READER WINS A RIPPING BICYCLE!

See page 16 for Result of Our Joke Competition!

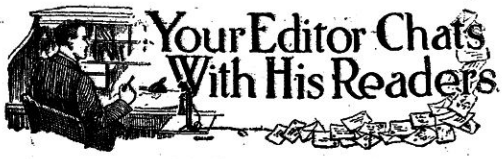
EVERY WEDNESDAY.

The GEM 2d LIBRARY

No. 989. Vol. XXXI.—January 29th, 1927.

THE SNEEZE THAT GAVE BAGGY TRIMBLE AWAY!

(A dramatic moment in the magnificent new extra-long story of Tom Merry & Co.—"Standing by a Scapegrace"—inside.)



Address all letters: The Editor, The "Gem" Library, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Write me, you can be sure of an answer in return.

SMILER!

"SMILER" DURSTON, of Lancashire—he's a staunch supporter of the GEM—writes and tells me that he possesses a smile that won't, to quote his own words, "come off." Now, strangely enough, this cheery correspondent of mine is a bit worried about that smile. He tells me that he smiles at everything—at things where smiles ought to be kept well in the background. He says that smiling is a habit of his, but all the same for that, it's landed him in many uncomfortable situations. For instance, the other day he heard some bad news from a friend. Now "Smiler" states that he was genuinely sorry to hear of this bad news, and yet, somehow or other, his face broke into a smile. He could have kicked himself afterwards, he says. I should say that "Smiler" is a highly-strung young fellow—there are many such—who finds it hard to express his sympathy with anyone's misfortune in words which he considers adequate. And while he's searching his mind for the right thing to say, his "nerves" get the upper hand of him, and bang comes that smile. But, don't worry, "Smiler," you will grow out of that nervous smile, but for goodness' sake stick to the cheery smile; never let that come off. There are far too many gloomy faces about these days as it is, and the Smiler is good to meet; he's the fellow who helps to make the world go round. Write me again, my chum, and next time do me the favour of including your address, then perhaps we can have a heart to heart talk through the post.

SHOULD HE SPEAK?

"Anxious" of —— writes me a long letter in which he says that a certain schoolfellow of his has been accused of theft, and "Anxious" knows for a certainty that this particular chap is not the guilty party. He tells me that he has proof of this, and, moreover, he knows who the guilty party is. "Should he speak out to those in authority?" This is rather a difficult question to answer without knowing the full circumstances. But if my chum is really positive that he knows the identity of the real culprit in this matter, I strongly advise him to take this chap on one side and tell him so. If the chap has any decency in him at all, he will put matters right of his own accord. If he doesn't, then it is up to "Anxious" to speak out, rather than see an innocent boy suffer for someone else's sins. Let me hear from you again, "Anxious"—I'm just as anxious as you to hear that this affair has been cleared up satisfactorily.

NEXT WEDNESDAY'S PROGRAMME:

"THE TOFF'S SACRIFICE!"
By Martin Clifford.

This story is a particularly dramatic one, with the Toff, otherwise Reginald Talbot, doing what he considers to be the right thing, although such a course means the destruction of his own good name. At this type of yarn, Martin Clifford has no equal. You'll enjoy every line of it, believe me, and then, like Oliver Twist, you will be asking for more.

"WHITE EAGLE!"

Look out, too, for another instalment of this stirring adventure serial, also another jolly poem from the pen of the St. Jim's Rhymester, entitled: "The Trials of Toby!"

"BICYCLE" JOKE COMPETITION No. 3.

In next week's issue will be found the result of the above competition. Your name may be amongst the prizewinners. Make certain of next Wednesday's GEM by ordering it now. Chin, chin, chums!

Your Editor.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN! It would be quite excusable for Talbot to desert his blackguardly cousin in his hour of need, for Talbot has known nothing but sneers and bitter enmity from Gerald Crooke. But the "Toff" recalls that he was once a sinner himself, and regardless of the risk, decides to take Crooke's burden on his own shoulders!

STANDING BY A SCAPEGRACE!

A Dramatic Long Complete Story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's, with Gerald Crooke and Reginald Talbot, once known as the "Toff," playing the principal parts.

BY

Martin Clifford.

CHAPTER 1.
No Escape!

"TALBOT!"

Talbot, of the Shell, started as his name was called.

He was strolling slowly along the gravel-path under the Form-room windows at St. Jim's, with his hand in his pockets and a cloud of thought on his brow.

No other fellow was to be seen near at hand.

On that Wednesday afternoon Tom Merry & Co. had gone over to Rylcombe to play the Grammar School, and a crowd of other juniors had gone over with the footballers. In the distance, a First Eleven game was going on, on Big Side. A dozen fellows could be seen, here and there, in the quad. But Talbot had the gravel-path to himself, and he was startled as his name was called quite close at hand.

He stopped and looked about him.

"Talbot!"

It was the voice of his cousin, Gerald Crooke, of the Shell, that called.

"Here!" went on Crooke's voice. "At the window, you ass!"

Talbot looked up.

Crooke was at one of the windows of the Shell Form-room. The windows were high, and Crooke was well above Talbot's head.

Talbot stared up at him.

Crooke was looking out, but he was not leaning out—he was keeping well back, as if afraid of being seen from the quadrangle. His face was pale and harassed in expression, his eyes furtive.

"Come nearer!" he called out. "I don't want to shout!"

Talbot came nearer.

"Are you detained?" he asked.

"Yes. But I've got to get out."

"Better not," said Talbot. "What's the good of asking for more trouble, Crooke? Mr. Linton is down on you already quite enough."

"I've got to get out, I tell you," muttered Crooke. "It—it's important. I want you to help me."

"How can I help you?"

"I'm locked in," said Crooke. "Linton sent me here to do my lines, and—and he caught me leaving the Form-room. He's locked the door."

"Then you can't get out," said Talbot quietly, "and it's all the better for you, Crooke. Mr. Linton is fed-up with you already; and if you break detention you will be taken before the Head."

"I don't care for that!"

"You will care when you're taken to Dr. Holmes," said Talbot. "For goodness' sake, Crooke, don't play the goat. Aren't you in enough trouble already, without asking for more?"

"It means more trouble if I don't get out this afternoon. You—you wouldn't understand. But I've got to get out," muttered Crooke. "A lot depends on it."

"I don't see——"

"I tell you it's so, whether you see or not," interrupted Crooke impatiently. "The door's locked, and I've got to bunk by the window. I want you to help me."

"Don't be a fool, Crooke! Our uncle, Colonel Lyndon, is with Mr. Railton in his study now. He will want to see both of us as soon as he's finished his talk with Mr. Railton. I'm waiting for him now."

"I'm not going to wait for him. I tell you it's important—more important than you can understand," said Crooke huskily. "I want you to get my cap for me, and get my bike out and take it into the road. Wait for me there with the bike—see?"

Talbot shook his head.

"I'll watch for a chance when the coast is clear and drop from the window," went on Crooke.

"You can't do it," said Talbot.

"I must do it! You fool, do you think I should be risking a Head's flogging if it wasn't important?" breathed Crooke. "I've got to do it. If you won't help me, I shall do it without your help."

Talbot looked at him.

Crooke's face was white and strained; there was an almost feverish look in his eyes.

Whether it was important or not for the black sheep of St. Jim's to get out of the Form-room, there was no doubt that Gerald Crooke believed it to be important.

"Any other fellow would help a chap," said Crooke bitterly. "Even Trimble would do it if he were here. You're my cousin—you offered to help me in any trouble, and you refuse. You're afraid of a caning from Linton, you—you funk!"

Talbot coloured.

"It's not that, Crooke, and you know it. But you know that you're in Mr. Linton's black books already, and——"

"Hang Mr. Linton!"

"And Colonel Lyndon is here and may come out of Mr. Railton's study any minute——"

"Hang him, too!"

"Look here, Crooke——"

"Will you help me?" said Crooke. "You rotter, if you won't help me, I shall take my chance without your help. You can't stop me. If you lend a hand, it will be safe. Anyhow, I'm going."

"For goodness' sake——"

Crooke gritted his teeth.

"Oh, shut up!" he said.

And Crooke shoved head and shoulders through the window, with the evident intention of climbing out and dropping into the quad.

"Stop!" breathed Talbot.

"Oh, let me alone!"

"Mr. Lathom is walking under the elms—he may see you——"

"I don't care!"

"Stop, I tell you!" rapped out Talbot. "If you're determined to play the fool, I'll help you. I'll get your cap and take your bike out. Wait till Mr. Lathom is gone, at any rate."

Crooke drew back at the window.

"Buck up, then! I sha'n't wait long!" he said sullenly.

"But if you've got any sense——"

"You're wasting time, you dummy! I——"

Crooke broke off suddenly, as a rather lean gentleman came round a corner of the building. It was Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell. Talbot spun round at his footsteps, and the colour flushed into his face. Mr. Linton came on, with a very grim expression on his severe countenance.

"Talbot, you are talking to a boy under detention in the Form-room."

"Yes, sir," muttered Talbot.

"I am surprised at this, Talbot. You are well aware that such a proceeding is against the rules."

Talbot did not answer. He was, of course, aware of that.

"You will take a hundred lines of Virgil, Talbot," said Mr. Linton severely. "Go to your study this moment and write them out!"

Talbot glanced at Crooke. There was no help for it; and he left the spot and went into the School House. Mr. Linton came nearer to the window and looked up grimly at Crooke's pale, enraged face.

"Have you written your lines, Crooke?"

"No!" snarled Crooke disrespectfully.

"Take care, Crooke! You have very nearly reached the limit of my patience!" said the master of the Shell. "You have made an attempt to break detention, and I have been compelled to lock you in the Form-room. Now I find you speaking to another junior from the window instead of performing your detention task. I cannot help suspecting, Crooke, that you were seeking assistance to escape from the Form-room."

Crooke drew a hissing breath. A savage and disrespectful answer was on his lips, but the stern look of his Form master checked it. Desperate as the black sheep of St. Jim's was at that moment, the Form master's severe frown daunted him.

"You appear to have grown utterly reckless and disregardful of authority," went on Mr. Linton. "You are seeking to drag a boy who is usually well behaved into your own reckless proceedings. A little more, Crooke, and I warn you that you will be reported to Dr. Holmes for a public flogging. Now go back to your task."

Gerald Crooke disappeared from the window.

But he did not go back to his task. Whatever might be the consequences of disobedience, Crooke was in no mood for transcribing Virgil then.

Five minutes later he looked from the window again, with gleaming eyes; but he backed promptly at the sight of Mr. Linton.

The master of the Shell was pacing up and down the gravel path. Possibly he was merely taking a little exercise on that pleasant sunny afternoon. It was more likely that he was keeping an eye on the Form-room, in case the detained junior should make another attempt to escape. At all events, there he was, and there was no chance for Crooke.

Crooke got down from the window and went to his desk, and fell rather than sat down there. He did not pick up his pen or turn a page of the Æneid. He sat staring before him, at the blank wall of the Form-room.

CHAPTER 2.
Not Trimble's Lucky Day!

BAGGY TRIMBLE, of the Fourth Form, grinned a cheery grin.

Baggy had cause to grin.

The fattest fellow at St. Jim's was enjoying his half-holiday.

There were many and various ways of making the best of a half-holiday. Baggy's way was peculiar to himself.

Tom Merry and his comrades were playing football, which was their form of enjoyment. A crowd of other fellows were watching the junior eleven play at the Grammar School, finding entertainment therein. Cutts of the Fifth was playing banker in his study with a circle of select friends and the door locked. Dr. Holmes was digging deep into Æschylus in the seclusion of his study, and discovering great joy in the task. Mr. Railton was chatting with his old comrade of the War, Colonel Lyndon, over a cigar, fighting ancient battles over again. And Baggy Trimble had found an occupation for the afternoon as entertaining as any—to Baggy.

The School House was almost deserted, but Baggy did not pine for company. On the other hand, the solitude of the studies pleased him vastly; for it enabled him to carry out his peculiar form of entertainment—which was dropping into one study after another, looking for "tuck."

Some of the study cupboards were locked—much to Baggy's disgust. He had rather hard thoughts of fellows who were so suspicious of their fellow-creatures that they locked their cupboards when they went out. But some of them were not locked—and in some of the unlocked ones Baggy found goods that rewarded him for his trouble.

In Study No. 6, in the Fourth, he had quite a harvest. Of the four juniors who belonged to that celebrated study, Blake and D'Arcy were in the junior eleven, and Herries and Digby had gone over to Rylcombe to watch them take goals. In the cupboard of No. 6 was a pile of good things, with which Blake & Co. had intended to celebrate, on their return, their victory over the Grammar School—taking the victory for granted in advance. Victory or defeat, that celebration was not now likely to take place. Baggy had already celebrated the absence of Blake & Co. with the good things, and he left hardly a crumb.

Feeling considerably bucked, the fat Baggy rolled on to Study No. 9 in the Fourth. Levison was in Tom Merry's team, Clive had gone with him to Rylcombe, and Cardew had gone out with Racke and Clampe of the Shell. So there was nobody at home in Study No. 9—till Baggy made himself at home there, which he did thoroughly. He was feeling fat and fairly well filled when he rolled out of No. 9; but, like Alexander of old, he was still prepared to conquer fresh worlds. In the passage he debated which study he should next visit, and he decided on Tom Merry's. But, alas!—the Terrible Three of the Shell had to be numbered among the more suspicious members of the St. Jim's community, for the cupboard was locked.

Baggy sniffed and rolled out again. He dropped into the next study, which belonged to Talbot, Gore, and Skimpole.

His fat face beamed as he saw that the cupboard door was unfastened. He had it open in a jiffy, and then he grinned—a grin of undiluted satisfaction. In the upper half of the cupboard, which was used as a larder by the occupants of No. 9 in the Shell, reposed a large cake—a very large cake, stacked with plums, and with ice on top.

"Talbot!" snapped Mr. Linton. "You are talking to a boy under detention in the Form-room!" "Yes, sir," muttered Talbot. "I am surprised at this, Talbot. You are well aware that such a proceeding is against the rules!" Talbot did not answer. (*See Chapter* 1.)

Baggy Trimble beamed at that cake.

He felt quite safe in the study. Gore, he knew, had accompanied the footballers to Rylcombe Grammar School. Skimpole had gone out into the woods on one of his botanical expeditions. Talbot was walking up and down the gravel path under the Form-room windows, waiting for his uncle to come out of Mr. Railton's study—only a few minutes ago Baggy had noticed him from a window. No thought of danger, therefore, was in Baggy's mind as he opened his pocket-knife and plunged it into the cake. Whether the cake had belonged to Talbot, to George Gore, or to Herbert Skimpole, Baggy did not know, and did not care—he knew to whom it belonged now! His happy afternoon was a great success, and that ripping cake was best of all.

A huge chunk disappeared into Baggy Trimble's capacious mouth. His jaws worked swiftly.

He did not trouble to take the cake out of the cupboard. He stood there and sliced it, and devoured it chunk by chunk.

About a quarter of the huge cake had vanished, and Baggy had unfastened a couple of waistcoat-buttons, when there was a step in the deserted Shell passage.

Baggy Trimble started.

The footballers could not have got back yet—he was sure of that. But somebody was coming up the Shell passage. Possibly Gore had come back early, without waiting for the finish—and Baggy turned quite cold at the thought of being caught in the study by the bully of the Shell. He would have paid dearly for that cake, had Gore caught him devouring it. He stood with palpitating heart, a chunk of cake on his pocket-knife half-way to his mouth.

"Oh dear!"

There was no reason to suppose that the newcomer was bound for that study specially. But Baggy, owing to the peculiar nature of his occupation, could not afford to take risks.

He squeezed into the lower half of the cupboard, which was the receptacle for boots, and boxing-gloves, and other odds and ends, deciding to remain there out of sight until the footsteps had passed. In the peculiar circumstances Baggy considered, justly, that a fellow couldn't be too careful.

He drew the cupboard door almost shut and listened intently, his fat heart thumping as the footsteps came nearer.

They stopped at the door.

The handle turned, the door opened. The newcomer, whoever he was, had come into No. 9 in the Shell. Baggy, as the door-handle turned, drew the cupboard door silently quite shut and held it fast. He thanked his good fortune that he had dodged out of sight. It was a precaution well taken.

Whether it was Talbot, or Gore, or Skimpole who had come in, Baggy had no means of guessing. He dared not open the cupboard door a fraction of an inch. If it was Gore in the study, Baggy was booked for the biggest hiding of his life, if he was discovered. He sat on the floor, leaning against the wall, and holding the door shut with a fat paw, hoping that the fellow would go, whoever he was. And he groaned inwardly as he heard the sound of a chair being pulled to the table and of a fellow sitting down. It must be Gore, he supposed. If it had been Skimpole, he would have been mumbling in his usual way,

and Baggy would have heard him; and Talbot was waiting for his uncle, and if he came to the study, Colonel Lyndon would come with him. Baggy's fat heart quaked at the thought that only the cupboard door stood between him and the heavy-handed bully of the Shell.

Had Baggy been able to see through the cupboard door—which, naturally, he could not do—he would have known that it was Talbot of the Shell who had sat down to the table.

All Baggy's careful calculations were well founded, but he had not counted on the chapter of accidents. Talbot, assuredly, would have been still waiting for his uncle to leave Mr. Railton but for the incident at the Form-room window. Mr Linton had sent him to his study to write a hundred lines, as a punishment for speaking to the junior under detention; but Trimble, of course, had no means of guessing anything of the kind. Talbot was in a hurry to get his lines done before the colonel was at liberty, and he lost no time. Little dreaming of the fat and fatuous Baggy curled up palpitating in the cupboard, Talbot set up the Æneid against his inkstand and dipped his pen in the ink, and began to write rapidly.

Latin verse after verse raced from Talbot's pen, while Baggy Trimble, palpitating and perspiring in the stuffy cupboard, wondered whether, after all, he had really made a wise choice in his method of passing a half-holiday. Even standing in a keen wind on the football ground at the Grammar School would have been better than this.

Talbot had written sixty or seventy lines, when there was a heavy tread in the passage. Trimble, shut up in the cupboard, did not hear it; but Talbot knew that his uncle was coming.

He laid down his pen at once, and rose to his feet. He had opened the study door before Colonel Lyndon reached it. The tall, bronze-visaged gentleman stopped at the door, and his rather hard and grim features relaxed into a kind smile at the sight of Talbot. He shook hands cordially with his nephew, and entered.

"Mr. Linton told me that I should find you here, my boy," said the colonel, in his deep, somewhat gruff voice, which had a soft note in it, however, as it always had when he was speaking to Talbot. Gerald Crooke had never heard that note in his uncle's voice.

The Shell study almost shook under the heavy tread of Colonel Lyndon as he came in.

"Oh crikey!" murmured Trimble, in the cupboard.

The heavy tread, and the deep, gruff voice, told him that there was a new arrival and who the new arrival was. It dawned now on Trimble's fat brain that it must have been Talbot who was in the study all the time. Now Colonel Lyndon was there also. Trimble quaked dismally. He would almost rather have faced Gore of the Shell than the grim-visaged old soldier, who was a governor of the school, too. Trimble sat tight, and hardly dared to breathe. His fat brain almost swam at the thought of being discovered in his hiding-place by the stern old colonel.

"I'm glad to see you, my boy," the colonel went on, "I should have come up before, but I stopped talking a little with Railton. Railton was with me in Flanders, you know."

Colonel Lyndon sat down in the chair Talbot placed for him. He was not six feet from the fat junior curled up in the bottom of the study cupboard.

"I'm glad to see you, uncle," said Talbot. "It was kind of you to come."

"Not at all, my boy." Colonel Lyndon glanced at the unfinished impot on the table and smiled slightly. "Lines, what?"

"Yes," said Talbot, colouring a little.

"You are not often in your Form master's black books, I think. Mr. Linton seems to have rather a good opinion of you. I wish the same could be said for your Cousin Gerald." The colonel frowned a little. "I hear that Gerald is now under detention in his Form-room."

"I—I think so—yes."

"And why this imposition?" asked the colonel. "Mind, I'm not catechising you, or finding fault. Don't think that. But tell me, if you like."

"It's for breaking a rule of the House," said Talbot.

"Nothing serious, I'm sure?"

"Oh, no!"

Talbot hesitated. It was his nature to be completely frank, and frankness was due to his kind guardian. He did not want to mention Crooke, but he hated the idea of seeming evasive

"I spoke to Crooke at the Form-room window," he said. "It's against the rules to speak to a fellow under detention."

Colonel Lyndon smiled.

"Quite right that you should be punished, Talbot—discipline is discipline," he said. "Between ourselves, however, it's not a fault that I should condemn you for, my boy. And now to business." Colonel Lyndon's face became very serious now "You wrote to me and asked me for fifty pounds. You have never asked me before for anything, though I should have been glad if you would have done so. Fifty pounds, or five hundred, would be quite at your service, if you needed it. I trust you so completely, Talbot, that I should have had no hesitation whatever in sending you a cheque for the sum by return of post. But I am your guardian, my boy, and a guardian must take care. You are too sensible a lad not to know that it is my duty to speak to you about such a matter seriously."

"I—I know, uncle," faltered Talbot.

"Well, then, now——"

Colonel Lyndon was interrupted.

From the study cupboard there came the sound of a loud and prolonged sneeze.

It was dusty in the bottom of the cupboard, dusty and stuffy. Baggy Trimble had felt that sneeze coming on, and he had struggled against it almost frantically. There was dust in his fat little nose, and with all his struggles he could not suppress the sneeze. Like wine, it improved with keeping. When at last it came out, in spite of Baggy's struggles, it was a terrific sneeze—it fairly rang and echoed.

"Atchoo-cho-chooooooooh!"

Colonel Lyndon started up.

"What—what——"

Talbot stared round towards the cupboard.

"Atchoo—choo-chooooooch!" came the prolonged and agonised sneezing of the hapless Trimble.

"Great gad! Do you keep animals in your study cupboard?" exclaimed the amazed colonel.

"No," gasped Talbot.

"Then, what——"

Talbot stepped to the cupboard door and dragged it open. Baggy Trimble, curled up among the lumber there, and still sneezing wildly, came into view.

"Trimble!" exclaimed Talbot.

Colonel Lyndon was on his feet now. He stared at the fat junior with a black brow.

"What does this mean?" he thundered.

"Groogh! Atchoo-oooch!"

"It's Trimble of the Fourth," said Talbot. "Goodness knows how he got here. Come on, you fat duffer."

"Grooogh!"

The wretched Baggy rolled out of the cupboard. Colonel Lyndon stooped, grasped his collar, and jerked him to his feet.

"You did not know he was there, I suppose, Talbot?"

"No!" gasped Talbot. "And I've been in the study a quarter of an hour or more. Trimble, you duffer——"

"Ow! I—I haven't touched the cake!" gasped Trimble.

"The cake?"

"I—I never—I didn't—I wasn't——" spluttered Trimble.

"What are you doing here, you young rascal?" exclaimed the colonel, shaking the hapless Baggy till his teeth clattered.

"Yaroooh!"

Talbot's face broke into a smile.

"He must have been raiding Gore's cake," he said. "A lot of it's gone. I suppose he dodged out of sight when he heard me coming."

"I—I thought it was that beast Gore," groaned Trimble. "I—I say——"

"I think I had better take him to the Housemaster!" growled the colonel, giving Trimble another vigorous shake.

Baggy yelped in alarm.

"Ow! Wow! I—I say, sir, I—I never touched the cake——"

"Come with me."

"Yow-ow-ow! Let a fellow off!" wailed Trimble. "I—I won't do it any more. I—I say, Talbot, old chap, put in a word for me! Oh dear! Ow!"

"Let me kick him out, uncle," said Talbot. "The fat duffer can't resist a cake. He's always playing these tricks."

"He ought to be flogged," grunted the colonel.

"Ow! Wow!"

"Well, kick him out!" snapped Colonel Lyndon. "Kick him hard!"

"Certainly."

The colonel's powerful arm swung Trimble to the door. Talbot laughed, and landed his boot behind the fat junior. Baggy fairly flew into the passage.

"Yaroooh!"

Trimble went along the Shell passage as if he were on the cinder-path. It was not, after all, Baggy's lucky day.

CHAPTER 3.
Talbot's Uncle!

TALBOT closed the study door and turned back to his uncle.

Colonel Lyndon had sat down again.

Talbot was smiling; but the smile left his face at once as he sat down facing his uncle.

There was a painful interview before him—a very painful one to Talbot, of the Shell.

Stern and grim as the old gentleman was, his manner to Talbot was kindness itself. But with his kindness there was firmness. He had been astonished by the junior's amazing request for such a sum as fifty pounds, as was only to be anticipated. He was uneasy, too. No schoolboy could possibly require such a sum for an ordinary purpose; and the request indicated that something very unusual must have happened. It was only natural that the colonel should fear that his ward was in trouble of some kind.

And Talbot could not speak out.

He could not tell Colonel Lyndon that his other nephew, Gerald Crooke, was paying the price for a long, reckless course of shady blackguardism—that he owed that sum of money to a bookmaker, and was in momentary fear of seeing Bill Lodgey arrive at St. Jim's to "show him up." Talbot had promised to help his cousin if he could; and he had promised that Crooke's disgraceful secret should be kept—that his name should not be mentioned. For had the colonel known the facts it would have been his duty to acquaint Crooke's father with the matter at once; and the colonel most certainly would have done his duty. The crash would have come then with a vengeance.

Talbot's handsome face was flushed, and for once he found it difficult to meet his uncle's eyes.

"Well, my boy?" said the colonel kindly, though the flushed discomfort of the schoolboy's face added to his inward uneasiness. "What have you to tell me?"

"Only what I told you in my letter, sir," said Talbot, the crimson deepening in his cheeks. "I'm ashamed to have asked you for money—utterly ashamed. I know I have no right to do so. All I can say is, that I never would have asked for myself."

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Colonel Lyndon gruffly. "You have every right to ask me—I've given you the right. I have been hurt by your never asking for anything—you know that I desire to do anything in my power for you. I have sometimes thought, indeed, that you have not wholly forgotten and forgiven the unhappy trouble between your father and myself."

"Oh, no, sir!" exclaimed Talbot. "No, no! That is all forgotten—quite forgotten. I—I—I know that my poor father was chiefly to blame, though there was a time when I could not see it."

"I was hard," said the colonel moodily. "I meant only to be just—and I was hard. If I had been kinder, many things would have been different, and you, my boy, would never have spent your early boyhood among rogues and vagabonds as you did. But what is past cannot be altered—what is done cannot be undone. Let us keep to the present. I repeat that you have every right to ask me for what you may need or want—and I am glad that you should ask. My only doubt is that you may have got into trouble of some kind; and if that is the case I want you to make a clean breast of it. You must know by this time that you will be speaking to a friend."

"Yes, yes," said Talbot.

"Then what is the trouble?"

"I am in no trouble, sir. I am not in debt, and never have been," said Talbot. "As I said in my letter, I want to help a certain person who is in money difficulties. If you would be kind enough to advance the sum, I want you to stop it out of my allowance."

"Nonsense! Who is the person you speak of?"

Talbot breathed hard.

"I know I'm asking you to trust me a great deal, sir," he said. "I can't give you any explanation. I can tell you nothing about the matter. I can only say that if you should hand me the money it will simply pass through my hands—for a good object."

Colonel Lyndon eyed him from under his knitted brows.

"Understand me, Talbot," he said crisply, "I trust you, and should never dream of doubting your word. That is understood. It is settled, therefore, that I believe that you want the money for a good object—so far as you are aware. But, sensible lad as you are—and much more experienced than most schoolboys could possibly be, owing to your early training—it is very likely that you may have been imposed upon by some charlatan. I cannot see why you should not tell me the name of the person concerned, especially as it is fairly certain that the person is unknown to me."

Talbot was silent.

"You have reasons, my boy?"

"Yes, uncle."

The colonel gnawed his underlip.

There was a short silence in the study. The colonel spoke again at last.

"One question you must answer, Talbot. More than once, since you have been at this school, you have come into contact with associates of your former life—those unhappy days when you were in the hands of a gang of cracksmen, and were known by a peculiar nickname. It has always been in my mind that some member of that gang might seek you out and attempt to blackmail you. Is that what has happened?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Talbot, crimsoning again.

He had not thought of it; but he could see at once that that was the most natural conclusion for the colonel to arrive at. Obviously, Colonel Lyndon had suspected at once that some member of the Angel Alley gang had found out the "Toff" and was endeavouring to extract money from him.

"Is it that?" asked the colonel.

"No! No! Nothing of that kind!"

"You have not seen any of your former associates?"

"No."

"Then this money is not demanded from you under a threat?"

Talbot shook his head.

"If that were the case, uncle, I should not dream of handing over a shilling," he said. "I am not the kind of fellow to be influenced by threats, I hope."

"I think not; but the circumstances are peculiar," said Colonel Lyndon. "You tell me plainly, then, that you are acting of your own free will in this matter, and that it is totally unconnected with any associate of your former life?"

"On my word, sir."

The colonel's face cleared a good deal.

"You—you supposed it was that, sir?" muttered Talbot.

"What could I suppose, my boy?" said the colonel. "At least, I feared that it was that. But your word, of course, settles the matter for me."

"You are very kind, sir," said Talbot, with a catch in his voice. "Considering what I was—before I came to St. Jim's—I have no right to your faith."

"I am no fool, my boy; I know whom I may trust," said Colonel Lyndon. "Now, your answer to that question clears the air. To come down to facts, you want fifty pounds to help a lame dog over a stile—in a matter that does not concern you personally?"

"That is how it stands, sir."

"Very good. I still think it possible that you may have been imposed upon by some rogue," said the colonel. "But that is a fault on the right side, if it is the case. I would rather have you too trusting than too suspicious. Now that you have relieved my mind on the point that troubled me, Talbot, I will ask you no more questions."

Colonel Lyndon took a pocket-book from his pocket and opened it. He counted out five ten-pound notes on the study table.

Talbot felt a mist before his eyes for a moment. The colonel had brought the money with him. If he had hesitated to hand it over without question, it was only for Talbot's own sake, because he feared that the junior might be in trouble. And this was the hard, stern man who Crooke disliked and feared—whom all his relatives looked on as a hard nut to crack.

"Take it, my boy!"

"Uncle! I—I don't know how to thank you!" muttered Talbot. "I'm ashamed to have asked you——"

"Nonsense!"

"You must stop it out of my allowance, sir. You give me more than I really need——"

"Stuff!"

"But, sir——"

"That matter is ended," said Colonel Lyndon, with a gesture of his hand. "Say no more about it. Now let us have a little chat. Time is going, and I must see your cousin before I go. I don't see any of your friends about the school—where are they?"

Talbot's face was bright now.

"The fellows are gone over to the Grammar School for a football match," he explained.

"You generally play for your school, do you not?"

Talbot smiled.

"I had to stand out to-day," he said.

"On my account? I'm sorry for that," said the colonel. "Gerald, I suppose, was not in the team?"

"N-no."

"I need not have asked," said the colonel dryly. "I should be glad to see him taking up games; but I suppose it will never come to pass. However, that is his father's business, I suppose, not mine. I am not his guardian. Do you get on better with Gerald than you used?"

"We've been quite friendly lately," said Talbot.

He was glad to be able to say as much.

"Even to the extent of speaking to him under detention?" said the colonel, with a smile. "I am glad to hear it."

For a quarter of an hour longer the colonel remained in the study, chatting with his nephew. The matter of the fifty pounds was not referred to again; Colonel Lyndon had evidently dismissed it entirely from his mind. He rose to go at last.

"Thank you once more, uncle," said Talbot, as the colonel shook hands with him in the Shell passage.

"Stuff and nonsense! Good-bye, my boy—good-bye!"

The colonel's heavy tread rang down the staircase, and he made his way downstairs to see his other nephew, his bronzed old face unconsciously hardening once more as he went.

CHAPTER 4.
Crooke's Uncle!

GERALD CROOKE started to his feet as the door of the Shell Form-room was unlocked from the outside.

Mr. Linton looked in.

The master of the Shell gave Crooke a cold glance. Crooke had written hardly a line of his imposition, but at the moment the Form master paid no heed to that.

"Crooke! Your uncle, Colonel Lyndon, is waiting for you in the visitors' room," said the master of the Shell. "You will go to him at once."

"Yes, sir," muttered Crooke.

Mr. Linton walked away, and Gerald Crooke made his way to the visitors' room.

He had to see his uncle, but he was not looking forward to the interview. It was a painful infliction to him—as possibly it was to the old colonel also.

Crooke wondered whether Talbot had yet asked the colonel for the fifty pounds. No doubt he had done so; but that he had received it Crooke did not believe for a moment. He had begged his cousin to try, knowing that there was a sporting chance, at least, that Colonel Lyndon might accede to the request of his favourite nephew. But when it was known that the colonel intended to come to the school to see Talbot about it, Crooke's hope had died away. He was quite persuaded that all Talbot had to expect from his uncle was a severe questioning and a severe lecture. If the colonel had intended to part with the money, he would have done so already.

Crooke was quite assured on that point; his only doubt was whether Talbot might have let out something concerning him, Crooke, in the interview. It would not have been easy to keep the secret had Colonel Lyndon questioned Talbot closely; and Crooke, uneasy and suspicious by nature, doubted whether Talbot really desired to keep it. It would have been so easy for Talbot to ruin him with his uncle that he hardly expected him to resist the temptation to do so. That thought added to his uneasiness as he made his way to the visitors' room.

"Well, Gerald?"

Colonel Lyndon shook hands with Crooke kindly enough.

It was a relief to the black sheep of St. Jim's. The old gentleman's manner would have been different had he learned from Talbot of the young rascal's present straits and difficulties. Talbot had not given him away, at all events. Crooke even had the grace to feel a momentary shame for his doubts of the fellow who had tried to help him.

"I have only a few minutes," said the colonel. "Sit down, Gerald, and let us make the most of them."

Crooke sat down, his bitterness returning.

Only a few minutes for him—in the visitors' room! With Talbot, the colonel had time for a chat in the study. Crooke did not reflect that, if his uncle cared less for him, he was really not the fellow to inspire much affection in a stern old gentleman with a very strict sense of rectitude.

"You were under detention, I think," said the colonel.

"Yes, uncle," muttered Crooke. "My Form master's rather down on me."

"Why?"

Crooke shrugged his shoulders.

"Bad temper, I suppose," he answered.

"I hope there is no more serious reason than that, Gerald," said the colonel dryly. "Do all the Shell find Mr. Linton bad-tempered?"

"They all think he's rather a Tartar," said Crooke

About a quarter of the huge cake had vanished when there was a sudden step in the deserted Shell passage. Baggy Trimble started. He stood there, with palpitating heart, a chunk of cake on his pocket-knife, half-way to his mouth. "Oh dear!" he gasped. (*See Chapter* 2.)

sullenly. "He gave Talbot a hundred lines this afternoon for nothing. I'm sure you don't think Talbot ever did anything wrong," he added satirically.

Colonel Lyndon's brow knitted.

"Talbot was punished justly for breaking a rule of the school," he said. "I fully agree with Mr. Linton in maintaining discipline. But what were you punished for, Gerald?"

"Leaving lines unwritten."

"And what were the lines imposed for?"

"Cheek!"

"Cheek!" repeated the colonel. "You mean that you were impertinent to your Form master?"

"Yes."

"Well, you are frank, at all events," said Colonel Lyndon, with a rather puzzled look at his nephew. "The last time I was here you had been punished for smoking in your study. I am glad it is for something a little less shady this time. You are not looking very well, Gerald."

"I'm not feeling very well," grunted Crooke. "Sticking in a stuffy Form-room writing lines doesn't buck a fellow."

"I suppose not. Are you playing football this season?"

"I play in the regular games practice."

"The compulsory practice, you mean?"

"Yes," muttered Crooke.

"Not on other occasions?"

"I've a lot of things to do," mumbled Crooke.

"Nor in the matches?"

"Tom Merry isn't likely to give me a chance in the matches," said Crooke bitterly. "He doesn't like me."

"Come, come! That is not just to Merry," said the colonel. "I am rather afraid that your tastes run in other directions, Gerald. But I am not here to find fault with you, my boy. I have been very glad to hear from your cousin that you are on more friendly terms with him than you used to be."

Crooke flushed uncomfortably.

"Talbot isn't a bad sort," he said awkwardly. "We've had a lot of differences at times, but he's not a bad chap. In—in fact, he's been jolly decent to me."

Colonel Lyndon's face softened considerably.

"I am glad you get on better with him, Gerald," he said. "I should like to see you sharing some of his occupations—such as the school games. I saw your father before I came, Gerald."

"Yes?" said Crooke, vaguely apprehensive.

"He is a little uneasy by the way you have been asking for extra remittances of late. It seems that your Housemaster spoke to him on the subject of your having more pocket-money than was good for you. He has decided to keep you within your allowance, Gerald, and as your allowance is very ample, it should surely be sufficient."

Crooke's face set doggedly.

"At the same time, he has no objection to your uncle tipping you when he visits the school," added the colonel, with a smile, as he rose to his feet.

"Oh!" said Crooke. "You—you're very kind, sir."

Colonel Lyndon looked at his watch.

"I must go to my train now," he said. "As you are under detention, I cannot ask you to walk to the station with me. Good-bye, Gerald."

The colonel shook hands with his nephew, leaving a five-pound note in Crooke's hand.

Crooke stared at the fiver when his uncle was gone. There was a bitter expression on his sallow face.

"Fat lot he wants me to walk to the station with him!" he muttered. "Any excuse is better than none. I know jolly well Talbot will go."

Crooke was right on that point.

Five minutes later, from the window of the visitors' room, he saw the colonel's tall figure striding down to the gates, Talbot of the Shell walking by his side.

Crooke watched them with bitter eyes till they disappeared.

"Crooke!"

It was Mr. Linton's voice. Gerald Crooke spun round from the window, and stared sullenly at his Form master.

"Colonel Lyndon is gone, Crooke, and you will return to the Form-room," said the master of the Shell. "I find that you have not written half a dozen lines of your task."

"I—I——"

"You will remain in the Form-room until the whole task is completed," said Mr. Linton icily. "Follow me."

With deep rage in his breast, Crooke followed the master of the Shell to the Form-room.

There the door was locked on him again.

Mr. Linton left him to his task, and Crooke, with a set and savage face, tackled it at last. He was to be a prisoner until it was finished—and it was a long task. There was no help for it, and the slacker of the Shell set to work, grinding wearily through the long imposition until the last line was written.

CHAPTER 5.
Too Late!

"GOAL!"

"Bravo, Tom Merry!"

"Well kicked, Tom!"

Tom Merry glanced round, recognising that voice. From the crowd looking on at the football match, on the ground at Rylcombe Grammar School, Talbot of the Shell waved a cheery hand to him.

Tom smiled back breathlessly.

He was surprised to see Talbot there, as his chum had stood out of the Grammar School match that afternoon, to see his uncle at St. Jim's. But he guessed that Talbot had walked to the station with the colonel after his visit, and so had found himself near the Grammar School after his uncle's train was gone.

The match was close on the finish now; there were only three or four minutes to go when Tom Merry kicked the goal.

The sides lined up again, to play it out, and Talbot stood watching, his hands in the pockets of his overcoat.

His handsome face was very cheery.

In an inside pocket reposed the fifty pounds the colonel had given him—the sum that was required to save Gerald Crooke from the results of his folly. Against all hope, against all expectation, Talbot had received the required sum from his uncle, and it made his heart very light. He would have been glad to give Crooke the happy news at once; but he could scarcely avoid walking to the station with his uncle, and he knew, too, that Crooke was still under detention for some time. He had seen the colonel off at Rylcombe Station, and then, passing the gates of the Grammar School on his way back to St. Jim's, he had dropped in to see how the footballers were getting on. A lift in the St. Jim's brake going back meant saving time, and he was anxious to see Crooke.

He was in time to see Tom Merry take the winning goal in the game, as it proved. It had been a slogging game, and the merry men on both sides looked muddy and breathless; but no goals had materialised for either team, until Tom Merry, almost at the finish, put the leather into the net.

The game finished a few minutes later, and Talbot of the Shell joined the St. Jim's footballers as they came off. Round the field a hundred St. Jim's men, who had followed the eleven, were cheering themselves hoarse. School House and New House were both well represented there, and they vied with one another in making the welkin ring for the St. Jim's victory.

"Bai Jove! It's old Talbot!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Have you been heah long, old fellow?"

"Only a few minutes, Gussy."

"Then you did not see the goal I vewy neahly had," said the swell of St. Jim's.

Talbot smiled.

"I saw the one Tom quite had, though," he said.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yaas, wathah! That was a vewy good goal," said Arthur Augustus. "But the one I neahly had was weally a corkah. If it had come off, it would have been a weal wippah! Unfortunately, it did not quite come off."

"That's the worst of Gussy's goals," remarked Monty Lowther. "They never do quite come off."

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"A miss is as good as a mile—as bad, in Gussy's case," observed Blake. "Still, we've beaten them."

"Yaas, wathah! By the way, how did you get on with your uncle, Talbot?"

"First-rate, old chap."

"Was he cwustay?"

"Not at all."

"Good! He looks wathah a cwustay codgah," said Arthur Augustus. "But pwobably his bark is worse than his bite."

"Room for one more in the brake going back?" asked Talbot. "If so, you fellows can give me a lift."

"Yes, rather!" said Tom Merry. "I suppose the colonel is gone now?"

"Yes. I went to the station, and dropped in here on the way back. I want to get back to the school as quickly as possible, if you fellows can squeeze me into the brake."

"Of course," said Tom.

"Yaas, wathah!"

And when the St. Jim's footballers rolled on their homeward way in the brake, Talbot was packed in with them, and as many other fellows as the vehicle would hold. A crowd of St. Jim's fellows followed on bicycles, and a crowd more on foot—quite an army had gone over to Rylcombe to see the junior eleven beat the Grammarians. Talbot chatted cheerily with the juniors on the way to St. Jim's, and more than one of his friends looked at him rather curiously.

"Your uncle's visit seems to have done you good," remarked Manners.

"Does it?" smiled Talbot.

"Yes, rather! You've been looking down in the mouth for days past, and now you seem quite merry and bright."

"Yaas, wathah! I was goin' to cut the football match, to stay in and see Talbot thwough with his jollay old uncle, you know, because he looked so vewy down in the mouth about it," said Arthur Augustus. "But weally he seems quite bucked."

Talbot laughed, and coloured.

His comrades did not know that he had been looking "down in the mouth" owing to Crooke and his troubles, neither were they likely to guess why the colonel's visit had "bucked" him so much.

He was glad when the brake reached St. Jim's at last, and he went into the School House. Baggy Trimble was there, and he gave the Shell fellow a very curious blink. Talbot called to him.

"Seen Crooke, Trimble?"

"Still in the Form-room," grinned Trimble. "Old Linton shoved him back into detention as soon as nunky was gone."

He eyed Talbot very curiously. Talbot had almost

forgotten the incident in the study, but Baggy had not forgotten the surprising words he had heard Colonel Lyndon utter, before that unfortunate fit of sneezing seized upon him and prevented him from hearing more.

"Did you get it, old chap?" he asked in a low voice.

"Eh, what?"

"I say, your uncle must be rolling in money, if you've got the neck to ask him for fifty pounds in a lump," said Baggy. "He didn't shell out, what?"

Talbot's face grew stern.

"So you were listening, you fat rascal?"

"Certainly not!" said Trimble indignantly. "I suppose I couldn't help hearing what the old codger said, could I, when he was shouting only a few feet from me? He said you'd written to him for fifty pounds—— Yaroooh!"

Trimble roared as Talbot of the Shell took him by the collar and tapped his bullet head on the banisters.

"Yow-ow! Leggo!"

Talbot, with a grim brow, tapped Trimble's head again. Then he let go, and the fat junior sat down with a roar.

"Mind your own business, Trimble," said the Shell fellow.

And he went up the Shell passage, leaving Baggy rubbing his head and mumbling. Talbot was deeply annoyed. It had not occurred to him before that Trimble had heard anything while he was shut up in the study cupboard; but he remembered now that Colonel Lyndon had mentioned the fifty pounds before Baggy was discovered there. He was thankful that Baggy had been discovered before he had overheard the whole conversation; but it was bad enough as it stood, for it was quite certain that Trimble would tattle what he knew all over the House.

It was only a matter of time—a very short time—before all the School House knew that Talbot had written to his uncle to ask him for fifty pounds, and that Colonel Lyndon had come down to the school in consequence. Certainly no one was likely to guess that his uncle had actually handed him such a sum.

In the Shell passage Talbot was rounded up by the Terrible Three and marched into Study No. 10 for a rather late tea. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther were glad to find their friend in such good spirits, though they were rather puzzled as to the cause. A visit from Colonel Lyndon was not calculated—from what they had seen of that gentleman—to put any fellow in the highest of spirits. But Talbot evidently was more cheerful than he had been for a good many days past.

After tea in Study No. 10 Talbot went downstairs, to see whether Crooke was at liberty yet. He found the door of the Shell Form-room still locked.

He compressed his lips a little.

He had good news for Crooke—the very best of news. It was like the idle, foolish, reckless fellow to anger his Form master, and to be detained on an occasion when there was no time to be lost. Now that Talbot had the necessary sum, it only remained for Crooke to pay his debt to Bill Lodgey, and recover the paper he had given to the sharper, and clear up the wretched trouble that had made his life a burden for more than a week past. Crooke was locked in the Form-room, and in a very short time now the school gates would be locked, and Crooke could not go out without breaking bounds, and risking inquiry and trouble.

Talbot loitered in the Form-room passage, waiting for the black sheep of the Shell to be released.

It was past lock-up when Mr. Linton came along. He glanced at Talbot rather expressively, but did not speak. He unlocked the Form-room door and went in, and a few moments later Gerald Crooke emerged, looking tired and worried, and doggedly ill-tempered.

Talbot made a step towards him.

"Crooke——"

Gerald Crooke gave him a savage look.

"Leave me alone!" he snarled.

And Crooke tramped savagely away, leaving Talbot of the Shell staring after him blankly.

Crooke took his cap and went out of the House in the falling dusk. There were still fellows in the quad, though the school gates were now locked, and it was impossible to go out—openly, at least. Talbot remained where Crooke had left him for a few moments, puzzled and almost confounded. After all the anxiety of a week or more, Crooke did not seem even to want to know the result of the interview with Colonel Lyndon. Certainly he had little or no hope that Talbot had been successful, but his indifference was strange enough, all the same.

It was no time to be deterred by a rebuff from the sulky fellow, however. Talbot, after a few moments' thought, hurried after him into the dusky quadrangle.

Crooke was lounging away with his hands in his pockets with an air of assumed carelessness. If Mr. Linton had observed him, he would have supposed that the black sheep of the Shell was getting a little fresh air after being shut up in the Form-room for the greater part of the afternoon. But Talbot could see that Crooke was lounging away in the direction of the secluded spot by the school wall, where the old slanting oak made it practicable to climb out unseen. It was too late to go out of gates; but Crooke was going out all the same. If he went, he would be missed at call-over, and it amazed Talbot that the reckless fellow should be asking for more trouble like this. He hurried after him.

Crooke had disappeared in the shadows under the trees near the wall. When Talbot sighted him again he already had his hands on the slanting oak to climb.

"Crooke!" called out Talbot hurriedly.

The cad of the Shell spun round.

"Who—what—oh, it's you! You fool, you startled me! Can't you leave me alone?" snarled Crooke.

"You're not going out?"

"Mind your own business!"

"I can't understand you, Crooke. You know that I have seen Colonel Lyndon, and asked him——"

Crooke burst into a bitter, sneering laugh.

"Yes, and I know nothing's come of it. I've found another way, if you want to know. Let me alone!"

"But you're mistaken, Crooke!" exclaimed Talbot. "I've got the best of news for you. I've been waiting to tell you."

Crooke started violently.

He left the slanting tree and came nearer to Talbot, his eyes shining strangely in the gloom, his face white as chalk.

"You—you——" he muttered thickly. "You—you mean—— You're fooling me! Heaven! If I—if I—I've done that for nothing—— Oh, heavens! Tell me the truth!" His voice trailed away in a gasp.

"I have the money!" said Talbot quietly.

"Fifty pounds?" gasped Crooke.

"Yes!"

Crooke gave a strangled cry.

"You—you've got it! Oh, heavens! I never believed for a minute you'd get it—never! Oh, I—I think I shall go mad!"

He reeled against the tree, covering his face with his hands. A groan of utter misery came from him.

Talbot stepped nearer to him, his own face pale with alarm.

"Crooke! For mercy's sake, what does this mean? What have you done? Tell me. You can trust me. What have you done?"

Crooke's answer came in a low whisper, a whisper of utter misery and despair.

"It's too late—too late! I'm a thief now! A thief!"

Talbot caught his breath.

"Are you mad, Crooke?" he muttered huskily.

Crooke only groaned. Talbot caught him by the arm.

"What have you done?"

"I've taken the money from Mr. Railton's desk! I've got it in my pocket now! I was going out to give it to Lodgey!"

"Good heavens!" said Talbot, aghast.

He stood rooted to the ground, overcome with horror and dismay. Crooke leaned heavily on the trunk, his face covered with his hands, and tears of utter misery and despair trickling through his fingers.

CHAPTER 6.
Standing by Crooke!

TALBOT of the Shell stood with his brain in a whirl.

Crooke was crouched against the tree before him, almost crumpled up. The wretched fellow seemed to be half-fainting.

Talbot's face was very pale. For once the cool, steady, level-headed "Toff" was utterly dismayed and beaten.

He had succeeded, against all hope and expectation, and his success had come too late. Crooke had given up hope, and had taken this desperate and irretrievable step. It was almost a stunning blow to Talbot. Low as his opinion of Crooke was, he had never dreamed that the fellow could actually become a thief. It seemed incredible. Neither had he dreamed that an opportunity could be found, if Crooke had thought of sinking so low. Opportunity and desperation had somehow coincided, and the poor wretch had fallen to this. And now——

What was to be done now?

"Pull yourself together, Crooke," said Talbot at last. "This isn't a time for breaking down. You've got to get out of this somehow. Thank goodness I stopped you in time. What you have st—taken must be replaced—at once!"

"Impossible."

"Why impossible?"

"I can't put it back. The desk is locked now, and I—I haven't the key now."

Talbot felt a chill.

"You had the key of Mr. Railton's desk?"

"Yes," muttered Crooke.

"And—and now——"

"Now I haven't."

"Good heavens!"

Talbot had determined to help the wretched, cowardly fellow, to save him if he could; for his own wretched sake, for the sake of his people, for the sake of his good name, for the sake of all who would be smirched by the black disgrace Crooke was bringing upon all connected with him. But at that moment it is not to be wondered at if the Shell fellow faltered—if he was tempted to step out of the matter there and then, and leave this wretched blackguard in his misery and shame.

Why should he be dragged into it—into shame, into disgrace, into baseness? What was the fellow to him?—his cousin, but always his enemy, always a carping, sneering enemy.

But that passed.

Back into Talbot's mind came the recollection of the past—his own past; the days when he had been the tool of a gang of cracksmen—when he had been called the "Toff," and sought by officers of the law. Those days were long past; long ago he had shaken off his evil associations, and thrown off the stain they had placed on him. But he felt—he knew—that it was not for the fellow who had been the prince of cracksmen to shrink in horror from this wretch.

A fellow like Tom Merry, or D'Arcy, or Figgins, would be justified in avoiding such contamination. All their natural instincts would lead them to keep away from a miserable rascal who had sunk to actual dishonesty. But it was not for the Toff to abandon him. What might he, himself, still have been, had he never been able to escape from the evil associations of his early boyhood? It was not for the Toff to turn his back on the sinner. It was for him to help.

He dropped his hand on Crooke's trembling arm.

"Come," he said.

He led the shaking Crooke away under the elms to a secluded bench. There he made him sit down. Far off, through the dusky evening, the lights of the School House windows glimmered across the quadrangle; but the quad was deserted now—the fellows were all in their Houses. Under the leafless elms the two Shell fellows were safe from observation, safe from listening ears. And Talbot, crushing down his deep repugnance, resolved to go through with the matter, still to help this trembling wretch, and save him if he could.

"Pull yourself together, Crooke," he said quietly. "Tell me exactly what you have done. There may be a chance yet. If I can help you out, I will help you."

"I—I must have been mad, I think," muttered Crooke hoarsely. "I never believed you'd get the money from Uncle Lyndon. You never believed so yourself."

"No," said Talbot. "I only hoped so. But tell me how——"

"It was all Railton's fault! He shouldn't have been careless with his key," said Crooke, in a miserable attempt at self-exoneration. "You know—he noticed something wrong—he's had his eye on me. The—the other day—he saw me here under the elms—looking awfully down in the mouth, I dare say—and he made me sit down, on this very bench, and questioned me. I nearly let the whole thing out I was so scared. But—but I fooled him! I told him I was worried over owing money at the school shop. Luckily, that satisfied him——"

Talbot compressed his lips.

But he did not interrupt. It was useless to tell the wretched fellow what he thought of his lying and shuffling.

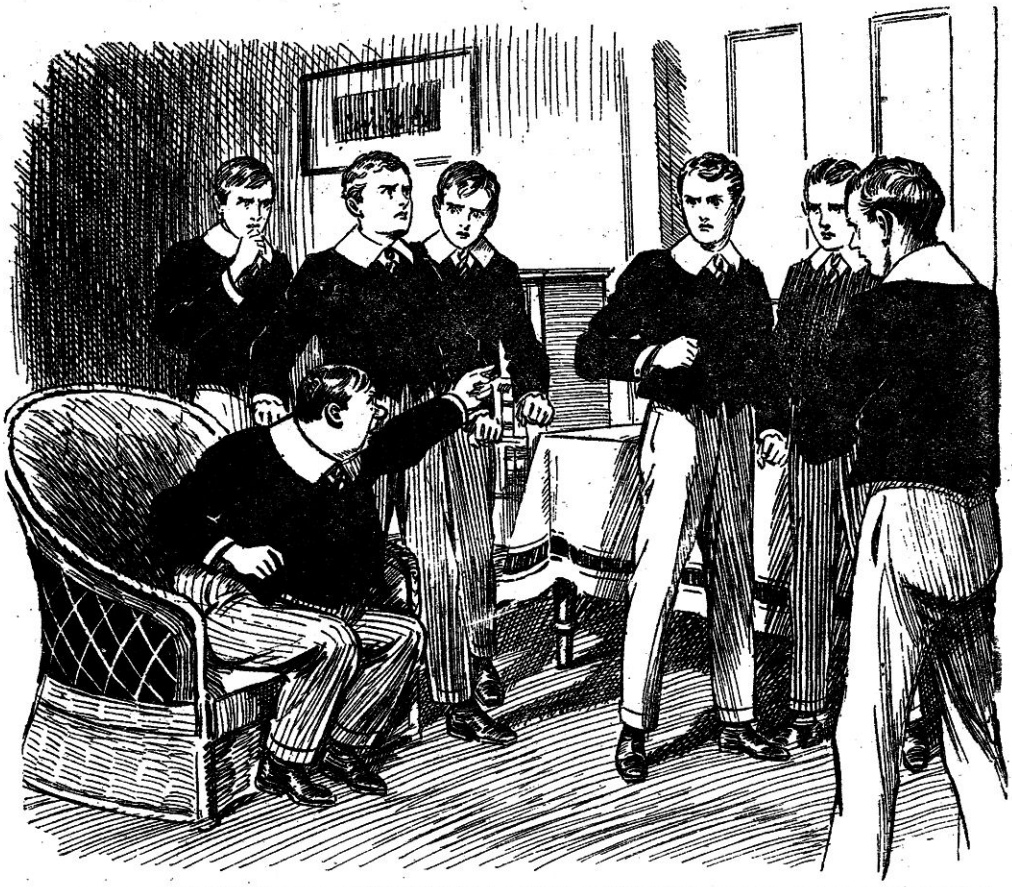
"He believed me," went on Crooke. "He lent me two pounds to pay Dame Taggles at the tuckshop. It's to be repaid out of my allowance, but—after he'd gone—I saw the key. He must have had it in the same pocket with his pocket-book. He dropped it when he took out the pocket-book to give me the money. It fell in the dead leaves and made no sound. He didn't see it—I never saw it till he was gone. I picked it up, intending to take it back to him. I swear I intended to take it back to him. But—but after that I—I thought——"

"Go on."

"Well, I thought I—I would keep it as a last chance if Uncle Lyndon didn't shell out," said Crooke miserably. "After that, Lodgey spoke to me near the school—the next day—threatened me. He's hard up for money, and getting desperate himself. You see, he put the money on the race for me, never dreaming that I was hard up and couldn't square—he's always known me to be flush of money. He thinks I'm swindling him, and—and I suppose he's right, in a way. Anyhow, he's furious. He spoke to me quite near the school, where anybody might have seen him——"

"I saw him," said Talbot quietly. "Tom Merry saw him, too. Luckily, no one else."

"He threatened me," groaned Crooke, "and—and I hadn't any real hope that old Lyndon would shell out. And—and I had the key in my pocket all the time. Mr. Railton hadn't missed it or inquired after it. He doesn't use that desk very often—only when he has to handle the House funds. He mayn't go to it till



"I tell you I heard Colonel Lyndon say that Talbot had written to him for fifty pounds!" roared Baggy Trimble. "Make it five hundred," suggested Monty Lowther. "No!" yelled Baggy. "It was fifty, wasn't it, Talbot?" All the juniors looked at Talbot, but he did not speak. (See Chapter 7.)

Saturday, very likely. Anyhow, I had the key. Then to-day—the chance came—everybody was out—all the fellows gone over to the Grammar School for the football match—most of the seniors on Big Side, and—and then Mr. Railton went in his car to fetch Colonel Lyndon from Wayland Station. Even Mr. Linton went out for a walk just—just as if it was all happening to give me a chance."

"And you——"

Crooke shuddered.

Now that he was telling another fellow what he had done, his brain seemed to be clearer, and he realised in all its enormity what he had been guilty of.

"I must have been mad," he said huskily.

"Tell me——"

"I—I went into Railton's study. I—I got the money from the desk—only fifty pounds. There was twice as much there, at least. I—I only took exactly what I—I needed. I—I'm not a thief——"

"Go on," said Talbot quietly.

"I locked the desk again and slipped the key into a pocket of Mr. Railton's old Norfolk jacket—you know, the old coat he keeps hanging up in his study——"

"I know."

"I—I thought he'd find it there sooner or later. Anyhow, he was bound to find it there when it was missed and looked for," muttered Crooke. "That—that saw me clear. There was nothing to connect me with the thing, anyhow. He couldn't prove that the key had ever been out of his possession. Anyhow, he couldn't connect me with it when he missed the currency notes from his desk. It—it seemed safe."

"And then?"

"Then I was going to cut down to Rylcombe on my bike and pay Lodgey, and get my paper back," groaned Crooke. "I—I wanted to get rid of the notes as soon as I could. Only—you know Linton's down on me. I was detained. I tried to dodge out of the Form-room again, and he caught me and locked me in. That—that was why I called to you from the window this afternoon."

"I understand."

"But for Mr. Linton I should have got rid of the notes long ago," mumbled Crooke.

"Then you may be thankful that Mr. Linton had his eye on you," said Talbot. "If you had parted with Mr. Railton's money you would be utterly ruined. Now, at least, there's a chance of giving it back."

"I can't!"

"You know where you put the key," said Talbot. "If you could get the key again and replace the money in the desk all will be well. You have done an awful thing, Crooke—but if you put the money back that is all you can do now, and at least it will never be known."

"I can't! I shouldn't dare to go to his study again," said Crooke, with a shudder. "I—I've not got your nerve, Talbot. I—I've been brought up differently."

Talbot's lip curved bitterly.

"I—I mean—I didn't mean to hurt you, old chap," said Crooke, peering at him in the gloom. "Goodness knows, you've been a good friend to me in this, and I've never deserved it from you. But it's a fact—I've

got no nerve—my nerves are in rags. I should never dare——"

"It must be done," said Talbot quietly.

"I—I know. But——"

"I only hope there may yet be time," said Talbot. "It is the only way to save yourself, Crooke, and to save all your people from disgrace."

"They couldn't prove anything against me," muttered Crooke. "I tell you there's nothing to show that I did it. Colonel Lyndon will never know why I was in the study——"

"Colonel Lyndon?"

"He arrived just when I was going to leave Railton's study," mumbled Crooke. "I think Railton was putting up the car. Anyhow, Uncle Lyndon came to Railton's study to wait there for him, and he came in and found me. But I—I stuffed him——"

"Crooke!"

"Do you think I could have told him why I was there?" snarled Crooke. "I made him believe I was there for a jape on the Housemaster, and he said he wouldn't mention it. He's gone now, anyhow, and he hardly ever comes to St. Jim's. Even if there's a row about the money, he will never hear of it. They can never connect me with it!"

Talbot gave him a pitying look.

"Thank heavens I stopped you in time!" he said. "I suppose you know that currency notes are numbered like banknotes, Crooke?"

"Nobody ever takes the numbers of currency notes, though."

"We don't," said Talbot. "But Mr. Railton has his money sent from his bank, and if he missed a bundle of currency notes he would apply to the bank at once, if he had not noted the numbers himself. He would know exactly which bundle of notes was missing. He would be able to tell the bank exactly what date they were sent to him, or handed to him. His banker would supply him—or the police—with the whole set of numbers at once."

Crooke stared at Talbot blankly.

"Do—you think so?" he stammered.

"I don't think so—I know!"

"Good heavens!" breathed Crooke. "And—and Lodgey would have paid away some of the notes here in Rylcombe—he owes a bill to Joliffe at the Green Man—and as soon as they were in circulation——"

He broke off, shuddering.

"In two or three days they would be traced to Lodgey, and he would state where he got them, unless he wished to face a charge of theft himself."

Crooke trembled from head to foot.

"I—I never thought——"

"There's an old proverb that honesty is the best policy, Crooke. You know what I've been through—long ago. I learned then, what every wrongdoer learns in time, that in doing wrong it is impossible to cover up one's tracks completely. There is always one point left unguarded by the most cunning criminal—always one flaw in the armour. Even a dishonest man would keep straight if he had enough common sense. You thought you were hiding what you did, and all you did was this—you made it an absolute certainty that you would be expelled for theft!"

"Oh, heavens!" breathed Crooke.

"Luckily, it is not too late, and you may thank Mr. Linton and the detention for it," said Talbot. "The money must be replaced."

"It—it would be safer to—to burn the notes——"

Talbot bit his lip hard.

"I'm trying to help you, Crooke. If you are determined to be a thief, I cannot help you. I drop the matter here and now. More than that! If Mr. Railton's money is not returned, it is my duty to tell him where to find it. Do you expect me to become a party to robbing our Housemaster? Are you out of your senses?"

"I—I didn't mean that. I—I—I'm too scared to think what I'm saying," mumbled Crooke. "I—I'll give the money back somehow. I'm not a thief. I never was anything of the kind. I shouldn't have touched his money, only—only I was frightened out of my wits. I'll give it back somehow! For mercy's sake, Talbot, don't turn me down now!"

His voice broke.

"I will stand by you if you do the best you can to undo what you've done," said Talbot. "The money must be replaced before it is missed. It's the only way to save you."

"I'll do it—somehow. But—but Lodgey——"

"You will pay Lodgey with the money Colonel Lyndon has given me," said Talbot. "Here it is—five tenners."

Crooke clutched the banknotes.

"God bless you, Talbot!" he muttered brokenly. "Oh, if I get out of this safe, I'll never play the fool again! I'll turn down that rotten gang—I'll never speak to Racke or Clampe again! I—I say, I'll cut out now and see Lodgey——"

"It's call-over in a few minutes now," said Talbot. "You will be missed at once, and Mr. Linton already suspects you of something——"

"I'll risk that."

"Leave it to me," said Talbot. "Pull yourself together, and come into the House now. After call-over, we'll take a stroll in the quad, and you can cut out and get back in time for some prep. But you must show up at call-over, or questions will be asked at once."

Crooke nodded.

"I—I believe you're my good angel, old chap!" he said huskily. "Stand by me till I'm through this—I'm not fit to think out anything for myself."

CAMEOS OF LIFE

A DIRGE OF

When winter winds blow chill and keen,
And every prospect freezes;
When lots of fellows may be seen
Sneezing terrific sneezes.
And when the 'Flu-germ flies around
Upon naughty missions,
Within the Sanny may be found
Patients of all positions.

For instance, there is Gerald Knox,
With influenza groaning;
His system cannot stand such shocks,
In bed he lies a-moaning.
There, also, Baggy Trimble lies,
He thinks that Fate is cruel;
No longer can he gorge on pies,
He's got to "take his gruel!"

And there is poor old Gussy, too,
Bemoaning his restriction;
There's one thing Gussy cannot do
Because of his affliction.
The 'flu has made him lose his voice;
No tenor songs he's croaking;
At which, we fervently rejoice,
And can't refrain from joking!

"That's all right," said Talbot.

And a few minutes later Crooke, making an effort to pull himself together, went into the School House with Talbot. They joined the crowd of School House juniors going into Hall for calling-over.

"Oh, heah you are, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, joining them with a cheery smile. "Bai Jove! Are you feelin' ill, Cwooke?"

"I'm not well," muttered Crooke.

"Sowwy to see you lookin' so sick, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "Do you think it is the cigawettes?"

"What?"

"I wecommend you to give up smokin', Cwooke. It's a wotten bad habit, you know, as well as bein' wotten bad form."

"You silly ass!" muttered Crooke.

"Weally, Cwooke——"

"Oh, go and eat coke, you fathead!" growled Crooke, and he went into Hall.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gazed after him, with the assistance of his celebrated eyeglass, and frowned wrathfully.

"Bai Jove! Your cousin's mannahs are weally wuffianly," he said. "Have you any objection to my givin' your cousin a feahful thwashin', Talbot?"

"Lots!" said Talbot with a smile.

"Then I will let him off," said Arthur Augustus graciously. "But, weally, you know, his mannahs are shockin'."

"Oh, here you are, Talbot!" said Tom Merry, coming along with Manners and Lowther. "Come on, old scout!"

And the juniors went into Hall. Mr. Railton, the Housemaster, was calling the roll, and Mr. Linton was standing with him. When the name of Crooke was called, Mr. Linton glanced round sharply at the ranks of the Shell. But Crooke's voice answered "Adsum" at once.

After call-over, when the School House fellows marched out of Hall, Talbot joined his cousin. Tom Merry called to him.

"Coming up to prep, Talbot?"

"Not just now, old man. I'm taking a stroll round the quad with Crooke."

"You're getting jolly pally with Crooke, aren't you?" said Manners.

"No business of yours, is it?" snapped Crooke.

"Dear man," said Monty Lowther, "we're Talbot's pals, you know, and it's up to us to keep him out of bad company."

"You silly idiot!"

"I trust, my young friend," went on Lowther solemnly—"I hope and trust, my dear young friend, that you are not falling into bad ways as well as bad company. If you are going to smoke cigarettes in the woodshed with that bad character——"

"Oh, don't be an ass, old chap," said Talbot good-humouredly.

"Monty can't help it," said Tom Merry. "Asses are like poets—born, not made."

"Why, you fathead——" began Lowther warmly.

Talbot nodded to the Terrible Three, and walked away with Crooke. They strolled on the path by the lighted windows of the House for a few minutes, and then quietly slipped away under the elms. They reached the slanting oak by the school wall. It was a new thing for Talbot of the Shell to be helping a young rascal to break bounds, and it was bitterly repugnant to him. But he had set his hand to the plough, and would not draw back.

"I'll wait here for you," he whispered. "As quick back as you can, Crooke; it's frightfully risky, at the best."

"I sha'n't be long, you can bet."

Talbot helped him over the wall, and Crooke disappeared.

Then the Shell fellow waited, pacing up and down under the shadowy trees.

His face was dark and troubled.

He did not repent of having resolved to help Crooke and to save him. But his whole nature shrank from the miserable trickery and dishonesty and deception with which he had been dragged into contact.

It was a long wait for him.

His prep remained untouched in the study—it could not be helped. He knew that the fellows would miss him from the House—but that could not be helped either. Crooke also would be missed; but if he was seen coming in, it would be better for him to be seen coming in with Talbot. Talbot's reputation was good enough to cover Crooke.

There was a sound at the wall at last. Gerald Crooke, breathless, dropped from the wall, and Talbot turned to him eagerly.

"Well?"

"It's done!" Crooke panted, but even in the darkness Talbot could see that his face was brighter. "I've paid the brute! You should have seen his face when I handed him the tenners. He got jolly civil all of a sudden." Crooke laughed sardonically. "He thinks there's a lot more to come, if I can raise fifty pounds in a lump, the rotter! I've done with him now."

"Thank Heaven for that!"

"I've got my paper back," said Crooke. "I've burned it—I set a match to it at once. I'm safe from Lodgey now—safe! The brute's as civil as anything, too; he expects to see me at the Green Man again at the old game. He jolly well won't! I've had enough of that game. Let's get in."

"Come on."

The two juniors walked to the School House.

(*Continued on page 17.*)

ONE FOR MANCHESTER!

A READER WINS A HANDSOME "MEAD" BICYCLE COSTING £7 12s. 6d.

AND FIVE OTHER READERS EACH WIN A TOPPING TABLE FOOTBALL GAME!

RESULT OF "BICYCLE" JOKE COMPETITION NO. 2.

THIS WINS A BICYCLE!

SOME FIND!

Two labourers were building a house when one of them discovered a heap of empty condensed milk tins. "Bill," he shouted excitedly, "come here, quick! Blowed if I ain't found a cows' nest!"—The special prize of a "Mead" Bicycle has been awarded to Arnold Smethurst, 10, Briardene, New Moston, near Failsworth, Manchester.

CIRCUMSTANCES ALTER FACES!

Mother: "What's that, Tommy—you've been fighting with Johnny Jimson? I thought he was a peaceable child. He had such a nice face, too." Tommy (glowing with pride): "Well, he ain't got one now!"—A topping Football Game has been awarded to Miss Nelly Scott, 27, Harrington Road, Aberdeen, Scotland.

HE TOOK THE BUN!

The train had just pulled up at the railway station when one of the passengers popped his head out of a carriage window and beckoned to a youngster who was standing on the platform. "Would you be good enough to run across to the refreshment-room and buy me a bun?" he asked. "And here's a penny to buy one for yourself, too," he added generously. Within a very short time the youngster returned, eating a bun. "They only had one bun left, so I've brought your penny back," he said, munching the while. "You'll have to wait until you get to the next station and try there!"—A topping Football Game has been awarded to Douglas Lewin, 52, Scotts Road, Leyton, E. 10.

HE SCORED!

"Patience and perseverance will accomplish all things," was a favourite saying of an old miller. He had just made this remark in a train one day, when a pompous individual in a corner seat butted in. "Nonsense, sir!" he said irritably. "I can tell you a great many things which neither patience nor perseverance can accomplish." "Perhaps you can," said the miller, "but I have never yet come across one." "Well, then, I'll tell you one. Will patience and perseverance ever enable you to carry water in a sieve?" "Certainly," said the miller. "Pshaw!" grunted the irritable one. "I would like to know how." "Simply by waiting patiently for the water to freeze!" said the miller calmly.—A topping Football Game has been awarded to Ernest Brain, 12, Denbigh Street, City Road, Bristol.

ANOTHER VALUABLE "GO-ANYWHERE" MOUNT AWARDED NEXT WEEK, CHUMS!

THEN SHE RETIRED!

At a dinner-party the guests were discussing whether women or men were the most trustworthy in business. "No woman can keep a secret," said one man scornfully. "I don't know so much about that," retorted the woman seated opposite him. "I've kept my age a secret ever since I was twenty-four." "Oh," replied the man, "you'll let it out one day, though, mark my words!" "Never!" exclaimed the woman. "When a woman has kept a secret for twenty years, she can keep it for ever!"—A topping Football Game has been awarded to H. C. Southon, 40, Lavender Hill, Tonbridge, Kent.

THE UNDAUNTED SERGEANT!

The bugle sounded the "Fall in!" and at once the men rushed to take their places. "Dress by the right!" roared the sergeant. The order was obeyed, and the men shuffled into a straight line. But the non.-com., an old soldier, was not satisfied. "Step forward, McGinty!" he ordered. "McGinty's not here, sir!" said a voice. The sergeant frowned, but was undaunted. "Step forward, then, the man next to him!" he roared.—A topping Football Game has been awarded to Alex Stewart, 141, Glenalmond Street, Tollcross, Glasgow.

RESULT OF

"BICYCLE" JOKE COMPETITION NO. 3

NEXT WEEK!

STANDING BY A SCAPEGRACE!

(Continued from page 15.)

The House was not yet locked up, but it was past the time when all juniors were supposed to be in their Houses. Crooke set his lips as he saw Mr. Linton's eyes on him the moment he came in.

"You are late out of the House, Crooke," said the master of the Shell.

"I—I had a headache, sir," said Crooke. "I—I was indoors all the afternoon, sir, and—and I took a stroll round the quad with Talbot."

"Very well, Crooke. You had better go to your preparation now."

"Yes, sir."

Only too well Crooke knew that his Form master would not have been so easily satisfied had he not been in Talbot's company. It was strange enough that Talbot—the "Toff" of old—was the fellow who was above suspicion; while Crooke, the rich man's son who had had every advantage, was distrusted and suspected. But so it was. The two juniors went up the big staircase together to the Shell passage.

CHAPTER 7.
"Rally Round!"

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY detached himself from the balustrade upon which he was gracefully leaning, and stepped into the way of the two Shell fellows. He did not deign to notice Crooke, whose manners—or want of manners—got rather severely on the noble nerves of the great Gussy. But he bestowed his kindest smile on Talbot of the Shell.

"Waitin' for you, deah boy," he said.

Talbot of the Shell stopped; Crooke lounged on towards his study.

There was a very great difference in Crooke's manner and look now.

The clearing off of his debt to Mr. Lodgey had lifted an immense weight from his mind.

It was true that still, in an inner pocket, he carried the bundle of currency-notes he had taken from Mr. Railton's desk. But he had resolved to replace that bundle of notes, and the resolve to a great extent exonerated him in his own eyes. He was no longer in fear of Mr. Lodgey—no longer dreading to see the evil face of the sharper at the gates of St. Jim's—no longer fearing a summons to the Head's study to answer for his conduct. The relief was so great that it seemed to give Crooke new life, and for the moment he was only thinking of the relief and his fortunate escape.

His face was unclouded now, his step was light, as he went along the Shell passage. Judging by appearances, indeed, it would have seemed that Crooke had passed his troubles over to Talbot's shoulders—for Talbot was looking by no means so content. He was glad that Crooke was out of danger from Mr. Lodgey, but the thought of the stolen notes was like lead on his mind.

That matter Talbot was feverishly anxious to clear off without delay, but Crooke seemed in no such hurry. Indeed, he did not seem sorry that Arthur Augustus had taken possession of Talbot. He went on quickly to his study, as if relieved to be away from him. Talbot stopped, suppressing his impatience. It had dawned upon him that Crooke was by no means eager to take the risk of returning the abstracted notes. Left to himself, it was very likely that Crooke would have burned them, thus saving himself from danger without further risk.

There was, indeed, no telling what the weak-natured, cowardly fellow might have done, and Talbot felt that there was no time to lose. He had intervened in the matter, and it was up to him to see that Crooke did not sink deeper than he had sunk already—and there was also a new aspect to the position now. If the notes were not returned to Mr. Railton, Talbot was a party to the theft—an accessory after the fact. That was the situation into which he had been brought by his desire to help the black sheep of the school, and that Crooke should be careless of such a consideration was rather bitter knowledge for Talbot. Yet it was clear that Crooke was glad to get away from him now.

"Pway hold on, deah boy," Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was saying. "I have been waitin' for you. You've been wathah a long time comin' in, old bean. I twust, Talbot, that you wegard me as a fwiend?"

"Yes, of course, old fellow," said Talbot, his eyes following Crooke as the latter disappeared up the passage.

"You will not wegard it as impertinent if I offah to help you in the pwesent state of your affaiahs?"

Talbot started.

"I—I don't quite understand, Gussy. What's up?"

"It's all wight, deah boy," said Gussy, with a smile, "I found a lettah waitin' for me when I got back fwom the Gwammah School this aftahnoon. There was a tip in it fwom my patah."

Talbot looked at him.

"A fivah!" said Gussy impressively.

"Congratters, old chap," said the Shell fellow.

"It's come in wathah luckay—what?" said Arthur Augustus. "That fivah, Talbot, is quite at your service."

Talbot started again.

"My dear fellow——" he ejaculated.

"Not a word, deah boy," said the generous Gussy. "As soon as I heard about your bein' hard up, old fellow, I thought of it at once. I've got the fivah heah, Talbot."

"But—but I don't catch on," stammered Talbot. "I'm not hard up, Gussy."

"Eh?"

"Not at all. My uncle tipped me to-day, as a matter of fact. Thanks all the same, of course."

Arthur Augustus jammed his eyeglass into his noble eye, and surveyed Talbot very carefully. He seemed astonished.

"You can twust me, Talbot," he said, with dignity. "I am speakin' entirely as a fwiend. I am not the fellow to butt into anothah fellow's affaiahs, you know. As a fwiend, I should like to help you in your pwesent financial stwaits."

"But I'm not in any financial straits, old bean," said Talbot. "What put that idea into your head?"

"You are suah, deah boy!"

"Well, I ought to know, oughtn't I?" said Talbot, with a smile.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"It's all right, old bean," said the Shell fellow. "You're an awfully good chap, Gussy; but really, I'm quite well fixed in that line. Thanks no end, all the same."

And with a nod, Talbot of the Shell went on his way, leaving Arthur Augustus looking very astonished. Evidently the idea had been fixed in Gussy's noble mind that Talbot was "up against it" financially.

Talbot paused outside Crooke's study, but he did not enter. Racke of the Shell would be there at prep, and he could not speak before Racke. He had his own prep to do, also—as much as there was time for. He decided to leave Crooke till after prep, and went on to his own study. His study-mates, Gore and Skimpole, were at prep there. George Gore looked at him very curiously as he came in, and Skimpole gave him a solemn, serious blink through his big spectacles. Talbot was conscious that his study-mates were regarding him with curiosity as he sorted out his books for prep.

"Quid any good, Talbot?" asked Gore suddenly.

"Wha-a-at!"

Gore coloured a little. He was not a pleasant fellow, and was not much liked in his Form. But somehow, even the bully of the Shell respected Talbot, and could not help liking him.

"You heard what I said," muttered Gore gruffly. "I've got a quid, and if it's any good, here it is!"

"My dear Talbot," said Skimpole, before the astonished Shell fellow could answer. "I was about to make a remark on the same topic. It is unfortunately true that my financial resources are limited, but I have at the present moment the inconsiderable sum of eighteenpence in my possession. If that sum would be of any use to you, my dear fellow, in your present pressing circumstances, I beg you to accept it."

Talbot stared at them.

"Is this a rag?" he asked at last.

"I fail to comprehend that question, my dear Talbot," said the solemn Skimpole. "In your present difficulties for money——"

"I'm not in difficulties for money."

"I am extremely glad to hear you say so, my dear Talbot. But I was assuredly labouring under the impression——"

"You don't want the quid?" asked Gore, staring at Talbot.

"No; thanks all the same. But will you tell me what this means?" asked Talbot. "D'Arcy's just offered me a fiver, and now you fellows seem to think that I'm hard up. Is it a rag, or what?"

"Blessed if I catch on," said Gore. "It's the talk of the House that you're on your beam ends for cash."

"What!" exclaimed Talbot.

"According to what the fellows are saying, you had your uncle here to-day to ask him for money—a lot of money," said Gore. "Of course he wouldn't hand it out—a crusty old codger like that!"

Talbot crimsoned.

"That fat idiot Trimble——" he exclaimed angrily.

"I believe it came from Trimble," said Gore, with a nod. "Never mind whom it came from, if it's true."

"It's not true!" snapped Talbot.

Gore eyed him curiously.

"I know Trimble is an awful fibber," he agreed, "but it's odd if he made up a yarn like that. I don't see what put it into his head. According to the yarn I heard among the fellows, you asked your uncle for a large sum of money. And you say you didn't?"

Talbot did not answer that question. Certainly he had asked Colonel Lyndon for a large sum of money, and he realised now that Baggy Trimble had repeated what he had overheard, all over the House. Evidently the story had reached Study No. 6, and had been the cause of D'Arcy's generous offer of his fiver. Talbot bit his lip with vexation.

"Well," said Gore, rather surlily, "if you're not hard up I'm glad. We're not exactly friends, but—well, if you were up against it I'd be willing to help all I could. No harm done, I suppose."

Talbot's face cleared.

"My dear chap," he said, cordially enough, "I'm no end obliged to you, and to Skimmy, too. It's awfully decent of you. But that fat fool Trimble quite misunderstood what he heard in this study; or, rather, he doesn't know what he's talking about. I'm not hard up. It's all right. Thanks all the same."

"Oh, all serene," said Gore, with a nod. "I've noticed you've been jolly thick with Crooke lately, and I know what that means—he wouldn't have a civil word for you if he wasn't in low water. I figured it out that he had been sticking you for money to square some shady debt or other."

Talbot compressed his lips If Baggy Trimble had been at hand just then, Baggy would probably have bagged a more severe kicking than he had received in the afternoon.

Talbot sat down to his prep. Gore and Skimpole were finished long before Talbot, and they left the study. Talbot was still at work when the door opened, and Tom Merry looked in.

"Still going it?" asked the captain of the Shell, with a smile.

"Yes; sha'n't be long now, though."

"Drop into my study before you go down, will you?"

"Certainly."

Tom Merry withdrew, leaving Talbot to finish. For once Talbot hurried through his prep, almost "scamping" it. He wanted to settle matters with Gerald Crooke before bedtime. But he could not very well neglect Study No. 10, and when he had finished work he went in to see Tom Merry. The Terrible Three were all in Study No. 10, though they had finished prep long ago.

"Oh, here you are, old fellow," said Tom. "Trot in, and shut the door."

Talbot guessed what was coming now. Study No. 10 had heard the tale of Baggy Trimble.

He was feeling extremely annoyed and uncomfortable, and yet there was something pleasant in this general rallying of the School House fellows to help him in his supposed difficulty. Even the surly and sulky Gore had rallied round, which certainly Gore would not have done for any other fellow at St. Jim's.

"Now, old fellow, don't blush," said Monty Lowther, with a grin. "We've all been there at times; and we're all friends here."

"The fact is, Talbot," said Tom, coming to the point in his frank, direct way, "there's a lot of talk going on about you up and down the passage. Somebody seems to have got hold of the news that you are hard up. I don't know whether it's true, but if it is, this Study will shell out to the last bean to see you through."

"The last giddy haricot!" said Lowther solemnly.

"Jolly lucky I didn't get those new films this afternoon, in the circumstances," said Manners. "We're all in funds, Talbot!"

Talbot coloured and smiled.

"You're awfully good," he said, "but it's all bunkum. That fool Trimble was eavesdropping, and, of course, misunderstood. There's really nothing the matter. I'm all right in that line."

"Oh, good!" said Tom. "I didn't half believe what I heard, but it's a regular yarn up and down the passage, so I thought I'd mention it. We can raise four pounds among us in this study, as it happens."

"No end obliged, old fellow—but it's all right."

"Good!" said Monty Lowther. "Sure you're not in debt, old bean, with any bookies or publicans or sinners? You've been keeping some jolly bad company lately."

"Fathead!" said Talbot, laughing.

"Let's go and kick Trimble, if it started with Trimble," suggested Manners. "It's too thick, to spread a yarn like that about a chap. The story is that you had your Uncle Lyndon here to ask him for some gigantic sum of money—goodness knows how much! I've heard different estimates—from fifty to two hundred and fifty."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Let's go and kick Trimble, by all means," said Talbot.

And the four Shell fellows left Study No. 10 and proceeded to Trimble's study in the Fourth Form passage. In that study Wildrake and Mellish were finishing their prep, but Baggy Trimble was not at prep. Baggy was sprawling in the study armchair, groaning dismally.

"Hallo! What's the matter with that fat animal?" asked Lowther.

Wildrake looked up with a grin.

"I guess Study No. 6 have been slaughtering him," he said. "They found their tuck missing when they came in. Trimble says he never touched it—which, of course, is proof that he did."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yow-ow-ow-ow!" groaned Trimble.

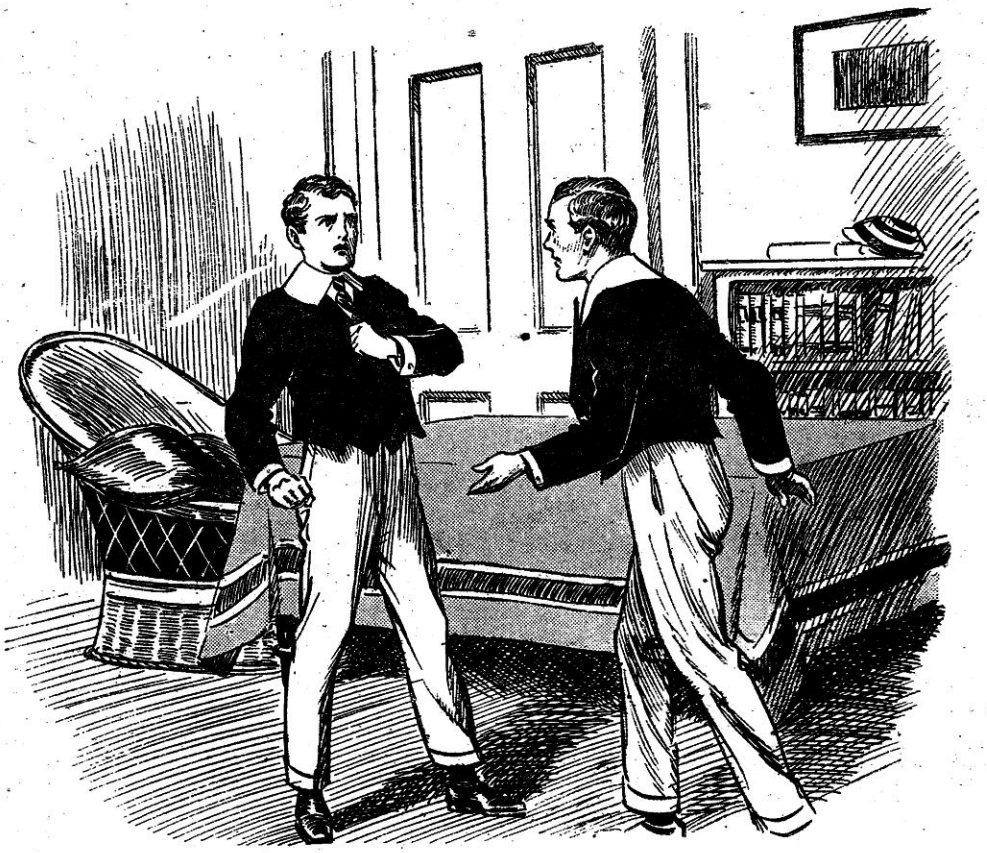
Tom Merry laughed.

"We came here to kick Trimble for spreading a yarn about Talbot," he said. "No objections, I suppose?"

"My dear chap, kick him as much as you like," said Wildrake. "Nothing in that yarn, Talbot?"

"Nothing."

"Then I guess I won't offer you the little loan I had ready for you," chuckled Wildrake. "If there happened to be anything in it, I guess I've got some quids at your service."



"You promised to keep my secret," muttered Crooke. "I—I—Talbot, I can't do it!" "You will," said Talbot. "You will replace Mr. Railton's money where you took it from!" "I can't do it—I shall give myself away," panted Crooke. "If—if you think the money ought to be put back, you—you do it!" Talbot started as if he had been stung. *(See Chapter 8.)*

"Thanks, old fellow," said Talbot, "but it's all right."

Mellish looked round at him very curiously. Mellish was one of the pals of Gerald Crooke, and, like Crooke's other pals, he had let him down, with a very heavy down, in his trouble.

"Sure there's nothing in it, Talbot?" he asked, with a grin.

"Yes," said Talbot curtly.

Mellish laughed.

"You've been jolly pally with Crooke lately," he said. "Crooke's been dunning us all for money—he had a fight with Racke last week because Aubrey wouldn't lend him anything. He called Clampe and Chowle all the names he could think of—very pretty names, some of them. Mean to say that Crooke hasn't been sticking you for money?"

"I don't mean to say anything to you, Mellish."

"Oh, keep your wool on!" said Percy Mellish cheerfully. "I wouldn't lend Crooke a red cent. But if you're hard up, I've got ten bob you can have, though you don't like me, and wouldn't touch me with a barge-pole."

Talbot stared at him.

"My hat!" he ejaculated.

"I mean it," said Mellish, flushing.

"I'm sure you do," said Talbot in a softer voice. "It's awfully decent of you, too. But I don't want it, thanks."

"Too jolly lofty to borrow from me, what?" said Mellish, with a sneer. "Well, it doesn't worry me."

"Not at all," said Talbot quickly. "I think it's jolly decent of you, Mellish, but it's all a mistake—that fat fool Trimble doesn't know what he is talking about."

"Oh, draw it mild!" grunted Trimble. "Mean to make out that you didn't ask that crusty old colonel for fifty pounds? I heard you."

"You lying worm!" exclaimed Tom Merry indignantly.

"I tell you I heard it!" roared Trimble. "I tell you I heard Colonel Lyndon say that Talbot had written to him for fifty pounds, and that's why he came down to the school to-day."

"Make it five hundred!" suggested Lowther.

"It was fifty——"

"Not fifty thousand?" asked Manners.

"No!" yelled Trimble. "Just fifty! Wasn't it, Talbot?"

All the juniors looked at Talbot of the Shell. Trimble was well known to be a successful rival of the celebrated Ananias in his own line, but there was a ring of truth about Trimble now, somehow. Mellish grinned rather maliciously; it was evident that he, at least, fully believed Baggy's story.

Talbot did not speak. Certainly he was not called upon to deny Baggy's yarn. Yet the juniors could not help feeling that it was odd, to say the least, that he did not deny it, if it was untrue.

There was an uncomfortable silence in the study for a moment or two. Tom Merry broke it.

"Get up, Trimble."

"Eh! What for?"

"To be kicked, old fat bean."

"Yow-ow-ow! All those beasts in Study No. 6 have been kicking me," groaned Trimble. "They make out I bagged their tuck, and I shouldn't wonder if that cad Gore makes out I helped myself to his cake. I told Blake that it was Mrs. Mimm's cat—I told him I actually saw the cat at his study cupboard, and he gave me another kick, the beast. Ow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Perhaps Trimble has been kicked enough," said Talbot, laughing. "But you should really mind your own business, Trimble."

And Talbot left the study, and the Terrible Three followed him, much to Trimble's relief. Baggy felt that he had been kicked quite enough, if not a little too much. He had suffered severely for his grub-raiding that afternoon, and he had a well-founded apprehension that there was more to come.

Tom Merry & Co. went down the staircase. At the foot of the stairs, St. Leger of the Fifth was lounging. He signed to Talbot.

The Terrible Three walked on, rather wondering what the dandy of the Fifth could have to say to a Shell fellow. Talbot wondered, too, as he stopped with the Fifth-Former.

"Excuse me, kid," said St. Leger, "no bizney of mine, but if you've landed yourself in trouble perhaps I can help you."

Talbot stared at him blankly.

"My only hat!" he murmured.

Evidently the tale of Talbot's supposed financial difficulties had reached the Fifth. With the matter talked of up and down the studies and passages, it was not surprising, perhaps, that Fifth Form fellows had heard something of it, but it was really amazing that a Fifth Form man should have troubled his head about it, especially a member of the sporting circle of Cutts & Co.

St. Leger smiled faintly at the astonishment in Talbot's face.

"I've been there myself, you know," he murmured lazily. "You're a good kid, Talbot, and accordin' to what I've heard some of the fags tattlin', you've got yourself into pretty deep waters. If there's anythin' in it, I'd be sorry to see you down and out. You're a good kid, and from what I've heard you had a hard row to hoe before you came to this school. I'm not goin' to ask you any questions—no bizney of mine. If you're up against it, I'll help you out, and keep my mouth shut—what?"

"You're awfully good," said Talbot, "but there's nothing in it, St. Leger. Only a silly yarn."

St. Leger gave him a rather searching look.

Then he nodded.

"All serene—no harm done," he murmured, and he strolled away and joined Cutts of the Fifth.

Talbot walked on with a flush on his face. Obviously the story that he had asked his uncle for fifty pounds was going the rounds of the House—it was a rather startling story, as he realised, and likely to excite interest. A Shell junior who was in want of such a sum as fifty pounds was remarkable enough to excite interest anywhere. The Fifth had heard it—it might reach the Sixth and the prefects next—even the masters, perhaps.

Talbot compressed his lips, rather regretting that he had not kicked Trimble after all. The situation was intensely annoying.

At the same time, it had its agreeable side. The mere rumour that Talbot of the Shell was up against it had brought forth a demonstration of how he was liked in his House. The most unlikely fellows had rallied round—not only his own friends, but the surly, sulky Gore, and the mean and malicious Mellish—and now the sportsman of the Fifth. It was intensely annoying, but it was flattering in its way, and it was strange enough that the one-time "Toff" was the fellow round whom the whole House seemed eager to rally in the hour of need.

CHAPTER 8.
Again Too Late!

GERALD CROOKE was loafing by the fire in the junior Common-room when Talbot saw him again. It was close on bedtime now, and there were a good many fellows in the room, chatting before dorm. Crooke certainly saw Talbot come in, but he affected not to see him, turning his back towards the door and beginning to speak to Scrope of the Shell. Talbot crossed over to him at once. He had a matter to settle with Crooke that could not wait, though Crooke apparently considered that it could wait indefinitely.

"I want to speak to you, Crooke," said Talbot quietly. "Will you come up to the study?"

"It's just on dorm," said Crooke.

"Come, will you?"

"No, I won't," said Crooke. "I've got something to say to Scrope."

Talbot drew a deep, deep breath.

The terror of Lodgey and his threats was gone from Crooke's mind now. Talbot had expected that to make a difference. He had not quite foreseen how much difference it would make.

Crooke looked a new fellow already. The deep lines of worry and anxiety seemed to have been erased from his face; his manner was no longer furtive and suspicious and apprehensive. Many of the juniors had remarked on the change in Crooke that evening, so striking was it. Indeed, his old pals, Racke & Co., concluded that it meant that he was out of the financial difficulties which had caused such a marked coolness between them, and they were thinking of being civil to Gerald again.

Talbot felt a throb of deep anger as he looked at the black sheep of the Shell. Apparently, Crooke, safe now from the terror that had haunted him, was willing to let matters rest, regardless of the fact that fifty pounds was missing from Mr. Railton's desk, and that as soon as the Housemaster discovered the loss there would be a hue and cry and such a sensation as the School House of St. Jim's had never known before.

But Talbot was not the fellow to be played with as Crooke seemed to suppose. He grasped Crooke's arm as the fellow was turning away.

"Come!" he said.

Crooke stared at him angrily.

"Let go my arm!"

Talbot looked him in the eyes.

"Will you come?"

"No."

"Very well; I am going to Mr. Railton."

With that, Talbot of the Shell turned and walked out of the Common-room.

He had not taken six steps down the corridor, when Crooke was at his side, catching at his arm.

"Talbot! You don't mean——" Crooke's face was white as chalk.

"I do!" said Talbot grimly.

"I'll come to the study," muttered Crooke sullenly.

"Come, then."

The two Shell fellows went up the staircase. Talbot led the way into his study, and closed the door when Crooke was inside. Gore and Skimpole were downstairs now. They had the room to themselves.

Crooke's face was sullen and apprehensive. He avoided the clear, steady eyes that Talbot fixed sternly on him.

"Let's have this out, Crooke," said Talbot quietly. "I've helped you out of your trouble, and I mean to help you out of the worse trouble you've landed yourself in. I tell you plainly that I don't feel at all sure that I'm doing right in shielding you; and, still more plainly, that if Mr. Railton's money is not returned at once, I shall tell him where to look for it. You shall not make me a party to a theft."

Crooke sneered.

"That from the Toff!" he said. "What were you before you came to St. Jim's? Don't give me that stuff."

Talbot's lip trembled.

This was Crooke's kind of gratitude. It was what he might have expected, knowing the fellow as he did.

Crooke flushed a little at the expression on his face. He had the grace to feel ashamed of his words the moment they were uttered.

"Sorry, Talbot," he stammered awkwardly. "I—I—that was a beastly caddish thing to say, I know. But—but don't rag me—don't hound me down as you're doing. I've been through enough lately, I think."

Talbot calmed himself with an effort.

"For goodness' sake, Crooke, have a little sense! Surely you can see that if you're to escape being expelled as a thief, Mr. Railton's money must be put back before he misses it."

Crooke shifted uneasily.

"You know what will follow when he misses it—a sensation all through the school, and a search. Do you want to be found with the stolen currency notes in your pocket?"

"They're not in my pocket now, you fool!" muttered Crooke. "Do you think I'm idiot enough to carry them about! I've hidden them."

"Where?" asked Talbot.

"Under a loose board in the box-room. If they're found, there's nothing to connect me with them."

"You took them from Mr. Railton's desk."

"Who's to prove it? If they'd been passed, I know; you made that clear to me. Nobody's going to pass them. If there's a search, they will be found. Railton will get his money back. I suppose you don't think I'm going to spend any of it. I'm not a thief."

"The money must be returned."

"What's the odds?" said Crooke sullenly. "I tell you it will be found if there is a search. Not a shilling will be missing. That's as good as putting it back, and it saves the risk. Suppose I was spotted in Railton's study, fooling about with his desk. Do you think he'd suppose I was putting money there? He'd think I was robbing him. What's the good of taking that risk?"

Talbot breathed hard.

"It will be known that Mr. Railton's desk was robbed if the money is missed," he said.

"I know that."

"It will be known that there is a thief in the House."

Crooke winced.

"You needn't use that word. I'm not a thief—I wouldn't touch a shilling of the money!"

"The thief will be searched for, and the Head will not let the matter drop until he is found," said Talbot. "The matter will be sifted to the very bottom. You are not making yourself safe by this funking, Crooke; you are renewing your danger and making it worse."

Crooke's face clouded. Evidently the wretched fellow had persuaded himself that the matter would be settled if the missing money was found soon after it was missed. Like most weak characters, Crooke had a way of believing, or half believing, what he wanted to believe. But Talbot's direct words had the effect of making the scales fall from his eyes. It brought clearly to his mind what would follow—what must follow—the discovery of a theft in the House. It was absolutely certain that the headmaster would never allow the matter to rest until the guilt had been traced home to the culprit. Crooke saw the abyss opening under his feet again.

"For your own sake, Crooke, you must do the right thing, if for no other motive," said Talbot patiently.

"I—I daren't!" muttered Crooke. "How can I get the key back again? I daren't go into Railton's study——"

"You dared go there to steal the currency notes," said Talbot grimly. "You must find at least as much courage to put them back again."

"I—I can't."

"You must."

"I—I won't, then!" panted Crooke.

Talbot set his teeth.

"You will!" he said. "You've dragged me into it, Crooke, and you're not your own master now. You will replace Mr. Railton's money where you took it from, before there is a scandal about a thief in the House. If the money is not returned I shall be forced to speak to the Housemaster."

"You promised to keep my secret," muttered Crooke. "You gave me your word——"

He broke off.

"Talbot, I can't do it! Don't drive me to it, or the game's up. I tell you my nerve isn't equal to it! I shall give myself away first shot. Let the money be found—or—or, if you think that it ought to be put back, you—you do it!"

Talbot started as if he had been stung.

"I!" he exclaimed, in a voice that made Crooke shrink back.

"Keep your temper!" panted Crooke. "What's the good of getting ratty now? You've helped me—you've saved my neck. You don't want me to ruin myself after that, do you?"

"You think I will touch the money—stolen money!" said Talbot between his teeth, his eyes blazing.

But the next moment the blaze died out of his eyes, the anger from his face. Was it for the Toff to speak in that strain—the strain in which Tom Merry might have spoken? The black past came with a rush into Talbot's mind. His face paled, and for the moment it looked old—old and worn. He sank down wearily on a chair.

Crooke looked at him, surprised by the sudden change.

"You could do it," he muttered. "You've got the nerve. I'm not taunting you, Talbot, goodness knows—but you've done things in the past that no man at St. Jim's would ever have had the nerve to do. It's nothing to you. If the key's to be got, you can get it easier than I can. You've got the nerve, the pluck. Railton goes to the Head for a jaw every evening; you can slip into his study, and—and, if the key's there——"

Talbot recovered himself.

"I've asked for this," he said bitterly. "No fellow at St. Jim's would have helped you but me—no fellow but me would keep your vile secret. And now you ask me to handle stolen money. There's a limit, Crooke! You're asking too much. I cannot."

"Let it alone, then," muttered Crooke, "and let me alone."

Talbot shook his head.

"I helped you. I promised to keep your guilt a secret, but that was on the understanding that you did the right thing," he answered. "Mr. Railton will be gone to the Head now. Now's your chance, before dorm. Crooke, if you've a rag of decency in you——"

Crooke was silent.

"Haven't you asked enough of me?" exclaimed Talbot passionately. "You've never been my friend, and I've humiliated myself to ask for money for you—and saved you. Now I only ask you to do what you ought to be eager and anxious to do, Crooke!"

Crooke's face was pale and red by turns.

"I—I—— You're right, Talbot," he muttered. "I—I know! I'll do my best—I'll try!"

And, as if afraid that his courage would fail before

he could carry out his resolve, Gerald Crooke hurried from the study. His way led him to the box-room, and Talbot watched him go, with a doubting and clouded face. Crooke had screwed up his courage to the sticking-point. Was the matter to end at last? Was Talbot to be able to shake himself free of it?

He waited in the study.

A quarter of an hour passed, every minute dragging slowly on wings of lead.

There was a step at last.

The door opened and Crooke came in.

His face was white.

"You've done it?" breathed Talbot.

"I've tried—believe me, I've tried!" Crooke sank into a chair, with a groan. "On my word, Talbot——"

"What's happened?"

"The key—it's not there!" Crooke panted for breath. "I—I went to Railton's study, but—but he must have put on that old jacket this evening and found the key in the pocket—as I expected he would when I shoved it there. I—I've been through the jacket—it's still hanging on the peg—but the key isn't where I put it. I—I can't open the desk without the key."

Talbot pressed his hand to his forehead.

"I can't help it!" said Crooke in a shrill whisper. "I've done my best. I've risked being caught in the study—fumbling with Railton's jacket on the peg, with that wad of notes in my pocket, too I've taken the risk. I've done all I can. Tell me anything more I can do, and I'll do it."

But Talbot did not speak.

There was nothing more that Crooke could do, and he knew it. At long last the wretched fellow had tried, and he had failed. Without the key he was helpless.

"What can I do?" breathed Crooke. His failure to replace the currency notes seemed to have brought the seriousness of the situation clearly to his scared mind. He was trembling. "Talbot! I'm in your hands! I'll do anything you tell me. What can I do?"

"Nothing!" said Talbot dully.

"You know I can't," muttered Crooke. "Goodness knows I would if I could. I'll do anything you say. Railton's got the key on him now—he's not likely to lose it again, or I to find it if he did. Is there anything to be done, Talbot?"

"Nothing," repeated Talbot.

He sat down heavily. Crooke gave him a glance and crept from the study to conceal the bundle of currency notes once more in the hiding-place in the box-room.

Talbot remained alone in black and bitter thought. He believed that Crooke was willing to do all he could, but the wretched fellow could do nothing now; the restoration of the currency notes was out of his power. What was to come of it?

The study door opened and Tom Merry looked in.

"You here, Talbot? Dorm, old chap!"

Then, as he saw the look on Talbot's face, the captain of the Shell stepped into the study.

"Talbot! What's up?"

Talbot pulled himself together, and rose from the chair. For the moment his face had betrayed him, but he knew that he had to be careful—there was a secret to keep. There had been a time when the Toff had had many secrets to keep, but Talbot of the Shell had done with that. Now it was another's secret that burdened him.

"Dorm already?" he said. "I—I was just thinking of——" He broke off and coloured. "It's all right, Tom!"

Tom Merry looked at him.

"Old chap, you look down and out," he said. "Talbot, you said there was nothing in that yarn—of course, I know you wouldn't have said so if it wasn't so, but—but if there's any trouble——"

"It's all right, Tom. I'm in no trouble," said Talbot.

"Oh—Crooke!" said Tom, a light breaking on his mind. "That outsider is bothering you. I understand! You're an ass, Talbot! But I've told you that before, old chap. Come on!"

And they went up to the Shell dormitory together.

It was late that night before Talbot slept.

CHAPTER 9.
The Unexpected!

TALBOT of the Shell was looking his usual self when he took his place in the Form-room with the other fellows the following morning.

Inwardly he was feeling anything but his usual self.

In chapel that morning he had glanced at Mr. Railton; at breakfast again he had observed the School Housemaster. Nothing in Mr. Railton's manner indicated that he had made any discovery.

It was a relief, in a way, but it prolonged the period of anxiety and doubt.

It was difficult for Talbot to keep his attention upon the Form work that morning. But he contrived to do so, and Mr. Linton noticed nothing out of the common. There is an old adage that he who has a secret to keep should hide not only the secret but the fact that he has it to keep. From of old the Toff had been accustomed to self-command—to hiding his thoughts; and he did not fail now.

He looked at Crooke several times in class.

Crooke did not look like a fellow with a guilty secret, and that was all to the good, in one way. But there was something bitter in the knowledge that the secret did not weigh on Crooke's mind as it weighed on Talbot's. It was, after all, Crooke's affair. Talbot had nothing to do with it, excepting from his desire to help the wretched fellow out of his trouble and to save a family disgrace. But the thought of the missing money haunted Talbot, as obviously it did not haunt Crooke.

His immediate danger was over, and that sufficed for the black sheep of St. Jim's. He had nothing to fear. There would be a sensation when it was learned that money was missing from Mr. Railton's desk. But the money would be found. Every pound note would be recovered. Crooke was not a thief—in his own estimation, at least. His danger once over, nothing would have induced him to touch the money. That was enough for his conscience. That there would be a terrible scandal, that St. Jim's would ring with it, could not be helped—Crooke was safe.

The matter would die away in time—all the sooner because the missing money would be found intact. It would be an insoluble mystery; but, after all, no harm would be done. Mr. Railton would never even know that his key had been out of his possession at all, so he would be absolutely puzzled and beaten. What did it matter? Anyhow, nothing could be done, and it was easiest and simplest to dismiss the thing from one's mind and think about something less disagreeable. That was the reasoning by which Gerald Crooke satisfied himself.

Indeed, Talbot, who read the black sheep's thoughts easily enough, wondered whether Crooke was not right.

Nothing could be done—why worry? But Talbot could not help feeling deeply troubled by the thought of what must happen. It would be known that there was a thief in the House. If the thief was not found, a shadow of disgrace would hang over the House—a shadow of doubt and suspicion. It was intolerable to think of—to Talbot; though Crooke seemed to reconcile himself to the situation easily enough.

After class Crooke walked away from the Form-room rather quickly, and Talbot smiled bitterly as he noticed it. Crooke evidently supposed that Talbot was going to speak again on the subject he wanted to forget, and he desired to avoid him.

But he need not have taken the trouble; Talbot had nothing more to say to him. So long as it had seemed possible to replace the money, he would have kept the wretched fellow up to the mark. But Crooke had done his best—Talbot knew that. He could do no more. Nothing could be done now but to wait for the crash to come, and if Crooke could forget it was all the better for him.

Talbot tried to drive the matter from his own mind. He told himself that it was not his affair; he had done all that could be done. Had there been any doubt about the money being found intact, it would have been a different matter, but he knew that he could trust Crooke on that point. Only dire terror had driven the wretched junior to take the currency notes from the Housemaster's desk, and his fear was now a

As the footballers came off the field, Kildare of the Sixth moved to intercept them. "Picking up some tips about footer for the Sixth, what?" asked Monty Lowther. And the juniors chuckled. But Kildare did not smile. "Talbot is wanted," he said quietly. "Here I am," said Talbot, and his heart beat fast. (*See Chapter* 9.)

thing of the past. Mr. Railton would lose nothing, and the scandal and the mystery would be forgotten in time. Talbot had, at least, saved his cousin from becoming actually a thief, and he found solace in that knowledge.

With an effort of will Talbot ceased to think about the matter. Only at intervals it would recur to his mind; he could not forget it, knowing that at any hour the discovery might come.

But the day passed as usual, and the next day came. It was most likely that Mr. Railton would make the discovery on Saturday, when he was accustomed to making up his House accounts, and would doubtless require the money in his desk. Unaware that the key had ever been out of his own keeping, the Housemaster might open the desk half a dozen times without noticing that a wad of currency notes was missing from its receptacle. When he came to use the money, however, he could not fail to observe what had happened.

Friday passed, and although Talbot had not forgotten, he had ceased to think incessantly of the matter. Crooke, to all appearance, had ceased to think of it at all.

The change in Crooke from the furtive, frightened fellow of a few days ago was really amazing. He had all his old confidence now, all his old careless insolence. He was on chummy terms with Scrope again, and friendly with Clampe and Chowle of the New House. He had not yet made it up with Aubrey Racke; but that, probably, was coming. With the danger, the fear had passed, and the black sheep was sliding back into his old ways. Talbot had more than half expected to see that; but he felt fairly certain that Crooke would never land himself again into such a scrape with Mr. Lodgey—and that was something.

On Saturday Tom Merry & Co. were thinking chiefly about a House match that was to take place in the afternoon. Talbot, of course, was to play for his House, and football was in his thoughts, too. But he could not help thinking also of the discovery that was likely to be made that day, and, rather to his surprise, he found that Crooke was thinking of it, too. After dinner, Crooke joined Talbot of the Shell as the juniors went out, and Tom Merry sheered off, with a slight grimace. He wanted Talbot's company; but most certainly he did not want Crooke's.

"Kick off at two-thirty, Talbot," he said, and he walked away with Manners and Lowther.

Crooke scowled after him, and then spoke to Talbot in a low voice.

"Railton will spot it to-day," he muttered.

Talbot nodded.

"He will be busy with the House accounts—he's bound to spot it. There's nothing to be done?"

"Nothing."

"You'll keep mum, of course."

"Of course."

"Well, I knew you would," said Crooke, with a relief which showed that he had had a lingering doubt. "You know that I did everything I could."

"Yes," said Talbot.

"It isn't as if there'd really been a theft," muttered Crooke uneasily. "The money's there, waiting to be picked up. It only means a bit of a noise before it blows over—the money's the chief thing. Nobody will be a penny the worse."

Talbot nodded again.

"I'm going out this afternoon," went on Crooke. "It's all safe, but I'd rather be off the scene when the row comes. I—I suppose there'll be a bit of a stir."

Talbot smiled faintly.

"More than a bit," he said.

"Well, it can't be helped now. I say, come out with me, and—and be off the scene when it happens, too."

"I'm playing footer."

"Oh, all right! So long as we keep mum they simply can't guess anything. I—I haven't forgotten what you've done for me, Talbot—believe me. I'm really grateful. I—I dare say you think I've been playing the fool again—speaking to Scrope and Clampe, and all that. A fellow must speak to somebody. But I'm keeping clear of the Green Man and that lot. You can take my word for that, Talbot." Crooke shivered. "I'm not likely to go through anything of that kind again. I've had a lesson. Clampe's going there this afternoon, and he's asked me. I've refused."

"Stick to that," said Talbot.

"I mean to. Mind, mum's the word."

"Not a syllable," said Talbot.

And Crooke, evidently relieved, left him. A little later Talbot saw him wheeling out his bicycle. For once, at least, Gerald Crooke was going to spend a half-holiday in a way that was not shady.

Talbot was going to the changing-room soon afterwards, when Kildare of the Sixth called to him.

"Step into my study a minute, Talbot."

"Yes, Kildare."

Talbot wondered what was wanted, and he noticed that the captain of St. Jim's eyed him very curiously and keenly.

"It seems to be the talk of the juniors that you have got yourself into money troubles," said Kildare. "I know it's a way of the juniors to get into these little troubles occasionally, but in your case a large sum of money is mentioned."

"I know!" said Talbot, smiling faintly. "I've had a lot of offers of help, Kildare, but there's nothing in it."

"Fifty pounds is the sum mentioned."

"I know. It's a mistake and a silly yarn; I'm not in any want of money."

"I thought there was nothing in it," assented the captain of St. Jim's. "Of course, if a junior wanted such a sum as fifty pounds it would be proof positive that he had been kicking over the traces pretty seriously. I know you're not that sort. Still, I was bound to speak. You give me your word that there's nothing in it?"

"Yes."

"That's all right, then," said Kildare. "You can cut."

Talbot left Kildare's study. Trimble's story was evidently still going strong, and it had reached the prefects now. Talbot resisted a temptation to look for the fat Baggy and kick him, and went to the changing-room. Tom Merry & Co. were there, changing for the House match.

"Oh, here you are, Talbot!" said Tom. "Seen that ass Gussy?"

"No," said Talbot.

"The fathead had lines to take in to Mr. Railton," said Blake. "Just like the ass to be late."

"Weally, Blake——"

"Oh, here he is!" said Blake. "Get a move on, Gussy! You can't take two hours to change as usual—you're late."

"Wats! I say, somethin's up, you fellows!" said Arthur Augustus.

"I know," said Blake. "Time's up! Get a move on!"

"Somethin's up with old Wailton," said Arthur Augustus, unheeding. "I took in my lines, you know, and——"

Talbot started.

"What's up, D'Arcy?" he asked quickly.

"I weally do not know, deah boy; but somethin's up—somethin wathah sewious, I think," said Arthur Augustus. "Wailton looked feahfully upset. He weally snapped at me when I said I had bwought my lines, and told me to put them on the table and cut. I wathah think he had forgotten them. If I had known that before, I need not have w'itten them out, you know; it was wathah unfortunate."

"What's the matter with old Railton?" asked Tom Merry.

"Perhaps he is wowwied ovah his accounts," said Arthur Augustus thoughtfully. "He had his account-books and things on the study-table and his desk open. He was standin' at the desk, you know, and the expwession on his face was quite extwaordinawy."

"Perhaps he'd had a shock," suggested Monty Lowther solemnly.

"As a mattah of fact, Lowthah, he looked as if he had had a vewy gweat shock; but what shock could he have had?"

"Your face, old bean."

"You uttah ass!"

"Well, your features appearing at his door all of a sudden," argued Monty Lowther.

"I wegard your wemark as uttahly asinine, Lowthah! I considah——"

"Do you consider that it's time to get changed for the match?" asked Tom Merry, laughing. "If not, I consider that I shall have to play another man, Gussy."

"Wats!"

Arthur Augustus changed, and the footballers went down to Little Side. Figgins & Co. of the New House were there, with Darrell of the Sixth, who was to referee the House match. The two skippers tossed for choice of ends, and the game began.

Talbot lined up with his comrades, his handsome face a little pale. The other fellows had given no special heed to D'Arcy's remarks in the changing-room, but Talbot of the Shell knew what the news meant. Mr. Railton had made the discovery.

The cheery footballers had no suspicion, but Talbot knew what must be going on in those very minutes as the sides lined up for the House match. The money had been missed, the trouble was beginning. In spite of himself the Shell fellow could not help thinking of it, and of what was to follow—of the sensation that was to thrill the House from end to end—and he could not give his thoughts to the football. Tom Merry had been forced to leave his best winger out of the match with the Grammar School, but he had expected Talbot to show up well in the House match. He was surprised and disappointed. For once Talbot was fumbling in a manner almost worthy of Grundy of the Shell.

New House scored the first goal, and Tom spoke to Talbot as the sides lined up again.

"Not feeling fit, old chap?"

"No—yes! Sorry, old man; I'm a bit off colour, I think," stammered Talbot. "I'll do better, though."

And after the restart he played harder, with a grim determination. At half-time Figgins & Co. were still one to the good. In the interval Talbot noticed that Kildare of the Sixth had come down to the junior ground, and was looking on at the game. It seemed to Talbot that the captain of St. Jim's was singling him out for special observation, and he wondered why. Certainly his play was not calculated to draw Kildare's special attention.

All through the second half Kildare remained on the junior ground, looking on. The juniors noticed him, and, rather flattered by that unusual attention from the captain of the school, both sides played up their hardest. It was a great game, and in the second half Talbot pulled himself together and played his best. When the final whistle blew School House were two goals to one, and Talbot of the Shell had kicked the winning goal.

(*Continued on page* 28.)

THE MAN IN CHARGE! Fat Solomon Slack, the "man in charge" of the Indian Reservations, has lined his pockets at the expense of the starving Redskins for years past. But little does he dream that his tame Indians contemplate pillaging the store and taking his scalp!

WHITE EAGLE!

A Grand Story of a young Britisher's Adventures with a Tribe of Apache Indians in New Mexico.

Told By

ARTHUR PATTERSON.

A Timely Warning!

TOM grinned. He knew Jeremiah tried to live up to his name when he had a chance, and, indeed, there was a betraying twinkle now in the sombre grey eyes. Then they grew grave again and hard.

"Them cowboys," Miah said abruptly, lowering his voice, "when are they coming? I tell you, Tom, I'm figurin' upon a bust in several kinds of ways. An' if it's to be, I sez to you bust first—when them bull-whackers come along!"

The advice was good, and Tom would have acted upon it if he could, but that was out of the question.

Winter had come with a vengeance. After the blizzard, snow; and after that came frost, then more snow, another blizzard, and so it went on. How could it be expected that men would come down a hundred miles through weather such as this, for any cause? So, though he wrote a full account of it all to Old Billie—making certain offers as to payment of expenses which would have struck the heart of the thrifty Jeremiah Mush stone cold, he had no expectation of results until spring came, and then it would be too late.

For the "Orders" from Washington were obeyed to the letter by Solomon Slack. Week by week, as the winter raged, and more warmth and more food were needed, the supplies given out grew less and less. It was done very gradually, and, as it seemed to Tom, with a fiendish, cold-blooded cruelty; for while, at first, the amount of food given did not vary, all clothing was stopped, and fuel for fires was dropped to a minimum when needed the most.

Day after day, Tom and the missionary, who, to Jeremiah's surprise, showed much courage and resource, and even coaxed out of Mr. Slack many alleviations which Tom had been refused—rode or sleighed, and often tramped on foot everywhere, doing all that could be done to keep matters from becoming desperate. Tom, indeed, drew recklessly from his own little capital, and it seemed very unlikely that much would remain of the seven thousand dollars at the Servita Bank by the time he returned to Calumet.

But it was not a question of money only. There was dirt and neglect and squalor everywhere. The Indians crowded together to keep warm; sanitation was unknown, and but for the dryness of the air, that the soil of the Reservation was mostly sand and gravel, and that, thanks to what Tom had done, backed by the chiefs who loved him, to make all take exercise and keep fit for the Rodeo, there would certainly have been an epidemic of dysentery, and perhaps of cholera.

As it was, the scourge of disease was avoided this winter, and only the dead-weight of privation and the bitterness of soul arising from it fell upon the Nation. But this was bad enough, and as the dark days passed, a dull, increasing feeling of despair oppressed Tom's heart and nearly broke it.

He heard nothing from Servita, and, worse than that, he received no reply to a long letter he had written to Colonel Chapin. In this he had neither spared the Government nor the Indian Bureau: and as for Mr. Slack, as Jeremiah expressed it when Tom told him what he had said, he had "cut up his jints with a sharp knife, and salted the rest of him raw." Tom had even begged Chapin to do something—anything—but in any case to let Tom know what he felt about the matter.

This letter was written the first week in January. It was now the second week in February, and not a word had come through. Trantville was snowbound. The Reservation lay a waste of weary miles of human misery.

Outwardly there was little sign of what was going on. The patient stoicism of the Apache race came out now in all its strength. Tom often marvelled at the silence and even apparent apathy with which the men and women sat hungry in their tepees, or trudged aimlessly hither and thither in the snow. All seemed waiting, just waiting—for what?

As time went on Tom asked himself this question with a desperation which grew feverish. He knew what answer Black Hawk would give. White Cat had already whispered it. It was plainly to be seen in Badger Head's catlike eyes. It lay smouldering in the set, blank faces of the warriors. These Apaches would bear all that came without a groan, as they bore torture at the stake. They would say nothing, do nothing, until the winter had gone. Then, when they starved no longer and their strength came back—then, as Black Hawk had said that evening at the camp fire "the Nation will be all one piece," thirsting for the blood of white men.

Already the Rodeo plans had broken up. No one cared. Every man's interest, Tom knew, was centred in plans for war—war to the knife, war to the death, upon the Settlements.

And all this time, though Tom did not know, Badger Head and Solomon Slack held conference together.

Gradually the weather changed—completely and entirely changed. The sun began to shine warmly; the snow sank into the ground and melted with magical rapidity. Animals and birds appeared from everywhere and nowhere. Spring had come and laid her fingers on the land.

The new life brought no comfort to Tom. Now, he realised, was the moment of danger. He saw a change in

WHO'S WHO IN THE STORY.

TOM HOLT, a sturdy young Britisher of seventeen who has lived for a time amongst a tribe of Apache Indians in New Mexico.
BADGER HEAD, supreme chief of the nation.
BLACK HAWK, a tribal chief.
WHITE CAT, his son.
COLONEL CHAPIN, a wealthy rancher.
SADIE, his daughter.
HUNKS and MALINKA, Tom's dog and horse respectively.

After staying for a time with Colonel Chapin and his daughter Sadie, Tom learns the horrible news that White Cat is sentenced to the "fire" for disobeying Badger Head, his chief. Tom stands by the Redskin, and to save his life offers to accompany the tribe to the Reservations for the winter. From Black Hawk, Tom then learns that Badger Head is contemplating a raid on the White Settlements in the coming spring, and this knowledge makes Tom more eager to accompany the tribe.

Promoted to the rank of chief and known as White Eagle, Tom reaches the Reservations. Here, he soon realises that Badger Head is secretly encouraging the wild bloods to revolt. Tom, however, exerts his influence to the full, but his efforts to run a Rodeo in the hopes of promoting happiness amongst the tribe, only enrages the unscrupulous SOLOMON SLACK, a Government official in charge of the Reservations, who schemes to get rid of the young Britisher by putting all the blame of the growing discontent on to his shoulders. But from Jeremiah Mush Tom learns of the charitable intentions of Solomon Slack and is thus put on his guard.

(*Now read on.*)

There hove in sight an enormous bundle of fat in striped pyjamas and bare feet—the terrified figure of Solomon Slack! Jeremiah hauled the wretched man along with a rope tied round his middle. (*See page 27.*)

the habits of the Indians. For the first time there were no loafers round the storehouse. Trantville was empty. Many were away hunting animals and birds which had been tempted out by the sun and the thaw to get food. But the majority were otherwise engaged.

One night, a week after the warm weather came, Tom slept badly. This was no new thing, for the bitter anxiety of his position, his helplessness, and a growing look of satisfaction observable on the countenance of Mr. Solomon Slack, had tortured him for many nights. He looked years older. Sadie would not have known him. This night, about two in the morning, Hunks growled very softly and went on tiptoe to the window. Tom was there almost as soon as the dog.

It was still, moonlight, and a figure was clearly visible in the street outside. It waved a hand; Tom went softly down the stairs and let it in, and a minute later White Cat was sitting, cross-legged, on his bed.

"Black Hawk send me," he said. "In one hour Big House"—jerking his thumb in the direction of the store depot—"taken by the warriors. In two, the boss-man's scalp hang from Badger Head's belt, and his fat body will be melting into oil over a fire. Then goods taken; store burn up, and the nation go to war. Huh!"

White Cat uttered all this in a breath, in quiet, emotionless tones, like a child reciting a prize poem at school. Tom found himself affected very little by the news. It was the worst possible, worse than he had expected in his most desperate moments, but it lifted the cloud of suspense and ended all inaction. He had something to do now, and so alert had his mind become, so hard were his nerves, that before White Cat had finished he had decided what he was going to do. But Hunks growled again; there was a sound in the passage outside, and White Cat was crouching for a spring. Tom touched his shoulder lightly.

"Kitten—am I a chief in the nation?"

The boy slipped to his feet.

"You are my chief—always."

"Then listen! The man outside the door is a friend. I tell him all, and he will come with us. Is that good or bad?"

White Cat shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

"Huh! You give orders. I obey—chief!"

Tom went to the door.

"That Miah?"

"Yep!"

He stood in the doorway. Jeremiah was without coat or boots. But he held a revolver in his hand, and he looked significantly at White Cat.

Tom smiled.

"Get clothes, and be back in five minutes. There's news."

The hotel-keeper nodded, and vanished like a ghost in his stockinged feet. Then Tom, without speaking again to White Cat, threw up the lid of a trunk, and when Jeremiah returned he was confronted with two Apache Indians in full dress. He had never seen Tom in this guise, and had the shock of his life, but all he did was to give a grim little nod.

"So ye're White Eagle now. Makes me feel a mite lonely. But I'm with ye jest the same."

Tom gripped his hand and looked at White Cat. The Indian understood and stepped forward.

"Me White Eagle's man. Shake!"

The American fairly started at such a proposal, but he did not hesitate.

"Then you and me's pards, sonny." And he gave the red fingers a squeeze which nearly broke them.

"There's no time to waste," Tom said. "We're for the storehouse. I'll tell you as we go."

All this time he had said no word of his intentions, and White Cat wondered what they were to do. But he was more than content. Tom's silence sent up his reputation for leadership in the Apache's estimation—and it was already high enough—a hundred per cent. It is an Indian proverb that a leader who tells his plans has no followers.

They reached the store depot in ten minutes without seeing anyone. White Cat was ordered by Tom to find a way of doing this, and succeeded, though with some difficulty.

"We must get in." Tom whispered when they were safely under the shadow of the back premises. "Know any way, Miah?"

In reply the hotel-keeper drew a key from one of his pockets.

Printed and published every Wednesday by the Proprietors, The Amalgamated Press (1922), Ltd., The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Advertisement offices: The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Registered for transmission by Canadian Magazine Post. Subscription rates: Inland and Abroad, 11s. per annum; 5s. 6d. for six months. Sole agents for South Africa: The Central News Agency, Ltd. Sole agents for Australia and New Zealand: Messrs. Gordon & Gotch, Ltd., and for Canada. The Imperial News Co., Ltd. (Canada).—Saturday, January 29th, 1927.
NN

"I'd a hunch we might get to this," he whispered back. "So I made a little deal on my own. Will you rouse Sol?"

Tom shook his head, and they stepped in with Hunks, making no sound, finding their way to the room occupied by Slack's assistant.

"Now," Tom said, closing the door softly, "no one can hear, and there will be no business done for half an hour; your ideas, Miah?"

Jeremiah Mush yawned; felt in another pocket, produced a large plug of tobacco, and after vainly offering it to his companions, bit off a generous portion, and leisurely and comfortably began to enjoy himself. But there was nothing leisurely about his reply.

"Ideas? They don't amount to two red cents, chee-eff." He mouthed the word with relish. "We're just skinned an' trussed for a roastin' bee. Badger Head's more smart than I'd have believed. He's dished Sol with his own spoon, after all their foregatherin'."

"What's that?"

Jeremiah put up his feet lazily on a window-ledge.

"They've been pow-wowing for weeks past, chee-eff. All against you. That little rat of a clerk told me late last night. Troops is expected to-morrow. Badger Head told Sol a week back he could not hold the Bucks longer, and Sol wired. But ye know what troops is. Maybe they will be here next week. Anyway, if White Cat here speaks truth, by the time the boys arrive they'll find nothing left of Sol but his boots. Badger Head's slick, I'll allow, most almighty slick. But tell me"—turning to the Indian—"how does your boss expect to get away with the goods before the soldiers get him?"

White Cat grinned.

"Huh! No get away. Take soldier-boys prisoner."

Miah's legs left the window-sill swiftly and he gasped.

"You really mean that? United States troops to be corralled?"

"P-ff!" White Cat made a face. "Sol, he tell Badger Head that soldiers be 'bout fifty men. Apache warriors here, full-armed, five hundred."

The boy was clearly pleased at the prospect. The warfever had taken him again. Tom could have cried out in his despair. But that was no use. Hunks was already on his feet, bristling all over, though he uttered no sound. The Indians were coming. In a few minutes the attack would begin. Tom laid a hand on Jeremiah's shoulder.

"I am going to open the front door," he said, "and hold it with Hunks and White Cat. I want you to haul Slack out of bed and bring him down. Tie him up, all but his feet. Tell him his life is in my hands. Will you?"

"Chee-eff," said Jeremiah slowly, "I will. You hev a plan?"

Tom nodded, without speaking.

"White Cat," he said in Indian, "open, then, and stand behind me."

The Prisoner!

THE air was very still. Dawn was just breaking, and a faint light rimmed the horizon in the east. Tom and White Cat could distinguish figures gathering across the street; clustering about the houses, slowly, stealthily, without a sound.

The opening of the great front doors of the house—and Tom made as much noise as he could in the process—sent those figures to cover as a gunshot sends rabbits to their holes, and when the boys looked out from the top of a broad flight of steps the street was without life or movement; but as Tom was recognised a chorus of grunts, some of amusement, the majority of surprise, went up from the Indians, and they gathered again.

Then a sharp voice gave a command; a number of Indians who were about to run up the steps fell back, and formed themselves into a close throng in the street below, and a man came forward.

It was Badger Head, and Tom gave a sigh of relief. The plan he had in his head largely depended on a meeting with the chief in sight of the warriors, before any of them got out of hand.

"Greeting, chief!" Tom said, in a voice which in the still morning air carried far. "The Big House is in my hands. The boss, Solomon Slack, is my prisoner. I have spoken!"

There was a deep silence. The significance of Tom's words was immense. It is a tribal law which is never broken that the Apache who seizes a prisoner has sole rights over him; equally, that booty or plunder found by act of war belongs, in the first instance, to the finder, though, if it is of great value, it must be divided among the party by a tribunal appointed for the purpose.

Badger Head, therefore, was confronted with the fact that the scoop he had planned had been anticipated by Tom, and that the life of the white agent and the whole contents of the storehouse were, for the time, at least, the property of this white boy in right of his chieftainship in the nation. It was a stunning blow, not rendered less painful by a spontaneous and appreciative murmur of applause which came from the crowd and spread rapidly.

But Badger Head had not won his high place in the nation by nothing. His keen wits explored the situation and his harsh-featured face did not express by the quiver of an eyelid the fury that was in his heart.

"I hear the words of White Eagle," he replied at last. "But where is his prisoner?"

Tom smiled, turning his face well to the light, so that everyone might see that he was taking the chief's words as a quiet joke.

"White Cat," he said shortly, "bring the fat pig and relieve the anxiety of the chief."

White Cat promptly disappeared into the store, and silence reigned again.

The seconds passed slowly. In two minutes, or less, the patience of the Indians would be exhausted, and Badger Head would be able to take full command. Now the chief's head turned slowly towards the crowd. Tom knew he was about to burst into scathing denunciation, call upon the men to attack and sweep all who opposed them to one side.

But a harsh clang within the store broke upon the ears of all, and Badger Head kept still. It was the opening and shutting of a door in the back of the house, followed by the tramp and shuffle of feet. Then came the sound of a voice and a volume of imprecations and groans.

"You'll be hanged for this, you 'Miah Mush! I'll see you done for—— Oh, my poor wrist! You shall swing in that cotton-tree! Say, fur mercy's sake alive hold that Buck! He's stabbin' me! I'm comin' fast as I can. Tell him Badger Head will put him on a burnin' grid! Ow! Stop that! I'm bleedin'! I'm dyin'! Mercy! Oh——"

There hove in sight now an enormous bundle of fat in striped pyjamas, and bare feet. Its hands were secured behind its body, and Jeremiah was hauling it along in front with a rope tied round the middle. White Cat, meantime, was applying the point of his hunting-knife with penetrating skill in certain tender, fleshy parts.

(Look out for next week's grand instalment of this powerful adventure yarn—every line's a thrill!)

STANDING BY A SCAPEGRACE!

(Continued from page 24.)

As the footballers came off, Kildare of the Sixth moved to intercept them. Tom Merry gave him a cheery grin.

"Awfully good of you to give us a look in, Kildare."

"Picking up some tips about footer for the Sixth—what?" asked Monty Lowther.

And the juniors chuckled.

But Kildare did not smile. The expression of his face was very grave.

"Talbot is wanted," he said.

"Here I am," said Talbot.

His heart beat.

Kildare had watched the game through, and it was borne in upon Talbot's mind that he had not been watching only the game. He had been watching Talbot—waiting for him. What did it mean?

"Mr. Railton wants to see you as soon as you've changed," said the captain of St. Jim's.

"Very well."

Kildare of the Sixth walked with the juniors to the changing-room. He waited at the door, still with a grave face, while they changed. Some of the fellows looked at him in surprise. Why the captain of the school was bestowing so much of his company on them that afternoon was a mystery to Tom Merry & Co.

It was no mystery to Talbot.

Kildare was keeping him under his eye. He knew it. The keen-witted Toff did not need telling that. Kildare was waiting for him and watching him. Talbot's face expressed nothing—the Toff of old had learned never to let his face betray him. But there was a tumult of thoughts in his mind. The theft in Mr. Railton's study had been discovered, and Kildare had watched Talbot through the football match, and was watching him now while he waited to take him to the Housemaster. Like a blinding flash of lightning, the revelation came to Talbot's mind. There had been a theft, there was no clue to the thief; money had been taken from a desk apparently locked, and upon whom could suspicion turn if not upon the Toff, the one-time prince of cracksmen?

"Talbot, old chap," exclaimed Tom Merry, "what——"

He sprang towards Talbot, whose face for the moment had gone white.

"All serene, Tom."

"You weren't fit, old chap; you shouldn't have played," said Tom. "You looked really ill for a minute, old fellow."

Talbot forced a smile. From the doorway he knew that Kildare's eyes were fixed on him. Kildare had seen and heard.

"It's all right, Tom."

He finished changing, and was the first out.

"Shall I go to Mr. Railton now, Kildare?" he asked very quietly.

"Yes."

Talbot started for the Housemaster's study. Kildare followed him. In ordinary circumstances he would, of course, have been left to go alone. Now the footsteps of the Sixth Form prefect echoed his own. A bitter smile came on Talbot's face. Before he reached Mr. Railton's study he knew what he had to face when he stood before Mr. Railton.

THE END.

(Whatever the consequences, the Toff has given his word to his rascally cousin that he will not "let him down." But the consequences are more terrible than the Toff imagines. Mind you read: "The Toff's Sacrifice!"—next week's grand school story, chums.)