did not waver. He must find Talbot at all costs, he told himself. But his hopes were not nearly so high as when he had first set out. He realised that it might be a matter of days—weeks, perhaps—before he could pick up any information which would put him on the track of his school-fellow.

London was a big place, and its vastness had never impressed Crooke so much as now.

He had plenty of money, and his first impulse was to book a room at one of the hotels, and delay the start of his search until the morning. And then it occurred to him that the longer he delayed matters, the more remote would his chances of finding Talbot become.

He crossed Waterloo Bridge, and plunged into the brightly-illuminated Strand. He kept his eyes open as he went. It was necessary, in order to dodge the umbrellas of the theatre-goers.

A policeman was stationed close to a refuge in the middle of the thoroughfare. Crooke thought of taking the man into his confidence, and asking his advice in the matter of finding Talbot.

As he was about to step off the kerb, however, he gave a violent start.

A man and a boy had just brushed past him. And the boy was Talbot!

Crooke could not be absolutely certain of this, but he would have staked a good deal on it.

He gazed after the retreating figures, and he thought he recognised Talbot's overcoat.

"Yes, it's Talbot right enough!" he muttered. "But—but who's he with?"

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Suddenly he lost sight of the two figures ahead.

"They've gone down that side-turning!" he exclaimed. "Here goes!"

And he promptly followed.

As he entered the side-street, however, he blundered into an old man who carried an umbrella.

It was a violent collision, and by the time Croke had sorted himself out, his quarry was no longer in sight.

He was positive that they had turned down the side-street, but he could see no sign of them. He walked the whole length of the street, and then back again. But they had disappeared.

"Confound it!" growled Croke.

He halted in dismay.

It was indeed tantalising, to have seen Talbot, only to let him slip through his fingers.

"I ought to have yelled after him when I first spotted him!" muttered Croke. "What a priceless fool I am! As for that blundering old fogey with the umbrella, I could brain him!"

He was undecided what to do next. And then he caught sight of an eating-house close to where he stood. He was ravenously hungry by this time, and he made his way thither.

The place appeared to be deserted. But no sooner had Croke seated himself at one of the tables than he heard voices behind him, at the back of the partition.

And one of the voices was unmistakably the voice of Talbot!

Croke's heart gave a bound. But he did not immediately betray his presence. He was fascinated by what was being said. Evidently Talbot and his companion had been so deeply engrossed in conversation that they had not heard him enter.

"It's the only way, Toff!" Tony Masters spoke in low but persuasive tones. "I tell you, it will be to your advantage to close with my offer. If you don't, there's nothin' for you but starvation an' a nameless grave. Oh, I'm not exaggeratin'! You wouldn't be the first young fellow to go under through lack of means."

"You are asking me to become a crackman again—to lead a dishonest life?"

"You've a mighty unpleasant way of puttin' things, Toff. Let's put it this way, I'm givin' you a chance of wealth, an' happiness, an' life!"

"I thought you had reformed long ago, Tony."

"Reformed? Not me! I'll admit I had a smack at it, but I found it couldn't be done, Toff. I got a clerkship in the City, an' I didn't earn enough to keep body an' soul together. I was in as bad a way as you are now."

"So you went back to the old life?"

"Yes. An', what's more, I don't regret it."

There was a pause.

Croke fervently hoped that the proprietor, who was dozing behind the counter, would not stir, and come and ask him what he wanted.

"Are you working for Jim Dawlish?" inquired Talbot of Tony Masters.

"Dawlish? No fear! I'm paddlin' my own canoe. I'm on my own, an' business is boommin'. But I could do with a partner, Toff, an' it's you I want. You'll suit me down to the ground. You've got brains an' education, an' you're up to all the tricks of the trade. Throw in your lot with me, an' you'll never regret it!"

Talbot was silent.

A great struggle was going on in the junior's mind.

In normal circumstances he would have rejected Tony Masters' offer with scorn.

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But he was not himself. His powers of resistance were feeble. He realised that if he went into partnership with the crackman, he would at least be able to live. Whereas, if he refused, there would be nothing for him, as Tony had said, but starvation and a nameless grave.

It was not an exaggerated picture. Talbot had no means of obtaining honest employment, for he had no credentials, and his Eton clothes went against him. They suggested that he was a renegade from school.

He was face to face with grim alternatives. In a nutshell, he could either become a crackman, and live, or he could remain honest and starve.

Tony Masters saw that the junior was wavering, and he pressed home his advantage.

"You'll never regret it, Toff!" he repeated. "You needn't hesitate from any false notion of honesty. 'Honesty is the best policy' is an out-of-date copy-book maxim—a creed that's worn threadbare. An honest man, nowadays, is a fool! What of the great business houses—the professions? Are they all run on strictly honest and honourable lines? Not a bit of it! Business is merely another name for sharp practice. The majority of men live by their wits; an' that's what you must do, Toff. You've had ample time to make up your mind. For the last time—will you join me?"

The man seemed to mesmerise Talbot as he spoke. And the junior's powers of resistance grew feebler and feebler.

"Come, Toff, make your choice! Is it to be life an' happiness, or starvation an' misery? Will you join me, or not?"

Talbot was about to make his fateful reply, when somebody answered for him.

"He will not!" came an exclamation, in ringing tones.

And the head of Gerald Croke bobbed up over the top of the partition.

CHAPTER 14.

"A Merry Christmas!"

TALBOT sat spellbound.

As for Tony Masters, he goggled at Croke as if the latter were a spectre risen from the floor.

"Who—who are you?" he gasped.

"Talbot knows who I am," said Croke. "I've come to take him back!"

"Croke! Croke, old man—"

Talbot's voice trailed off huskily.

"It's all right, Talbot. It's all serene. I've told uncle everything."

"You—you've confessed?"

"Yes. I couldn't have done anything else. If I hadn't owned up, I should have reproached myself to the end of my days. I've come to take you back to Lyndon House."

"But—but how did you find me?"

"I spotted you in the Strand, and saw you come down this side-street. Then I lost sight of you, and gave it up. After that I came in here, and stumbled across you accidentally."

"You've been here all the time?"

"Long enough to discover that this rotter was spreading a net for you."

"Look here, young shaver," said Tony Masters aggressively, "you'd better hop it, or—"

Croke caught Talbot by the arm.

"Come along, old chap," he said quietly.

Like a fellow in a dream, Talbot rose to his feet.

"You—you're not goin', Toff?" gasped Tony Masters.

Talbot nodded.

"Then you decline my offer?"

"Without thanks!" said Talbot curtly

"But—"

"You had me at a disadvantage," Talbot went on. "I was down and out, and you knew it, and tempted me for all you were worth. I was on the point of giving in to you, and I can see now what it would have meant. I should never have forgiven myself—never!"

Tony Masters made a last desperate appeal to the junior. He urged him, with all the eloquence at his command, to return to the old life. But he might just as well have addressed the wooden partition, for all the impression he made.

"I'm going," said Talbot.

And he went, leaving Tony Masters speechless with despair.

"We can't go back to-night," said Croke, when they were out in the street. "But we'll book a room at one of the hotels, and catch the first train in the morning. My hat! I'm awfully glad I found you! When I arrived in town it seemed as if I'd come on a wild-goose chase. But the luck's been with me."

"You saved my life, Croke," said Talbot quietly.

"Rats!"

"But you did. If you hadn't turned up at that moment I should have sunk my honour and gone to the dogs!"

"Not so bad as that, surely?"

"Yes. I was on the point of yielding to that scoundrel!"

"Well, it's all right now. Here we are! This is a decent-looking hotel."

They were in the Strand by this time, and they had no difficulty in obtaining a comfortable room at the hotel.

For hours they remained awake, recounting the dramatic events of the past few days. But they were up and away early next morning, bound for Lyndon House.

Talbot's heart was light now that the dark clouds had rolled by. But Croke—though he did his best not to show it—was far from happy. He was thinking of the reception he would get at the hands of his uncle. And he reflected that a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year would not be his portion.

"No news," said Colonel Lyndon, in response to Tom Merry & Co.'s inquiring glances at the breakfast-table. "I have just received a communication from Ferrers Locke. He has not yet been able to discover a single clue as to Talbot's whereabouts."

And the faces of the juniors fell. They were beginning to despair of ever seeing their chum again.

"It will be a wotten Christmas without old Talbot!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gloomily.

"A wash-out!" growled Manners.

"The question is, ought we to take up the search?" said Tom Merry.

Colonel Lyndon shook his head.

"I fear it would be useless," he said. "Where Ferrers Locke has failed, it is hardly likely that you would succeed."

"Amateur detectives are sometimes more successful than professional ones," said Kerr.

"I, at any rate, am going to search for Talbot!" said Marie Rivers.

The girl was pale, but very determined. She felt that she would go mad if she remained at Lyndon House and made no effort to find her chum.

"I'd give a whole term's pocket-money to know where Talbot is!" exclaimed Monty Lowther.

"He is here!" said a voice.

All eyes turned towards the doorway. Then there was a great shout from the assembled juniors:

"Talbot!"

The wanderer had returned!

"My boy—my dear boy!"

Colonel Lyndon was on his feet, advancing to greet his nephew.

"Forgive me, Reginald! I have wronged you greatly! I have done you a grave injustice. But it was not until Crooke came to me and confessed that my eyes were opened!"

"That's all right, uncle!" said Talbot cheerfully. "You couldn't be blamed for thinking as you did."

The next moment Talbot's hands were being seized and shaken by his delighted chums.

"Who found you, old man?" panted Tom Merry.

"Crooke."
"My hat!"

"He found me just at the right moment, too," added Talbot.

And then he explained, breathlessly but in detail, all that had happened. And he spoke of Crooke's part in the drama in such glowing terms that Colonel Lyndon's anger towards his errant nephew evaporated, and everybody in the room felt favourably disposed towards the cad of the Shell.

"Where is Crooke now?" asked the colonel suddenly.

Talbot glanced into the hall.

"He went upstairs directly he came in," he said.

"Let's go an' wout him out, deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus.

At that moment Crooke came down the stairs, with a suitcase in his hand.

He had been thinking a great deal on the way down from London, and he had come to the conclusion that he would not be wanted any longer at Lyndon House—that he would be driven forth in disgrace, even as Talbot had been. And he had decided not to stand upon the order of his going, but to go at once.

Judge of Crooke's surprise, therefore, when his schoolfellows surged towards him, and shook hands with him, and congratulated him upon finding Talbot.

"Don't mock me, you fellows!" he said hoarsely. "I—I can't bear it!"

"We're not mocking you, you duffer!" said Tom Merry. "What are you doing with that suitcase?"

"I'm going! I'm not wanted here! I'm a cad and an outsider, and I'm not going to stay and spoil your Christmas!"

"Gerald," said Colonel Lyndon, placing his hand on the junior's shoulder.

"Do not think of the past! I want you to stay—we all want you to stay. And this shall be such a rousing, such a truly merry Christmas, as has never been spent before!"

"Hear, hear!" cried everybody, in chorus.

Outside, in the snow, carol-singers were chanting their joyous refrain:

"God rest you, merry gentlemen!
Let nothing you dismay."

Crooke's eyes brimmed with tears. He could scarcely credit his great good fortune.

He was to stay. The past didn't count. He was to look forward, not backward.

And it was to be a Merry Christmas, after all—a time of peace and goodwill for everybody. But especially for Gerald Crooke, and for the fellow who, on Crooke's behalf, had made such a gallant sacrifice!

THE END.

(Do not miss next week's wonderful number of the GEM. You will vote next week's long complete story the best you have ever read.)

"SLAVE ISLAND!"

Dick Harmer Explains!

THOSE below scattered wildly, and Hans Meppel crashed to the flags of the courtyard, where he lay motionless.

One of the greatest criminals and tyrants of modern times had met his end.

To save the overseers who still remained hiding in the upper rooms of the palace from sharing a similar fate at the hands of their one-time victims, the sailors had to threaten to resort to drastic measures.

The sight of their rifles and the formidable-looking machine-guns, however, had the desired effect, and, although there were discontented mutterings, the mob fell away from the palace entrance, and the naval men entered and took some fifty prisoners.

It was just as these overseers who had escaped with their lives were being marched, in charge of a strong force of armed men, towards the seashore and the cruiser, that Captain Kentish felt a touch upon his arm, and, swinging round, found the negro Joe beside him.

The slaves who had been in the prison, under punishment or awaiting sentence for some real or supposed breach of discipline, had just been released by a party of their comrades, and were coming that way. Among them was Dick Harmer, and the negro pointed to him.

"Dat's de boy I tell you of, boss!" Joe informed the skipper. "Him de lad who sated the young missy, and him de feller you want."

Captain Kentish stepped up to Dick as he stood staring about him.

"What's your name, my lad?" the skipper asked, laying his hand upon the boy's shoulder.

"Harmer—Dick Harmer," the youngster returned, turning his head sharply and meeting his glance.

"I'm Dirk Kentish, skipper of the steamer Albatross, and I am here to take you back to your father at Beech Marshes," the captain told him, holding out his hand. And, as Dick quickly took it, he uttered an exclamation of joy.

"My father sent you here to find and rescue me? Then the dad is alive and well?" Dick cried.

"Sure, my lad!" Captain Kentish answered cheerily. "And mightily pleased he'll be to get you back, after you being kidnapped and lost for all these long months. Have you any notion why you were spirited away like this and brought here?"

Dick Harmer did not reply at once. His eyes were fixed upon Jasper Standish, of whom he had just caught sight. When he did speak, his voice was unsteady with excitement.

"I have not the least idea, Captain Kentish," he said. "But ask that man! He should be able to tell you! He was on the vessel—Hans Meppel's vessel—when it brought me here! And I have reason to believe that it was through him that I was kidnapped in the first place—through him, too, that I was brought to this island and made a slave!"

If Dick Harmer had deliberately aimed at creating a dramatic situation, he could not have succeeded better.

Captain Kentish and O'Hara, who was at his elbow, and also one of the officers in charge of the naval men, turned and regarded the millionaire in amazement and askance.

"What does this accusation mean, sir?" the naval officer asked. "Is it true?"

Jasper Standish shrugged his shoulders. Now that his anxiety for his daughter's safety had been appeased, he was his old dispassionate self once more.

"It is perfectly true," he answered quietly. "You know me—you know where I can be found in England. Be good enough to inform the boy's father of my identity, and say that I, and I alone, accept all responsibility for his abduction and imprisonment upon this island."

He laughed softly, his eyes fixed upon Dick and holding a hard light.

"I shall be quite ready to face any action he dares to take against me," he continued coldly. "But"—and again he laughed, with the trace of a sneer—"Richard Harmer senior will not dare to proceed against me, you will find!"

Very coolly he turned and walked away with the men of his yacht, and Captain Kentish and the others, including Dick, gazed after him with puzzled expressions.

Conclusion.

IT was many months later ere Dick Harmer set eyes again upon the man he eventually learned was Jasper Standish, a powerful British millionaire.

On the morning that his father's car carried its owner and Dick down to Jasper Standish's country home it wanted but a few days to Christmas, and the roads and hedgerows were white with a sprinkling of snow, though the fall had ceased for some hours, and it was very pleasant out of doors.

Once again the fortunes of the Harmers were in the ascendant. There had been some difficulty in proving Mr. Richard Harmer's claim to the extensive tract of land in the far Pacific, but it had been done unquestionably at length, and now a company had been formed of which Mr. Harmer was the chairman and heaviest shareholder, and the silver-mines located by Dick were already being worked and yielding splendid profits.

In the library, Richard Harmer, senior, was facing Jasper Standish, who had risen from the chair he had been occupying near the fire, and bowed coldly.

"Well," the millionaire sneered, "have you brought with you a man from Scotland Yard to arrest me for abduction, conspiracy, and the like?"

Richard Harmer's glance met his unflinchingly.

"Why did you do it, Jasper?" he asked, very quietly.

"You ask me that?" For a moment Jasper Standish's mask of cynical self-control fell from him, and his voice was raised in anger, his eyes blazing and his attitude suggestive of flying at his visitor's throat. "You dare to ask me that—you, who deliberately went back on your pledged word, and left my wife to die and my child to starve and be lost to me!" he thundered passionately. "By heavens, I—"

"Stop!" As the millionaire advanced upon him with upraised hand, Richard Harmer raised his own in a pleading gesture. "You wrong me—wrong me deeply, Jasper!" he said steadily. "Let me explain, and do my best to end this enmity you bear me."

There was something so steadfast and dignified about Dick Harmer's father that Jasper Standish found himself silent and listening in spite of himself.

"No sooner had you gone to prison
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than I succumbed to an attack of rheumatic-fever," Mr. Harmer went on quickly. "I lay too ill to carry out my promise for some time; but immediately I was able I set afoot inquiries for your wife and child, only to find that they had gone from the address you had given me, and left no hint as to where they might be found."

"Heaven forgive me! Can this be possible?" Standish muttered to himself. Then, aloud, with a catch in his voice: "Richard, I see that I have indeed wronged you bitterly. I—I ought to have made sure that you had gone back on your word before I robbed you of your boy. Thank Heaven, he came to no real harm, and that you have him back!"

There came a long, strained silence. "It is near the time when all differences should be forgotten," Jasper Standish murmured at last, in a strangely changed voice. "I wonder if you can forgive me, and take my hand?"

Slowly he extended it, and, after a moment's hesitation, Richard Harmer's fingers met and clasped his. The eyes of the two old friends met.

THE END.

(Next week our splendid new serial story, "THE FEUD AT ST. KATIE'S," will start. Order your GEM early.)

YOUR EDITOR'S CHAT.

Address: Editor, The GEM, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C. 4.

My Dear Chums,—

Last week I announced that this number of the "Gem" would contain the opening chapters of our rattling new school serial, "The Feud at St. Katie's"; but at the last moment I decided that I would give you an extra long complete yarn, and postpone the other treat until next week. In my opinion, "The Christmas Bombshell" is one of the finest stories the "Gem" has yet published, and I am sure all my readers will agree with my verdict. As I anticipated, our art photograph of the Smiling Prince has proved a huge success, and I feel confident that the splendid study of the great "B.P.," which appears in this issue, will also be welcomed by all my readers. Next week another national hero will appear in our feature, "Pictures For Your Den." There will also be a rattling long, complete school story, dealing with the world-famous chums, and the first chapters of our new serial, "The Feud at St. Katie's." Do not miss it!

By the way, the Editor of the "Magnet" tells me that he has a big surprise in store for his readers. In the issue of that paper dated January 1st there will appear a splendid four-page supplement, entitled: "Billy Bunter's Weekly." Billy is very proud of the fact that he has edited a real paper, and he is quite certain that it will prove a huge success. That issue of the "Magnet" will also contain a long story, entitled: "Ponsonby's Victim."

Now, just a word about the Christmas number of the Greyfriars "Boys' Herald," which is on sale next week. This will be a record number in every way, and all boys who desire an extra special Yuletide treat must obtain a copy. It is packed with splendid stories from cover to cover, and will be on sale everywhere at the price of 1½d.

Well, boys, before closing, I desire to give you all my hearty wishes for a Happy and Joyous Christmas, and I am happy to feel that this is reciprocated by all the large circle of "Gem" readers at home or abroad.

Your Editor



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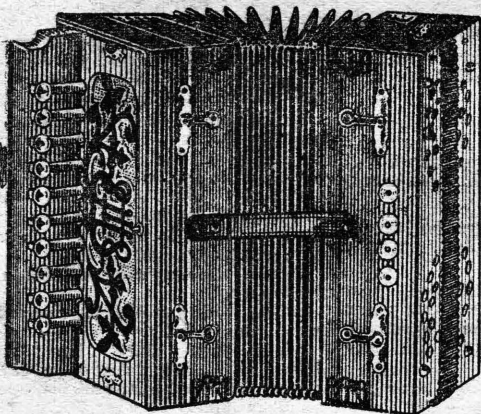
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