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(See page 16 for Result of Special "Bicycle" Joke Competition No. 4.)

EVERY WEDNESDAY

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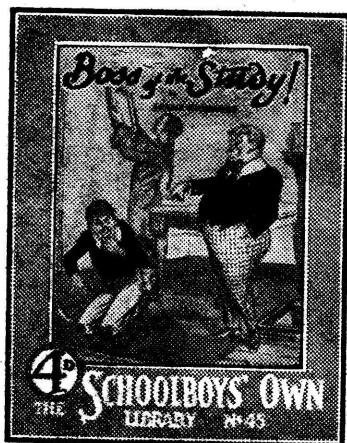
No. 991.
Vol. XXXI.
Feb. 12th, 1927.



TRUTH WILL OUT!

(In his delirium Crooke confesses to the theft for which his cousin has been condemned! See—"TRUE AS STEEL"—This week's grand school story of St. Jim's.)

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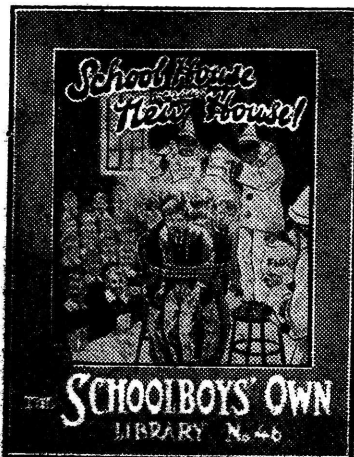
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BERNARD GLYN!

A HAMPSHIRE reader writes in congratulatory terms of the "splendid quality" of the GEM stories, and says that it is the only paper within his knowledge that does not give the public impossible stories. Next, he says that he has to go round "half the town" every Wednesday before he can get his copy of the GEM, because the newsagents invariably say they are "sold out." That tit-bit of news is good to hear in one way, for it just bears out what I have repeatedly said in the chat, that this paper sells like "hot cakes." But my Hampshire chum could save himself a lot of unnecessary exercise every Wednesday if he gave his nearest newsagent a look in and asked for a copy of the GEM to be put aside for him regularly. Newsagents like a regular order; it saves them a heap of time, and it saves the public disappointment. My Hampshire chum then goes on to say that he's simply dying to see a Bernard Glyn invention series of stories in the GEM. Well, "G.P." you can rest easy in your mind; I have before me now, a special series of "invention" yarns by Martin Clifford, and these will appear in your favourite paper very shortly. How's that?

HE WANTS TO JOIN THE NAVY!

"T. N." of Dublin, an old reader of the GEM, is keen to get into the Royal Navy, but he's doubtful whether he will pass the Medical Examination. It appears that he was scalded under the chin and on the chest when he was quite a baby, otherwise, he declares himself to be as fit as a fiddle. I don't see why those "scald" marks should prevent "T. N." from joining the R.N. Anyway, his best plan would be to "hop over" to Liverpool, and find things out for himself at the Royal Naval Offices, 30, Canning Place. Let me know the result, chum, should you decide to do this.

JIMMY SILVER & CO!

A GEM reader of long standing, who also took in the "Boy's Friend" regularly every week, deprecates the fact that the "Jimmy Silver & Co." school stories have disappeared from the old Green 'Un. Apparently my correspondent is not aware of the fact that our grand companion paper, the "Popular," contains a ripping complete Rookwood school story every week—and that these tales of Jimmy Silver & Co. are exclusive to the "Popular." So now you know, my chum, where to look for Uncle James and his merry men of Rookwood.

NEXT WEDNESDAY'S PROGRAMME:

"A MERSEYSIDE MYSTERY!"

By Martin Clifford.

This yarn for next week is out of the usual run of St. Jim's stories, for it deals with the adventures of Tom Merry & Co. in Liverpool. On this account, Liverpool readers will have something "extra" to look forward to, whilst other "Gemites" will still find this story a "winner."

"WHITE EAGLE!"

Look out for another trenchant instalment of this grand adventure yarn, boys, also a further contribution from the St. Jim's Rhymester, entitled:

"THE BOOBY TRAP!"

And let me rub it in once more—Give a regular order to your newsagent for the GEM and you won't be disappointed. Chin, chus, chums!

Your Editor.

THE RIGHT SORT! For the sake of his weak-natured cousin the Toff allows himself to be blamed for a crime of which he is innocent. But the shame of it all drives him from St. Jim's—from the chums he has grown to love. Yet, just in time, Fortune smiles again and the Toff comes back into his own!



TRUE AS STEEL!

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. Not Sacked!

"TRIMBLE!"
"Ow!"
"Twimble!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Wow!"
"Trimble!" exclaimed a dozen voices in the Fourth Form passage of the School House at St. Jim's.

In ordinary circumstances, there would have been nothing surprising in seeing Baggy Trimble, of the Fourth Form, mounting the staircase and rolling into the Fourth Form passage. Neither was the fact that he was wriggling and mumbling from a recent licking at all surprising. Baggy Trimble was often licked, though not so often as he deserved.

Nevertheless, the School House juniors were evidently astonished to see Trimble there.

They stared at him in great surprise, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy jammed his eyeglass into his eye as if he could not quite trust his vision without the aid of his celebrated monocle.

"Trimble—still here!" exclaimed Blake of the Fourth.
"Ow! Wow!" said Trimble dolorously. "I say, I've been licked! Ow!"

"Aren't you sacked?" exclaimed Herries.

"Ow! No, you beast!"

"Wats!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "You are sacked, Twimble! All the House knows that you are sacked!"

"I'm not sacked!" roared Trimble indignantly.

"You've been locked up in the punishment-room!" said Digby.

"Yes, but—"

"I know that Darrell of the Sixth was booked to take you home!" said Mellish.

"Yes, but—"

"But you've spoofed the Head somehow into letting you hang on?" asked Blake.

"Yah!"

"Bai Jove! I congwatulate you on gettin' off, Twimble," said Arthur Augustus. "I was quite sowwy when I heard that you were expelled. I have always said that you are more fool than wogue, deah boy!"

"You cheeky ass!"

"Weally, Twimble—"

"Whether Trimble's more fool than rogue, or more rogue than fool, is a giddy problem," remarked Blake. "But there's no doubt at all that he's a lot of both."

"Yaas, wathah!"
"Hallo, is that Trimble?" Tom Merry of the Shell came along with Manners and Lowther. The buzz of amazement in the Fourth Form passage had drawn the Terrible Three to the spot. "Trimble! I heard you were sacked!"

"Only licked?" asked Monty Lowther. "Too bad!"
"But he was sacked," said Manners in amazement. "All the House knew he was sacked!"

"But here he is, as large as life!" grinned Blake. Baggy Trimble snorted.

Certainly Trimble of the Fourth had been under sentence of the "sack." All the House knew that Trimble was to be "bunked" from St. Jim's; though they did not know why. But all the House had no doubt whatever that he deserved it. The Head had not cared to make a public statement as to the reason for expelling Trimble of the Fourth. But all the St. Jim's fellows were prepared to rely upon the Head's judgment so far as Baggy Trimble was concerned. It was, as Monty Lowther had remarked, not at all surprising that he had been bunked—but only surprising that he had not been bunked before.

And now, apparently, he was not bunked at all, for here he was. Certainly he looked as if he had been through it. Judging by the fat junior's looks, the Head had dealt faithfully with him, and had not spared the rod.

Trimble snorted indignantly. All the juniors were surprised to see him still there, but nobody appeared to be specially pleased. Really, it looked as if the fat Baggy's departure, had it taken place, would not have left an incurable grief behind in the School House.

"Well, I'm glad," said Tom Merry after a moment's thought. "I don't know what you did, Trimble, but the beak seems to have given you a chance not to do it again. Take the tip, and don't."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with a nod. "Make the most of your chance, Twimble. The Head may not let you off so lightly next time."

RESULT
OF
"BICYCLE"
JOKE
COMPETITION No. 4.
ON
PAGE 16!

"I never did anything!" bawled Trimble.

"Gammon!"

"Nothing at all, you rotters!" howled Baggy indignantly. "I was innocent——"

"Bow-wow!"

"Weally, Twimble, you cannot expect us to swallow that," said Arthur Augustus.

"If you fellows don't believe me——"

"Believe you!" ejaculated Lowther. "If you want us to believe that you were innocent, old bean, you'll have to swear you were guilty. You see, we know you."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Innocent as the babe in the cradle!" said Trimble impressively. "Fancy accusing me of anything of the kind, you know! Me!"

Tom Merry laughed.

"But we don't know what you were accused of," he said. "I suppose you were found out in something."

"I wasn't!" hooted Trimble. "I've never done anything to be sacked! Findings are keepings, I suppose!"

"Oh, that's it, is it?" chuckled Lowther. "You've been finding something in somebody's pocket——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"No!" roared Trimble. "As for the money having been bagged from Mr. Railton's study, how was I to know? I never knew anybody had taken fifty pounds from his desk, did I?"

There was a buzz of astonishment in the Fourth Form passage. Baggy's words made quite a sensation.

"Fifty pounds!"

"From Railton's desk!"

"Great Scott!"

"Bai Jove! You awful wottah, Twimble! Have you been wobbin' your mastah's desk?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus in horror.

"No!" yelled Trimble. "Don't I keep on telling you I was innocent? I found the currency notes. I tell you—found them hidden under the loose board in the box-room. How was I to know a thief had put them there? I found 'em—and findings are keepings, ain't they?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Mellish. "So that's where you got the tin you've been splashing about lately."

"Bai Jove!"

Tom Merry's face was very grave. Most of the juniors were looking grave now. The news that there had been a theft in the School House of St. Jim's was a serious matter enough.

"Let's hear about this, Trimble," said the captain of the Shell quietly. "You say you found fifty pounds in currency notes hidden under the floor in the box-room?"

"Yes," mumbled Trimble, "and Railton had the cheek to think I'd bagged them from his desk, you know! Thought I'd picked up his key somewhere and burgled his desk—fancy that!"

"I don't see what else he was to think if he found you with his currency notes in your pockets," said Tom.

"I told him I'd found them!" hooted Trimble. "And he didn't believe me—and the Head didn't! Refused to take a fellow's word, you know."

"Is that why you were sacked?"

"Yes."

"Well, you jolly well deserved it," said Blake. "What beats me is the Head letting you stay on."

"I didn't do it!" shrieked Trimble. "They've found out that I didn't do it, you silly ass! They know that I never touched Railton's desk. I've been flogged for keeping the currency notes I found in the box-room, that's all. If they hadn't found out the thief I should have been sacked, though. He was only found out just in time."

"Oh, my hat! Then they've got him?" said Manners.

"Ow! Yes."

"Honest Injun?" asked Blake suspiciously.

"Yes, you ass! He came to the Head's study and owned up when he heard I was sacked," groaned Baggy. "But for that it would have been me for the long jump. Rotten injustice!"

"Well, you asked for it," said Tom Merry. "A fellow who finds fifty pounds and keeps the money is asking to be thought a thief. What else could the Head think, you frabjous ass?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"And you say the real rotter owned up?" asked

Manners. "Must have something decent about him to make him do that. But it's a bit thick—a thief in the School House."

"Was it a School House man, Trimble?" asked Tom Merry.

"Ow! Yes."

"And he's sacked, of course?"

"I suppose so. Ow!"

"Blessed if I can understand it," said Tom Merry. "I can't think of any chap in the Fourth who'd do a thing like that—unless it was Trimble."

"Yah! It was a Shell chap!" hooted Trimble.

Blake grinned.

"Might have guessed that," he said. "We don't have any thieves in the Fourth Form."

"Wathah not!" said Arthur Augustus emphatically.

"A Shell man!" exclaimed Tom Merry, knitting his brows. That was not pleasing news for the captain of the Shell.

"Plenty of suspicious characters in the Shell, if the Head only knew," grinned Blake. "Was it you, Racke?"

"What?" roared Aubrey Racke, of the Shell.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, you're a suspicious character, you know," said Blake. "If it wasn't you——"

"You cheeky cad!" hissed Racke furiously.

"Was it your pal Crooke?" asked Blake cheerfully. "After you, Crooke's the man a fellow would naturally think of."

"Yaas, wathah! If you are suah it wasn't you, Wacke——"

"You silly idiot!"

"Wathah, Wacke, I was askin' you a civil question and——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Draw it mild, Blake, old man," said Tom Merry. "That sort of joke is rather too unpleasant, you know. Anyhow, I suppose Trimble knows who it was, as he says the fellow came to the Head's study and owned up. Who was it, Trimble, if you know?"

"Talbot!"

"WHAT?" roared Tom Merry.

"Talbot of the Shell—— Here, leggo!" shrieked Trimble, as Tom Merry, his eyes blazing with wrath, grabbed him by the collar and shook him like a rat in the jaws of a terrier. "Yaroooh! Hoop! Yooop! Leggo! Help!"

"You fat scoundrel!" panted Tom.

"Bai Jove! Wag him, deah boy!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus hotly. "The frightful wottah, to dare to say such a wotten thing about old Talbot!"

"Ow! Wow! Yow! It's true!" yelled Trimble.

Shake, shake, shake!

"Oh crumbs! Oh crikey! Leggo! Help! It's true! Yooop! Talbot owned up—— Yaroooh! He came to the Head's study and said——yaroooop-hoop-whoop!"

Crash!

Baggy Trimble, with a final wild yell, rolled in the passage. Tom Merry's eyes gleamed after him. Monty Lowther caught his chum by the arm.

"Steady on, Tom!"

Tom Merry panted.

"The villain! To dare to hint——"

"He did more than hint," said Racke of the Shell.

Tom spun round on Racke.

"Racke! If you dare say what Trimble said——"

Aubrey Racke backed away quickly enough.

"I didn't; but——"

"Shut up, then!"

"Steady, Tom!" Manners slipped his arm through Tom Merry's. "Come away, old fellow. Let's go and see Talbot. That fat fool's got something or other mixed up wrong. Talbot can tell us what's happened."

Tom nodded, and, breathing hard, he went with his comrades to Talbot's study. The crowd of juniors were left in a buzz behind him.

CHAPTER 2.

Dark Suspicions!

"TALBOT!"

"Talbot!"

"Where's Talbot?"

Up and down the School House of St. Jim's many voices were inquiring for Talbot of the Shell.



"Who was the thief?" asked Tom Merry. "Talbot!" said Baggy Trimble. "WHAT!" roared Tom Merry. "Talbot of the Shell. Here, leggo!" shrieked Trimble, as Tom Merry, his eyes blazing with wrath, grabbed the fat junior by the collar and shook him like a rat. (See Chapter 1.)

It was time for prep, but nobody in the School House—among the juniors, at least—was thinking of prep.

The news that there had been a theft in the House—that fifty pounds in currency notes had been taken from the Housemaster's desk—was the sensation of the term.

Fellows were inclined to doubt Trimble's statement that such an event had occurred at all. It was altogether too startling. But they could hardly doubt that he had kept the money he had found accidentally under the loose board in the box-room.

That was exactly what Baggy Trimble would do. And that he had been flogged for doing so was also clear.

So, as Trimble had found the purloined money, it had to be believed that the money had been purloined in the first place. But it was amazing.

All the fellows knew the desk where Mr. Railton kept the House cash. They knew that Mr. Railton carried the key on his person. How could a fellow have got hold of the key? And why had nothing been said earlier about the robbery? Trimble stated that he had found the currency notes in their hiding-place the previous Saturday. So the robbery was some days old, at least. Yet nothing had been said so far.

Trimble—questioned by a hundred fellows one after another—adhered to his story. He had been suspected because the currency notes were found in his possession. He had been sentenced to the sack for that reason.

Then Talbot of the Shell had owned up and the Head had let him off with a flogging. That was Trimble's story, and it did not vary as Trimble's stories generally did.

Fellows exchanged very queer glances. They remembered the strange story of Talbot's past, before he came to St. Jim's—the half-forgotten history of the time when he had been known as the "Toff." A word from Talbot

himself would have quashed the tale, though Trimble had sworn to it with tears in his eyes. But Talbot was not there to speak a word.

Where was Talbot?

He was not in his study. Skimpole was there, but he had not seen Talbot for some time. He was not in any of his friends' studies—or in the Common-room; he could not be found about the House. No one had seen him since he had abruptly left the tea-table in Study No. 6—unless Trimble had seen him, as he stated, in the Head's study.

"Bai Jove! It looks vevy queeah, you fellows," Arthur Augustus D'Arcy observed to his chums sagely. "You wemembah Talbot was havin' tea in our studay, and he cleahed off quite suddenly when—when—"

Blake started a little.

"When somebody mentioned that Trimble was bunked and waiting in the punishment-room to be sent home!" he said.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I remember," remarked Herries, with a startled look. "Talbot jumped up and cleared without finishing his tea. He was upset."

"I noticed it and wondered why he was bothering his head about Trimble," said Digby. Blake whistled softly.

"But—but it can't be possible—" he breathed.

"It can't!" said Herries. "Talbot's all right!"

"Yaas, wathah! But it is vevy queeah!"

The chums of Study No. 6 had to agree that it was very queer. Other fellows, at the same time, were thinking that it was very queer that Talbot of the Shell did not show up to speak for himself. The House was thrilling with the startling news of the theft; all the fellows knew that Trimble had named Talbot as the

culprit—yet the accused junior did not appear. Racke of the Shell observed that it looked as if he was sacked already, and gone; and Aubrey Racke was not told to "shut up," as he would have been a little earlier. For many fellows were thinking now that it looked as Racke declared it looked.

Tom Merry did not doubt—he would never have allowed himself to doubt. Talbot was his chum; and Tom was not likely to doubt his chum's honour. But he looked troubled and dismayed as his search failed to find Talbot of the Shell in the House. And Manners and Lowther exchanged very uncomfortable glances as they accompanied Tom in his search.

"Where can he be?" muttered Tom at last. "Crooke's his cousin—he may know something about him—and Talbot's been very thick with Crooke the last few weeks."

Tom Merry compressed his lips hard. "If there's anything wrong Crooke's mixed up in it," he said. "I'm sure of that. Let's find Crooke."

But it was not easy to find Crooke of the Shell. He was not in his study. Racke, his study-mate, had not seen him since tea. It looked as if Talbot's cousin, as well as Talbot, had vanished.

But there was information at last. D'Arcy minor—Wally of the Third—dodged into the House from the dusky quad, to cut off to the Third Form-room for prep, and Tom Merry called to him.

"Seen Talbot, Wally?"

"No!" answered D'Arcy minor over his shoulder.

"Seen Crooke?"

"Yes—saw him in the quad half an hour ago."

"Oh, good! Where was he?"

"Mooching round by the wall, looking as if he was going to be hanged," grinned Wally. "His jolly old geegees have left him in the lurch, I fancy, from his looks."

And the fag chuckled, and went on his way.

"Come on," said Tom.

"What about prep?" asked Manners.

"Hang prep!"

"Oh!"

The Terrible Three went out into the quadrangle. It

was dark there outside the radius of light from the windows of the School House. Tom Merry hurried on through the deep dusk, looking for Gerald Crooke, and his chums followed him. In the shadow of the trees by the school wall they spotted a shadowy figure, and Tom Merry ran up.

"Is that you, Crooke?"

Gerald Crooke spun round.

"Eh? Yes! I'm here."

"Do you know where Talbot is?"

"Talbot?" Crooke's voice was thick and husky. "No! How should I know? In the House somewhere, I suppose."

"Haven't you seen him since tea-time?" demanded Tom impatiently.

"I—I saw him for a few minutes."

"Where?"

"Here—in the quad!" muttered Crooke. In the gloom Gerald Crooke's face glimmered white and drawn. "Nearly an hour ago, I think. We—we talked for a few minutes—I haven't seen him since."

Tom Merry looked hard at the black sheep of the Shell. For weeks past Tom had suspected that Crooke had somehow drawn Talbot into the troubles his wretched blackguardism had brought upon him. They had never been friends, near relatives as they were; yet Talbot had stood by the black sheep of the Shell in the hour of trouble. Tom knew that—he was not the only fellow who knew or suspected it. And it was borne in upon his mind that if Talbot had found trouble now, Crooke was at the bottom of it—somehow; how he could not surmise. But he was sure of the fact.

"Do you know what's happened, Crooke?" asked the captain of the Shell, his eyes on Crooke's colourless face.

Gerald Crooke licked his dry lips.

"N-no! What should I know?"

"Is Talbot in some trouble?" asked Manners.

"I—I know nothing about it—"

"Do you know where he is now?" demanded Lowther.

"No."

"You're sure?" asked Tom Merry sharply.

"How should I know?" muttered Crooke huskily.

"Let me alone."

He swung away.

"Let's get back to the House," said Tom Merry between his teeth. "I'm going to the Head. This can't be allowed to rest—it's all over the House now that Trimble has called Talbot a thief. I'm going to ask the Head for the truth."

"We've a right to know," said Manners.

"If there's anything up Crooke knows," said Tom savagely. "It was written all over his face—he knows. But—"

"But what can have happened?" said Lowther uneasily. "It—it looks—"

"What?" exclaimed Tom.

"Oh, nothing! Let's get back to the House."

Tom looked at his chum, who avoided his eyes. His lips opened, but he closed them again. There was an ache of dread in Tom's own heart now. If Lowther doubted, what were the other fellows likely to think? What did it all mean? Why was not Talbot of the Shell there to quash Trimble's lying story with a scornful word? Why?

The Terrible Three entered the House again, and Tom Merry hurried away to the Head's study. There, at least, he would learn the truth—although already, in his breast, there was growing up a vague fear of it.

CHAPTER 3.

Guilty or Not Guilty!

DR. HOLMES turned his eyes curiously on the captain of the Shell. Mr. Railton was in the Head's study, and Tom could see that the two masters had been deep in consultation. Both of them were looking very grave. But that might only be because there had been a theft in the House—because a School House junior had found the hidden money and had kept it back. That was a sufficiently serious matter. But Tom, at the bottom of his heart, knew that there was something more than that.

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"What is it, Merry?" asked the Head quietly.

"About Talbot, sir," stammered Tom.

Dr. Holmes raised his eyebrows.

"Bless my soul! Has Talbot told you—"

"He's told me nothing, sir—I haven't seen him," said Tom. "We can't find him anywhere."

Tom observed the two gentlemen exchange a glance. That glance told, as plainly as words could have done, that they were not surprised to hear that Talbot of the Shell was keeping out of the sight of his school-fellows. Tom's heart was like lead.

"He hasn't—left, sir?" stammered Tom.

"Certainly not!"

Tom Merry breathed a little more freely. He had dreaded to hear that Talbot was already gone—gone in disgrace from the school and the House that were proud of him.

"But something has happened, sir," said Tom. "I—I hope you'll excuse me for coming here like this, sir, but—but a fellow says that—that Talbot is accused—" He broke off.

"No doubt Trimble has already told the others of what has happened, sir," said Mr. Railton, as the Head frowned. "As Trimble was not sent away, it was, of course, certain that the matter would become generally known."

"No doubt," assented the Head.

He turned to the Shell fellow again.

"You have heard that there has been a theft in the House?"

"Yes, sir," said Tom. "Then that—that's true?"

"That is true."

"But Talbot—"

The Head coughed.

"It was my intention, Merry, and Mr. Railton's intention, to let nothing be said in public of this disgraceful occurrence," he said. "Too little could not be said upon such a subject. Had it proved that Trimble was the guilty person, as I supposed from what appeared to be conclusive evidence, he would have been sent away quietly, and nothing would have transpired in public. At the last moment, however, Trimble was cleared by a statement made by another junior—and, in consequence, publicity cannot be avoided. In these circumstances, Merry, it is better for Talbot's friends and the Lower School generally, to be acquainted with what has happened. I shall therefore tell you, and you will tell the others."

"Yes, sir," muttered Tom.

"One day last week fifty pounds in currency notes were taken from Mr. Railton's desk in his study. As the key was in Mr. Railton's own keeping, he questioned Talbot on the subject—"

"Because—because—"

"Because Talbot, owing to his peculiar circumstances before he came to this school, was the only person to be thought of in connection with such a matter. A locked desk was opened without a trace being left."

"Oh, sir!" said Tom miserably.

He understood that the strange and chequered past of the "Toff" had risen against him once more. And, passionately loyal as he was to his chum, he could not be surprised. For, in such a case, of whom was the Housemaster to think, excepting the fellow who had once been known as the prince of cracksmen?

"Talbot, as you are doubtless aware, was separated from the rest of the boys for a time while suspicion rested upon him," said the Head. "I may say, Merry, that I would have taken his word. But he refused to say plainly that he knew nothing of the theft."

"He refused?" exclaimed Tom Merry blankly.

"Yes."

"Oh, sir! Why should he refuse?"

"No doubt he had his reasons," said the Head very dryly.

Tom felt as if his brain was in a whirl. Talbot was innocent—innocent! Tom would have staked his life upon his innocence. Why, then, had he refused to deny any knowledge of the theft?

"Both Mr. Railton and myself, Merry, hoped that Talbot might be able to clear himself of this suspicion," said the Head. "Our trust in him was great. And then his relative, Crooke, made a suggestion to Mr. Railton that was acted upon. Crooke suggested that Mr. Railton

might have mislaid his key, that some dishonest boy might have found it and, after using it, returned it to his pocket in some surreptitious manner. Mr. Railton remembered having found the key, on one occasion lately, in the pocket of a coat he does not usually wear, and he considered that Crooke's suggestion was a valuable one. It was acted upon at once."

The Head paused.

"Inquiry was made as to whether any boy of this House had been of late in possession of an unusual sum of money," resumed the Head. "It was soon discovered that Trimble of the Fourth was such a boy. Trimble was questioned and was found to have the currency notes in his pockets. He declared that he had found them by accident under the box-room floor. I did not attach the slightest importance to such a story, and Trimble was adjudged guilty, and this evening he would have been sent home in charge of a prefect; but—"

"But, sir—" breathed Tom.

His heart was beating painfully.

So far, the Head's statement bore out what Baggy Trimble had already told the whole House. But the rest of Trimble's statement was surely not to be borne out. It was impossible—impossible.

"But Talbot came to my study," said the Head.

"Talbot!" whispered Tom.

"He stated that he knew the truth of Trimble's explanation, improbable as it was. He gave a description of the hiding-place where Trimble had found the currency notes. He was aware that they had been hidden there before Trimble had found them."

"Oh!" panted Tom.

"In the circumstances, Trimble was cleared of suspicion of theft. Certainly he had kept the money he had found, a serious matter enough; but it was clear that he had found it and had not taken it from Mr. Railton's desk. Trimble has been flogged, and, so far as he is concerned, the matter ends. The thief remains to be dealt with."

"Trimble says that Talbot owned up—" panted Tom.

"But he did not—he did not—"

"No."

"I knew it!" breathed Tom.

"Talbot refuses to make any explanation of his knowledge of the theft and of the hiding-place of the money," said Dr. Holmes. "That some other person robbed Mr. Railton's desk, and that Talbot knows who it is but will not reveal the guilty person's name—that is apparently what he desires me to believe."

"It's true, sir."

"What can you know about the matter, Merry?" exclaimed the Head.

"I know that Talbot never touched Mr. Railton's money, sir. I know it—I know it!" exclaimed Tom.

"He's covering somebody else. He knows who it was and refuses to give him away."

"No boy in this school is in a position to refuse to answer his headmaster's questions on a matter of such serious import," said Dr. Holmes. "I have given Talbot until to-morrow to make any explanation he can. If he can name the guilty party, and proof is forthcoming, well and good. If he cannot do so, Talbot is adjudged guilty, and he will leave the school."

Tom's lips trembled.

"It isn't that he cannot—it is that he won't, sir."

"That makes no difference, Merry. The boy who shields a thief, knowing his guilt—"

"But—but—sir—"

Dr. Holmes raised his hand.

"You need say no more, Merry! Talbot's fate is in his own hands. If his statement is true, that he did not rob his Housemaster's desk, it follows that he knows who did. He must give the name of the thief or he must be adjudged guilty. My faith in him has been great—and I still cling to the hope that he may set himself right in my eyes. If you, as his friend, are concerned in his fate, I recommend you to see him, to urge him to make a full and frank explanation to me before it is too late."

"I—I will, sir!" muttered Tom. "It's not a case of sneaking—a thief has no right to expect a fellow to shield him. Talbot must be mad to think of shielding him. I—I can't understand it."

Dr. Holmes gave him a compassionate look.

The junior's faith in his chum touched him. But the Head's own faith had been shattered; and Mr. Railton's expression showed that he fully shared the headmaster's opinion.

Tom Merry looked from one face to the other.

He read there Talbot's condemnation.

"I'll make him speak," he muttered. "I—I can't understand it! He knows he can't shield a thief—he must know! Oh, he's mad to think of such a thing!"

"That is how the matter stands, Merry," said the Head. "You may tell your friends—and if, as seems to me scarcely possible, Talbot may yet have some explanation to make, his friends may prevail upon him to make it. It is not yet too late. You may go, Merry."

And the captain of the Shell left the Head's study, his face pale, and his brain in a whirl.

CHAPTER 4.

Good-bye to St. Jim's!

GERALD CROOKE started, and his heart beat faster as he heard a faint sound under the shadowy trees by the school wall.

It seemed to Croke of the Shell that he had been pacing there wearily, drearily, for hours—long hours and hours. He had forgotten prep—he had forgotten all things but the fear and misery that gnawed him and tormented his guilty mind. Step by step the black sheep of St. Jim's had gone on the downward path, till he had reached, at last, the bottom of the abyss. Now he was at the end of his tether. To keep silent and let Talbot suffer for his sin—to speak out and face utter ruin. That was his choice now.

He had not the courage to speak out and draw upon his own head what now impended over Talbot's. The mere thought of it thrilled him with fear. But his conscience was not sufficiently hardened to carry him through such an ordeal untroubled. Talbot would be silent, he knew that. Croke was to escape his punishment, but, tortured by remorse, his escape seemed hardly worth while.

The sound under the shadowy trees made Croke start. He cast a hurried glance towards the distant lighted windows of the House, and then plunged into the deep shadow of the branches towards the school wall. He knew what was meant by the sound he had heard—he guessed whom he would find there. By the slanting oak a dim figure loomed up, in coat and cap, with a bag in hand.

"Talbot!" breathed Croke.

The dim figure moved.

"Is that you, Croke?"

"Yes."

Talbot of the Shell looked at him intently in the gloom.

"Why are you here, Croke?" His voice was quiet, almost gentle. "Better get into the House—better show up among the fellows. You're giving yourself away."

"You—you're going out?"

Talbot smiled faintly.

"Yes."

"You—you—you mean, you're going?" muttered Croke huskily.

"Yes."

"Leaving St. Jim's?"

"What's the good of waiting?" said the Toff softly.

"The Head's given me till to-morrow to speak out."

"But—" muttered Croke.

"Trimble will have spread the story all over the school by this time. I should be questioned right and left. What could I say to Tom Merry?" Talbot's quiet, steady face worked for a second. "What could I say to the others? Better not see them again. I've been keeping out of sight and putting a few things together—now I'm going. I should have to go to-morrow, in any case."

"You can't go!" breathed Croke.

"There's no other way."

"All the school will call you a thief if you go. It will be taken as a confession!" said Croke hoarsely.

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"I know."

"You can't go, then."

"All the school would call me a thief to-morrow, Croke, when they saw me sacked," said Talbot quietly. "Better to get out of it all without a scene. Good-bye, Croke! Let's part friends, at any rate."

Croke panted for breath. Talbot was going—with his cousin's burden of guilt upon his shoulders. It seemed to Gerald Croke, like the transgressor of old, that his punishment was greater than he could bear. What was the use of his own escape if it left him to his own undying contempt and self-loathing? How could he ever look a decent fellow in the face again if he let Talbot go—adjudged guilty of what he himself had done?

"Oh, you're a fool!" he muttered. "Why couldn't you let matters alone? Trimble was as bad as a thief, keeping the money when he found it. If you'd let matters alone—"

"I haven't come to that, Croke," said Talbot quietly. "Trimble is a young rascal, but he is not a thief, and I was bound to clear him. I was bound to tell the Head that I knew he was innocent. I have kept my word to you. You stand clear of it all."

"But you're going."

"I should be kicked out to-morrow if I stayed."

"Oh, you're a fool!" said Croke huskily. "Any other fellow would give me away and save his own skin."

"I don't think so. I gave you my word when you confessed to me what you'd done. I'm bound to keep it. That isn't all. Perhaps I was a fool to get mixed up in your affairs; but, at all events, I went in to help you of my own accord, with my eyes open. It would be rather thick if I gave you away now that the crash has come. I knew there was risk—though I admit I never dreamed that suspicion would turn on me. I might have guessed it," added Talbot bitterly. "Whom should they suspect, if not the Toff?"

"I can't stand it!" muttered Croke, licking his dry lips. "I can't! I can't! I—I'll go to the Head now and own up!"

Talbot gave him a smile of pity.

All that was good in Croke—and there was good in the weak, vicious fellow—was urging him to play a manly part; to own up to the truth and take the consequences. But Talbot knew he had not the courage for it—that he could never face it. Had he been the fellow to face the music when the catastrophe came, he would never have been the fellow to land himself in such a terrible scrape at all.

"You—you think I ought to own up, Talbot?" muttered Croke.

"You know what you ought to do, Croke."

"But—but you don't ask me?"

"No."

"And—and you're going—"

"I'm going. Good-bye!" Talbot held out his hand.

"Let's part friends. I wish we'd been better friends here. We're not likely to meet again. But for goodness' sake, Croke, let this be a lesson to you. You don't care much for anybody but yourself, I'm afraid; but it was because you cared about your mother—because you shrank from giving her pain—that I made up my mind to take a hand in this matter. Think of her next time you're tempted to play the blackguard and fool. There won't be anybody here to save you another time. Keep straight, after this."

Croke laughed hoarsely.

"I don't need telling that! Do you think I'd go through this again? But—but have you thought? Our uncle—Colonel Lyndon—what will he say? What will he think?"

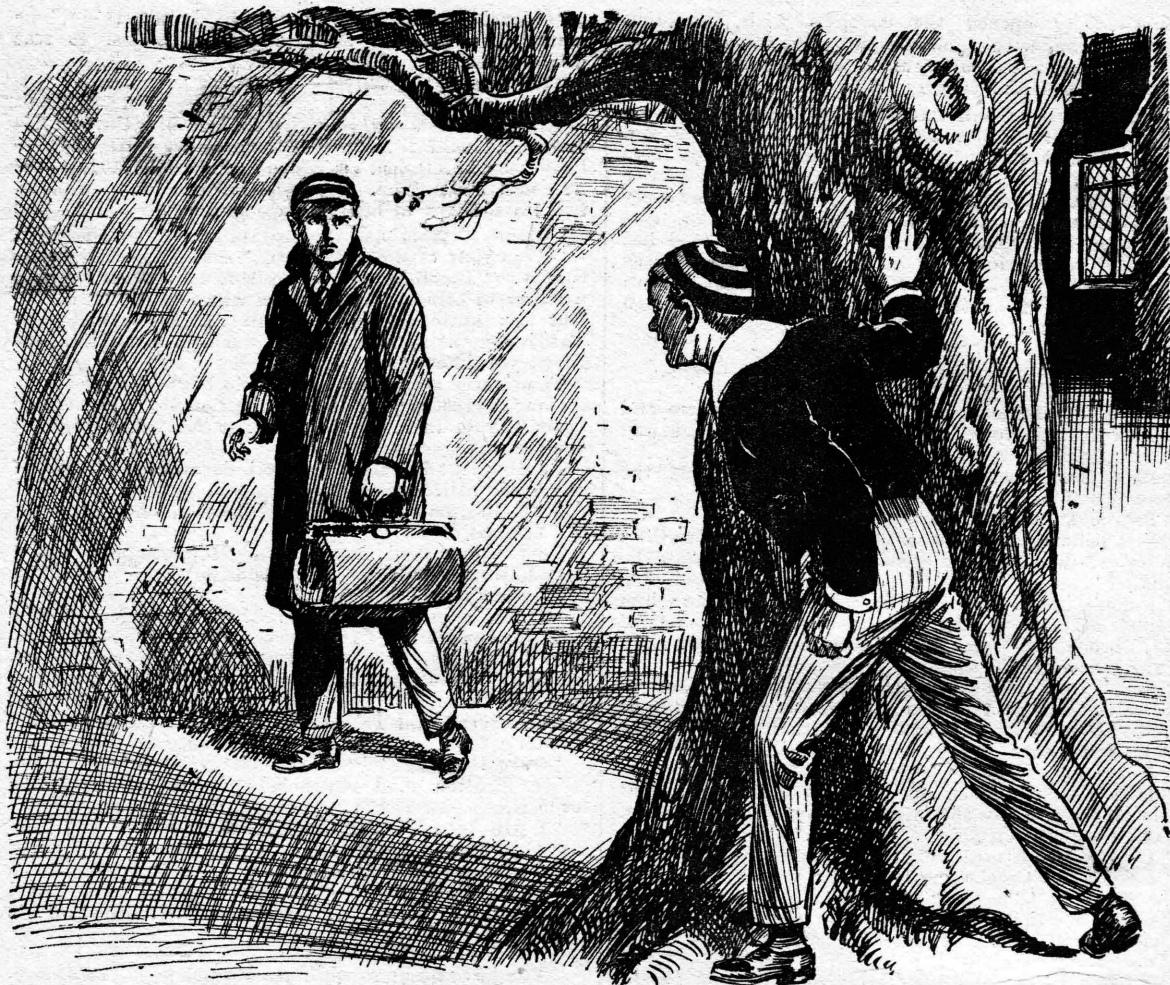
Talbot winced.

"He will think, as the rest will think, that the Toff has broken out again; that the path of reform was too thorny for the prince of cracksmen," he said bitterly. "It's useless to talk, Croke. Unless you go to the Head and make a clean breast of it, the game is up for me here. And you won't do that."

"I—I—I can't!"

"I know you can't! Good-bye!"

Talbot pressed Croke's nerveless hand and turned to



By the slanting oak a dim figure loomed up, in coat and cap, with a bag in hand. "Talbot!" breathed Crooke. "Is that you, Crooke?" "Yes. You—you're going out?" Talbot nodded. "Leaving St. Jim's?" asked Crooke, in a strained voice. "What's the good of waiting?" said the Toff softly. "The Head's given me till to-morrow to speak out. You know I can't speak out." (See Chapter 4.)

the slanting oak. Crooke watched him dumbly, like a fellow in a dream.

The active Shell fellow climbed and reached the shadowy top of the wall. The bag was dropped over into the road outside.

Crooke heard it fall. Dimly he saw the active figure of Talbot swing over the wall; he heard him drop into the road. Crooke pressed his hand to his burning forehead.

Talbot was going—going—leaving St. Jim's and all that St. Jim's meant for him—leaving it all for a scruple of honour. Who would have thought it of the Toff, the one-time member of Hookey Walker's gang, the old associate of Rogue Rackstraw. Who could have dreamed it? Talbot was going—innocent, but covered with shame as with a garment; and he, Crooke, remained—guilty, but yet able to hold his head up among honourable fellows. Crooke groaned aloud.

There was a sound of footsteps on the hard road for a few moments. The footsteps died away.

Talbot of the Shell was gone.

CHAPTER 5.

Talbot's Last Word!

"MASTER MERRY!"

Toby, the House page, looked into Study No. 10 in the Shell. It was close on bed-time for the St. Jim's juniors.

The Terrible Three were in their study. Manners and Lowther were looking grim and troubled. Tom Merry's face was the picture of misery.

Throughout St. Jim's Talbot of the Shell had been sought, but he had not been found. In the School House and the New House, in the dusky quadrangle—everywhere he had been sought; and all the fellows knew now that he was no longer in the school.

It was a crushing blow to Tom Merry.

He had clung to the belief that Talbot was innocent; that for some inexplicable reason he was shielding the guilty party. He had resolved to reason with Talbot—to urge him to speak out—to force him to tell the facts before it was too late. And Talbot was gone! After that interview with the Head he had vanished, and it was clear now that he had left St. Jim's, deliberately avoiding meeting any of his friends before he went.

What could it mean—excepting that he was guilty? Tom drove the thought from his mind, as other fellows were trying to drive it from their minds. But it would return.

Tom glanced at the House page, noticing that there was an envelope in Toby's hand.

"What is it, kid?" he asked, without interest.

"This here letter for you, Master Merry," said the House page. "Master Talbot—"

"What!"

"Master Talbot left it with me, sir, and told me to give it to you before you went to bed," said Toby.

Tom almost snatched the letter.

"Right-ho—thanks," he stammered. "When did Talbot give you this, Toby?"

"'Bout two hours ago, sir!"

"Oh! You've seen him since?"

"No, sir."

Tom Merry opened the envelope with trembling fingers. Toby, with a curious look, left the study, and Manners closed the door after him quickly. Tom's chums watched him eagerly as he read the letter.

"Dear Tom,—I shall have left St. Jim's some time before you get this—it was better not to see you, old chap. There was no help for it. The way things have worked out, I had to go. Believe me, Tom, if you've still got faith in me it's justified. I've never knowingly done anything that I need be ashamed to tell you. But I can't explain, and, as matters stand, the Head has no choice but to decide as he has done. Trust me as much as you can, old fellow, and believe that I shall never forget you or the other fellows who have been so decent to me.

"Good-bye.

"REGINALD TALBOT."

Tom threw the letter on the table, and Manners and Lowther read it together. Tom's face was white and set.

"He's gone, then!" he muttered. "Gone—and the whole school will believe that he was a thief!"

"Poor old Talbot!" muttered Manners.

"I—I believe what he says here," stammered Lowther, "but—but—why has he gone, Tom? Why can't he explain?"

"I don't know. But I believe him—I'd believe him against all the world. Crooke knows something of this," broke out Tom Merry passionately. "Crooke's at the bottom of it, somehow."

"Steady, old fellow," said Manners. "According to what the Head said to you Crooke was helping all he could. It was Crooke who put Mr. Railton on the track, you know."

"I—I know. But—"

"It was what Crooke suggested to Railton that put them on the track of the missing money," said Lowther.

"That was how Trimble was bagged."

"I know," muttered Tom.

"I don't like Crooke any more than you do, old chap," said Manners. "I don't trust him an inch. But it seems to me that he's standing by Talbot in a way nobody would ever have expected of him."

Tom Merry was silent.

He knew it—he had been astonished himself by the evident concern Gerald Crooke felt in his cousin's fate. Crooke wished Talbot well now, whatever he had felt at other times. That was certain. And yet a deep instinct warned Tom that his suspicion was well-founded—that somehow, he could not imagine how, the black sheep of St. Jim's was at the bottom of the terrible disaster that had overwhelmed Talbot of the Shell.

There was a tap at the study door, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy looked in. The face of the elegant Fourth-Former was unusually grave.

"Dorm, you chaps," he said.

Tom nodded without speaking.

"Talbot hasn't turned up," said D'Arcy. "I—I suppose it's certain that he has cleaved off, you fellows."

Tom Merry tossed him the letter. The swell of St. Jim's read it through.

"Bai Jove! That settles it," he said. "Poor old Talbot!"

"You believe what he says there?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Only—what does it mean?" muttered Lowther.

"Goodness knows," said Arthur Augustus. "I weally see no weason why old Talbot should not explain. This will be a feahful blow for Colonel Lyndon—Talbot's uncle is vevy fond of him, you know."

Tom's face lightened for a moment.

"Colonel Lyndon may be able to do something," he muttered. "He will never allow the matter to rest where it is."

"Wathah not! Only—"

"Only what?"

"By wunnin' away like this Talbot has thwown his cards in," said D'Arcy. "Ewevy fellow will want to know why he cleaved off instead of statin' the facts—if he could state them. Innocent fellows don't cleave off and leave chaps to believe them guilty."

"D'Arcy!" exclaimed the captain of the Shell fiercely. "Keep your wool on, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus calmly. "I believe in old Talbot, because it's up to a fellow to believe in any fellow who is a fwient of his. But it's quite certain that all St. Jim's will take Talbot's goin' as a confession. No good blinkin' the facts, you know."

Tom Merry shoved the letter into his pocket and rose. Arthur Augustus went to join the Fourth, who were on their way to their dormitory. The Terrible Three left their study.

As they headed for the Shell dormitory Kildare of the Sixth called out to Tom.

"Mr. Railton wishes to speak to you, Merry."

"Yes, Kildare."

Tom Merry went down to the Housemaster's study. Mr. Railton's look was compassionate as he glanced at the junior's pale, stricken face.

"Talbot appears to have left the school, Merry," said the Housemaster. "It has occurred to me that he would probably leave some message for you, as I understand that you have been his best friend here. Have you received any such message?"

Tom Merry laid Talbot's brief missive on the Housemaster's table.

"Only that, sir," he answered.

Mr. Railton read the note and knitted his brows over it.

"I will keep this for the present, Merry, if you have no objection."

"Certainly, sir."

"It is certain that the unhappy boy is gone," said Mr. Railton. "I take it that you know nothing of his further intentions?"

"Nothing, sir."

"You have no knowledge—no suspicion?" The Housemaster's keen eyes scanned Tom's face.

Tom Merry crimsoned.

"I know this, sir, that wherever he goes, and whatever happens to him, Talbot will play the game and keep straight. He will never go back to—to what he knew before he came to St. Jim's. He's gone, because he would have been expelled to-morrow if he had stayed. But he is innocent—"

"Does his action look like innocence, Merry?"

"It doesn't, sir," stammered Tom, "but that makes no difference to fellows who know and trust him."

"I am afraid, Merry, that we have all been deceived in that unhappy boy," said Mr. Railton. "My faith in him was strong, and I kept it until he shattered it by his own action. Yet even at the last he showed that there was, as I have always believed, a noble strain in his nature. Had he kept silent, as he might easily have done, Trimble of the Fourth would have suffered in his place. He was not bad enough for that. That must always be remembered to his honour. And you may be sure, Merry, that he will be sought and found, and saved from falling deeper than he has fallen already. Good-night, my boy!"

"Good-night, sir!"

Tom Merry left the Housemaster's study. He was the last fellow in the Shell dormitory, and he found the dormitory in a buzz. Talbot's flight from St. Jim's was the one topic in the House now. That his flight was a confession of guilt could hardly fail to be the general view—only fellows who knew him intimately and trusted him by instinct rather than by reason, clung to their faith in him. And they, though they clung to their faith, had little to say in defence of it.

Tom Merry glanced at Crooke, and was struck by the white misery in the wretched fellow's face. All the Shell had noticed how hard Crooke was taking it, and had wondered. Crooke had never been supposed to be an affectionate relative, or a fellow of deep feeling.

ANSWERS

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But there was no doubt that he looked utterly knocked out by what had happened to Talbot.

The suspicion was strong in Tom's mind that, somehow, Crooke had had a hand in this disaster. But his heart smote him as he saw the expression on Gerald Crooke's face. He could not help realising that, if Crooke had somehow been the cause of this, he had not been a willing cause. Grundy's loud voice broke on Tom's ears.

"Who'd have thought it?" Grundy, of the Shell, was saying to Wilkins and Gunn. "You never know a fellow till you find him out. A thief—pah! Jolly good thing he's gone!"

"Oh, cheese it, old chap!" murmured Wilkins. "Least said, soonest mended!"

Grundy snorted.

"Do we want a thief in the House?" he growled.

Smack!

Grundy, in astonishment and rage, reeled under a sudden blow that landed full in his rugged face. It was Crooke who had struck him—Crooke's eyes that were glinting at him from a white, tormented face.

"Why? What?" bellowed Grundy.

"Hold your rotten tongue!" shouted Crooke. "It's my cousin you're speaking of, you rotter—a better fellow than you will ever be. Hold your tongue!"

Grundy spluttered with wrath.

"Why, I—I—I'll smash you!" he gasped.

And undoubtedly Grundy would have smashed Crooke, or something very near it, for the weedy black sheep could not have held his own for ten seconds against the hefty Grundy. But Tom Merry's strong hand closed on Grundy's shoulder as he was rushing at Gerald Crooke, and the burly Shell fellow was swung back.

"Let go, Tom Merry, you fool!" he bawled.

Tom's eyes blazed at him.

"Hold your rotten, silly tongue, as Crooke's told you!" he said, between his teeth. "Another word about Talbot and I'll smash you!"

"Why, you—you—you—"

"Stop that!" It was Kildare's voice in the doorway.

"What the thump are you ragging about?"

The Shell turned in. And the great Grundy, on reflection, decided to say no more. Talbot, of the Shell, was down and out; but he had plenty of friends left in his House, and even Grundy realised that the least said was the soonest mended.

CHAPTER 6.

The Colonel Takes a Hand!

"COLONEL LYNDON!" said Monty Lowther.

It was the following day, and the St. Jim's fellows had turned out in morning break. A good many glanced at the car that stopped at the School House, and at the tall, lean, bronzed gentleman who stepped from it. Some of the juniors had wondered whether Talbot's uncle would come down to the school. Now he had come.

The colonel's face, always a little hard and grim in expression, was harder and grimmer now.

"Looks in no end of a wax!" Jack Blake remarked to his friends of the Fourth, and Arthur Augustus murmured: "Yaas, wathah!"

The colonel's grim features and knitted brows certainly did not seem to indicate an amiable mood.

"Talbot's uncle!" said Tom Merry. "I must speak to him."

And Tom ran across the quad to intercept the colonel as he was going into the House.

The lean military gentleman stopped, and fixed his eyes on Tom. He gave him a curt nod.

"Excuse me, sir," said Tom, rather breathlessly. "You've come down about Talbot? I'm sure of that."

"Yes."

"I—I hope you will be able to help him, sir," said Tom, colouring under the old soldier's grim gaze. "He never needed help more than he needs it now, sir."

"So I understand from what his Housemaster has told me." The grim face relaxed a little. "Does that mean that you are still standing by your friend who has gone to the wall, Merry?"

"Yes, yes, yes!"

"You believe in him still?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" panted Tom.

It seemed as if the captain of the Shell felt that he could not make his answer emphatic enough.

"And why?" asked Colonel Lyndon.

"Why?" repeated Tom Merry blankly.

"Yes, why do you believe in him, when all the evidence goes to show that he is a young rascal, deserving to be kicked out of the school?"

Tom's face crimsoned.

"Colonel Lyndon! Talbot is nothing of the kind—you cannot believe it, you cannot!"

"I said that all the evidence goes to show as much," answered the colonel composedly. "I did not say that I believed it."

"Hang the evidence!" exclaimed Tom hotly. "I wouldn't believe that old Talbot was a rascal, if he told me so himself. I should only think he was out of his senses."

"Good man!" said the colonel, his face breaking into a smile. "I am glad that my nephew has so true a

"HALLO, HALLO—YOU THERE, SANDY?"



Mr. Sandy (local newsagent): "Yes, sir? What can I do for you?"

Dr. Birchmell: "I want a copy of this week's 'Magnet.'"

Mr. Sandy (with a faint gasp of amazement): "But, surely, sir, a gentleman of your age and attainments doesn't read the 'Magnet'?"

Dr. Birchmell (emphatically): "Tut-tut, sir! A man's never too old to read such a spiffing paper."

Mr. Sandy: "You surprise me, sir."

Dr. Birchmell: "I'll surprise you still more, my good man. I've been reading the 'Magnet' ever since Bureleigh—he's my senior boy, you know—came to St. Sam's. I used to confiscate his copy every week, but he's got wise to my little caper and has his copies bound now."

Mr. Sandy: "Does that mean you intend placing a regular order with me for the 'Magnet,' sir?"

Dr. Birchmell (emphatically): "Of course! And mind you don't disappoint me. I don't mind missing my train occasionally, but I can't bear missing my 'Magnet.'"

(A faint chuckle comes over the telephone): "Well, well, sir, you're not the only one who knows a good thing when you see it. I've been reading the 'Magnet' for eighteen years, and a better boys' paper doesn't exist."

Dr. Birchmell: "Bravo, Mr. Sandy! You're a fellow after my own heart. You'll let me have my 'Magnet' every Monday without fail?"

Mr. Sandy: "Without fail, sir. In fact, I'll bring it up myself."

(Voice breaks in on the conversation): "You gentlemen have had more than your three minutes—but I'll let you off this time. I read the 'Magnet' myself!"

friend left. He has another in his uncle, my boy; for my opinion is exactly the same as yours. And somehow or other, we are going to set this matter right—at all events, I shall leave no stone unturned to that end. As you say, my lad, hang the evidence!"

And with another curt nod, the colonel strode into the House. Tom Merry rejoined his chums, his face brighter.

"Is he standing by Talbot?" asked Manners.

"Yes—and he believes in him," said Tom. "He's had the whole story from Railton, and he still believes in Talbot."

"I—I hope he's right," said Lowther.

"I know he's right!" said Tom Merry steadily.

Meanwhile, Colonel Lyndon had been shown to the School House master's study. Mr. Railton greeted him with a cordial handshake. The two men were old friends of the War days.

Colonel Lyndon sat down.

"If I'm interrupting you, Railton, you must forgive me. You will understand that I am very anxious about my nephew."

"I am sure of it," said Mr. Railton, with a clouded brow. "He did not come to you when he left the school last night?"

"No."

"You know where he is?"

"I know nothing of his movements. He does not intend to come to me with a stain on his name," said Colonel Lyndon. "He has written me a letter to tell me so. He appears to think that I may believe him guilty of dishonourable conduct, in the evidence against him—an error on his part."

Mr. Railton raised his eyebrows.

"Do not think that I blame you, Railton, or the headmaster," said Colonel Lyndon. "I am aware that you could only decide on the evidence before you, and the evidence, as detailed in your letter to me, would have been quite sufficient to satisfy a judge and jury."

"It was a painful shock to me, sir," said Mr. Railton. "My faith in Talbot was unbounded."

"I am able to make the same statement in the present tense," said the colonel, unmoved. "My faith in Talbot is unbounded."

"My dear sir—"

"I repeat, Railton, that I blame nobody. But I am firmly convinced of my nephew's innocence of any wrongdoing, and I am here to see what may be done to establish the truth."

"The truth, I think, is already established," said the Housemaster, a little nettled.

"I think not," said the colonel; "and upon one point, at least, I am able to enlighten you. You have told me that it was the talk of the Lower School that Talbot was in want of a large sum of money—fifty pounds. Some tattling fellow heard him ask me for that sum on my last visit here."

"Exactly—and that was the precise sum taken from my desk."

"You are not aware that I gave my nephew the sum he asked?"

Mr. Railton almost staggered.

"You gave Talbot, of the Shell, fifty pounds!" he exclaimed.

"I gave him that exact sum!" said Colonel Lyndon icily. "My trust in Talbot was so complete that I acceded to his request for that sum of money. He required it, he told me, to help a certain person who was in difficulties. He declined to give the person's name, and I did not press the point. I trusted him—as I trust him now. If, therefore, you have been influenced by the circumstance that Talbot was in need of fifty pounds, let it influence you no longer, because he received that sum from me, in banknotes, one day last week."

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed the Housemaster, utterly taken aback.

"If Talbot is guilty," resumed the colonel, "we are to imagine that he was in need of another sum of fifty pounds very soon afterwards—which I decline to imagine."

"It is scarcely possible to suppose that a schoolboy could need such a sum for an innocent purpose, Colonel Lyndon. It points to debts and difficulties outside the school."

"Possibly; but not his own. My nephew told me he needed the money to help another person, and I believed him—and believe him now."

Mr. Railton pursed his lips.

"You surprise me very much," he said. "But you force me, sir, to conclude that the unhappy boy was in need of a larger sum than he dared ask you for, and—"

"I believe exactly what Talbot stated to me, neither more nor less," said Colonel Lyndon. "Moreover, it appears that the thief did not use the money taken, but concealed it under the box-room floor, where it was found by another boy. This does not look as if he had a pressing need of the money."

"Some belated repentance—or fear of the consequences—"

"Not in my nephew's case. No doubt that is the explanation—and it points to a boy of weak character and weak will—a boy capable of theft and incapable of resolute determination—a boy, in a word, utterly unlike Talbot in all respects."

Mr. Railton was silent.

"My nephew, I am assured, is incapable of a dishonourable action," resumed the colonel. "But he is still less capable of irresolute shilly-shallying. There

was a time, sir, when in very early boyhood, in the hands of a gang of law-breakers, he was a breaker of the law himself. At that time, nevertheless, he was resolute, daring—too daring and resolute, in fact. When he escaped from those infamous surroundings, and was able to take to a new way of life, he kept those qualities, sir; and I am convinced that if Talbot should resort to lawless ways he would not act in the irresolute, unnerved way in which this unknown thief has acted."

"Really, sir—"

"Had Talbot taken to dishonourable courses, had he taken the money from your desk, sir, the money would never have been found under a loose board," said Colonel Lyndon. "It would never have been found at all."

Mr. Railton wrinkled his brows. There was something in the colonel's mode of reasoning, strange as it sounded.

"Talbot may, or may not be, capable of crime, but he is not capable of a blundering, weak-kneed, irresolute crime, at all events," went on the old military gentleman. "It follows, to my mind, that Talbot is innocent, and it remains to find the guilty party."

The Housemaster made a gesture.

"You do not agree with me, naturally," said the colonel, unmoved. "I keep to my belief, however. Talbot, it appears, admitted that he knew who was the thief, in order to save a foolish lad who had found the money, and had not given it up as he ought to have done, and had thereby drawn condemnation on himself. That admission was not the act of a rascal, sir. It was the act of a noble lad generously facing a terrible risk in the cause of justice and common honesty. True, he has no right to shield a thief. But it is probable that there is a very good explanation of that circumstance. The wretch may have confided to him under a promise of secrecy. If Talbot were here I should command him, with all my authority, to speak out frankly. I have no doubt whatever that he could clear the matter up."

"But he is not here," said the Housemaster very dryly. "He does not care to face you, any more than he cares to face his headmaster. I honour you for your faith in this unfortunate boy, colonel—it is no greater than was my own at one time. But as Talbot has chosen to flee, I see nothing further to be done in the matter."

"Let us follow my line of reasoning a little, sir," said Colonel Lyndon. "On my theory, some wretched, weak-willed, irresolute fellow has committed this crime, and Talbot knows his name but will not speak. Talbot is shielding a friend—at all events, someone whom he feels bound to stand by from a sense of mistaken chivalry. His friends—"

The colonel paused.

"His best friend was Tom Merry, a lad above the faintest breath of suspicion."

"I am sure of it. But others—"

"Manners and Lowther of the Shell—"

"Two very straight-forward lads. But—"

"He was very friendly with some boys in the Fourth Form—Blake, Herries, Digby, D'Arcy, Clive—"

The colonel knitted his brows.

On his own theory it was necessary to discover some St. Jim's fellow who might be supposed, at least, capable of a dishonourable action, and yet in whom Talbot might be expected to take a friendly interest. Certainly the list mentioned by Mr. Railton did not suit the description.

"My nephew probably had friends in the other House?"

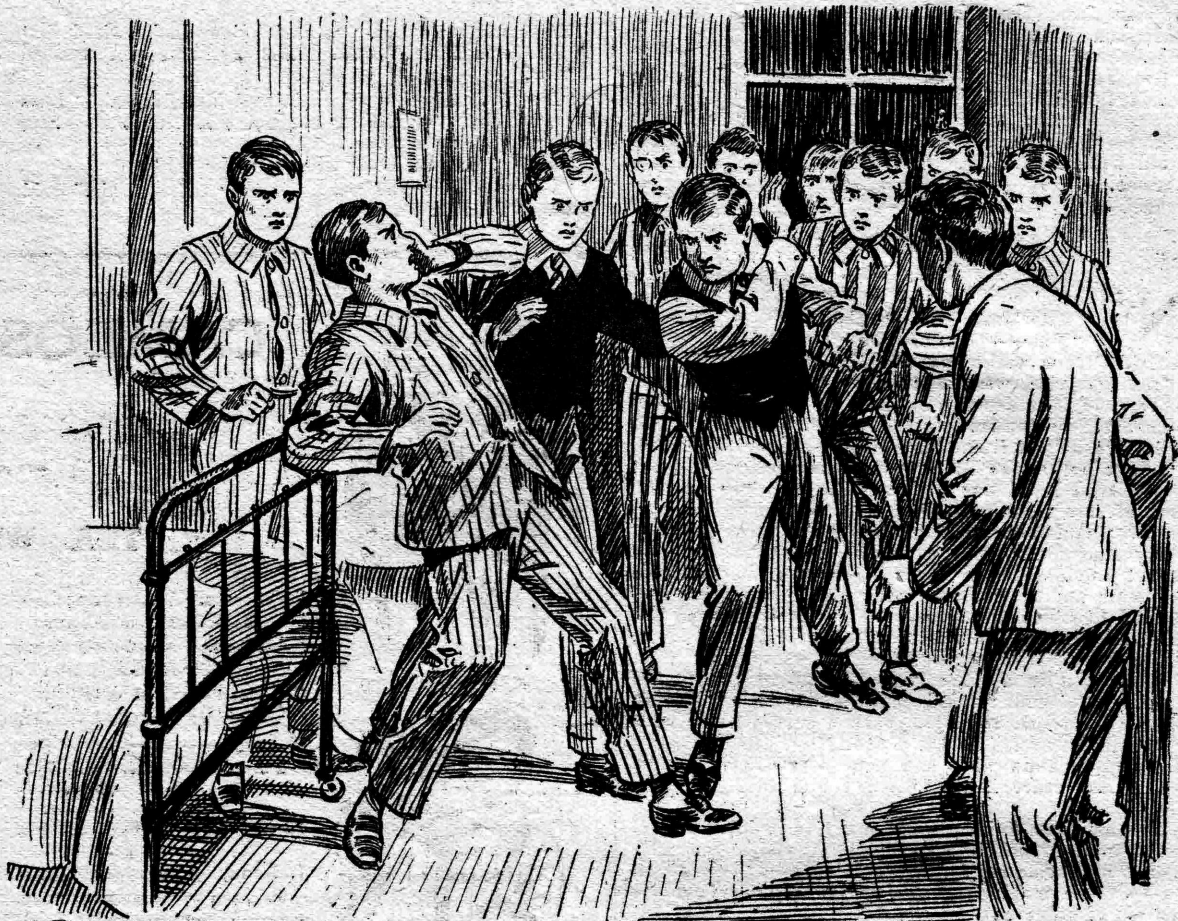
"I believe so—Figgins, Kerr, Wynn, Redfern—all boys of the very best character."

The colonel smiled grimly.

"It seems, then, that my nephew, judged to be a scoundrel, made friends only with boys of the very best character, and had no acquaintance with any of second-rate character," he said. "Very remarkable, I must say, in a boy capable of a scoundrelly action."

Mr. Railton started a little. Certainly it was odd enough, if Talbot was capable of dishonesty, that all his friends were fellows upon whose characters suspicion would not dare to breathe.

"Not a friend of my nephew's, then," said the colonel, with a nod. "Some wretched fellow whom he



"You never know a chap until you find him out," snorted Grundy. "A thief—pah! Jolly good thing Talbot's gone! Smack! Grundy, in astonishment and rage, reeled under a sudden blow that landed full in his rugged face. It was Crooke who had struck him. "Hold your rotten tongue!" shouted Crooke. "It's my cousin you're speaking of, you rotter!" (See Chapter 5.)

has helped in a difficulty. It is now fairly plain to me, Railton, why my nephew wanted fifty pounds. It was to help a lame dog over a stile. It is not hard to guess that it was the same wretched evil-doer whom he is now protecting at such cost to himself. It remains to find him.

"Come, sir," said the Housemaster, with a touch of impatience, "I can make every allowance, but this verges upon the absurd."

"Indeed, sir!" said Colonel Lyndon, unmoved.

"Indeed, Colonel Lyndon," said Mr. Railton tartly. "We are to suppose that some wretched vicious boy was in trouble—not a friend of Talbot's, yet for whose sake Talbot was willing to ask you for an unexampled sum of money—not a friend of Talbot's, but for whose sake he is willing to give up everything that makes life dear. I am afraid that I cannot suppose anything of the kind. Why should Talbot do all this—make such unheard-of sacrifices—for a boy who cannot possibly be found in the list of his friends?"

"Why, indeed?" said the colonel. "That is what we are to discover, sir."

"I have no hope whatever of discovering any such person, Colonel Lyndon. No boy of bad character is known to have been Talbot's friend. There are boys here, certainly, as in all schools, who had fallen under the eye of suspicion—there may be vicious lads whose viciousness has not been discovered. I admit it. But you ask me to suppose that there exists in the school a lad of dishonest character, not a friend of Talbot's, yet with some claim on him such as Talbot cannot deny? You ask me to suppose too much." The Housemaster broke off suddenly. "Colonel Lyndon, what is the matter? Are you ill?"

The colonel's tanned face had suddenly whitened.

"Good gad!" he breathed. "Stop—stop! Say no more."

"What—"

Colonel Lyndon rose from his chair. A strange pallor was in his bronzed face, his eyes had a haunted look. Mr. Railton gazed at him in amazement. It was as if the Housemaster's words had struck the old military gentleman like a heavy blow.

With an effort Colonel Lyndon recovered his impassive calmness.

"I am wasting your time, Mr. Railton," he said quietly. "This discussion leads to nothing. Do not let me detain you any longer."

"It is true that I am due to take the Sixth in third lesson," said the Housemaster, "but—"

"Please do not let me detain you," said Colonel Lyndon. "As I am here, I presume that I may be allowed to see my other nephew—Gerald Crooke. I should naturally like to see him while I am here."

"Certainly, sir. He will be going into his Form-room now, but I will send word to Mr. Linton that he is wanted."

"Thank you. I will wait for him in the visitors'-room. I know my way—don't trouble."

Colonel Lyndon left the Housemaster's study, leaving Mr. Railton in a very perplexed frame of mind.

In the visitors'-room, while he waited for his nephew Gerald Crooke to come, the colonel paced to and fro, and now that he was alone his iron face was agitated, his lips quivered.

"Good gad!" he breathed. "Good gad!" He repeated the words of the Housemaster. "Some lad of dishonest character, yet with such a claim on Talbot as Talbot could not deny. Railton's words—and Railton did not guess what his own words might convey! Yet only last term he warned me, he warned Gerald's father, that unless Crooke mended his ways, his

expulsion from the school must come. Gerald—my sister's son!"

He gnawed his lip.

"But Talbot, too, is my sister's son, and justice comes before all! The truth must be told!"

Tramp, tramp, tramp! went the steady soldierly tread as the colonel paced the room, waiting for Gerald Croke to come. But Croke of the Shell did not come.

CHAPTER 7.

The Gully One!

"NOT goin' out?"

"Yes," muttered Croke.

"But—" said Racke, in surprise.

Gerald Croke walked on without answering. Racke, in great surprise, went with him towards the gates.

There had been trouble between the two black sheep of the Shell—bitter trouble and blows. Racke was not the man to help a friend in distress—especially to such an extent as Croke had required when Mr. Lodgey, of the Green Man, was dunning him for fifty pounds.

But of late it seemed that Croke's money troubles were over, and if he no longer wanted to borrow money Aubrey Racke was willing to make it up again. It was not comfortable to be on fighting terms with his study-mate and former associate.

Gerald Croke had shown little desire to resume the former friendship. He was civil to Racke in the study, but he said little to him, and he showed no wish at all to join in a little game of nap or banker, as of old. He had refused point-blank to accompany Racke and Mellish and Clampe on a surreptitious visit to the billiards-room at the Green Man. Racke really did not quite know what had come over Croke, unless some serious scare had frightened him into the path of reform.

Racke had seen Colonel Lyndon arrive in his car, and he was aware that Croke's uncle's visits generally meant a handsome tip for Croke. So he was surprised to see Croke making for the gates with the evident intention of going out.

Moreover, break was nearly over; in five minutes the juniors would be due for third lesson. It looked as if Croke meant to cut class—a rather serious matter in the eyes of the master of the Shell.

Croke hurried on, without a look at his companion—seeming hardly conscious, in fact, that Racke was at his side. Aubrey Racke had a very curious eye on his troubled, harassed face.

"You know your uncle's here, Croke?" he said.

"Eh? Yes."

"You'll be missin' him."

"I can miss him if I like, I suppose," grunted Croke.

"You'll be late for third lesson."

No answer.

"Look here, Croke, what on earth's the game?" exclaimed the astonished Racke. "You'll offend your uncle and lose a good tip—and you'll get into hot water with Mr. Linton. What's the game?"

Gerald Croke halted, and turned on him fiercely.

"Mind your own business!" he said, between his teeth. "Can't you let a fellow alone? Mind your own business, confound you!"

"Oh, gad!" said Racke.

Croke hurried on again, leaving Racke staring after him. The cad of the Shell shrugged his shoulders as Croke disappeared out of gates.

A few minutes later the bell rang for classes, and the Shell went to their Form-room. Mr. Linton came into the Shell-room, and Racke wondered whether he would notice that Croke was not there. An absentee in class was not likely to escape the Form master's attention. But while the Shell fellows were taking their places, Mr. Railton stopped at the door of the Form-room, and spoke to the master of the Shell.

"Mr. Linton, Colonel Lyndon is here, and desires to speak to his nephew. Please let Croke go to the visitors'-room."

"Certainly, Mr. Railton."

The Housemaster passed on, and Mr. Linton turned to his class.

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"Croke!"

There was no answer; several fellows had noticed that Croke was not present. The Form master noticed it now.

"Is not Croke here?" exclaimed Mr. Linton. "Does anyone know why Croke has not come in to class?"

There was no answer.

"Merry, do you know where Croke is?"

"I saw him in the quad ten minutes ago, sir," said Tom. "I haven't seen him since."



CAMEOS OF LIFE

TEA WITH T

"Put on your Sunday best, deah boys!"
Says the illustrious D'Arcy;
"For one of school-life's greatest joys
Is clobber which is classy!
The Head's invited us to tea,
His kindly face will beam, boys,
To see you lookin' just like me—
I'm a sartorial dweam, boys!"

Up to the dormitory we dash,
At Gussy's keen persuasion;
In brimming bowls we sponge and splash
It is a great occasion!
Not often does the lordly Head
Take tea with mere nonentities;
It is a treat we rather dread,
By general consent it is!

Our collars are of spotless white,
Like snow upon the mountains;
And every face is shining bright
As if we'd bathed in fountains!
Our shoes are gleaming on our feet,
Thanks to a perfect polish;
And now our host we'll go to greet,
His dainties to demolish!



Mr. Linton looked very cross.

"Cannot any boy tell me where Croke is?" he snapped.

"I think he's gone out, sir," said Racke.

"Gone out!" snapped the master of the Shell. "Do you mean gone out of gates, Racke?"

"I think so, sir."

"Really, upon my word!" rumbled Mr. Linton, very much annoyed.

The lesson was commenced; Mr. Linton had no doubt.

that Crooke would come in late. His intention was to send him to the visitors'-room when he came in. It was really inconceivable, to a Form master, that a fellow in his Form could have gone out of gates just before the lesson, with the intention of staying out.

But that, seemingly, was what Gerald Crooke had done, for he did not come in late. He did not come in at all.

With the Shell and Latin prose on his mind, Mr. Linton soon forgot about Crooke and his absence. He

nephew has unaccountably absented himself from class, and is not in the school."

"Yes, sir," said Tom.

Manners and Lowther joined Tom as the captain of the Shell came out of the Form-room.

"Crooke's asking for it," remarked Manners. "He seems to want to get Linton's rag out."

"I can't understand it," said Tom. "Crooke knows that his uncle is here—I saw him looking at the colonel's car when it came."

"Dodging the old gent, perhaps," grinned Monty Lowther. "The colonel is a bit of a stiff old ramrod; I'm not sure I should be keen on seeing him if he were my nunky."

Tom Merry nodded, and went on to the visitors'-room to deliver his message. He heard the steady tramp, tramp of the old soldier's feet as he approached the room. Colonel Lyndon was still there, whether his nephew had come in or not.

The suspicion that had lurked in Tom Merry's mind revived with greater force now. It was fairly clear to him that Gerald Crooke had deliberately gone out of gates, taking the risk of his Form master's anger, in order to avoid the colonel. Why had he done so, unless he was, as Tom could not help surmising, somehow at the bottom of the trouble that had fallen on the colonel's other nephew—the favourite nephew? If that was the case, Tom could understand very easily that the wretched, nerveless fellow shrank from meeting the keen, penetrating eyes of the man who had come there to defend Talbot.

Tom found the colonel alone in the visitors'-room. Colonel Lyndon ceased his restless pacing as the junior entered, and turned to him.

"I have waited a long time for you, Gerald—" he began, and broke off as he recognised Tom. "Oh, it is you, Merry?"

"Hasn't Crooke come in, sir?" asked Tom.

"I have not seen him."

"Mr. Linton has sent a message to you, sir, if Crooke is not here," said Tom. "Crooke seems to have gone out of gates."

"That is very odd. Was he excused from classes this morning?"

"I—I think not."

"Then he is playing truant?"

"It—it looks like it, sir."

"He knew I was here, I think?" said the colonel, fixing his eyes upon Tom Merry's face.

Tom did not answer that question. He knew that Crooke was aware that his uncle was at St. Jim's, but it was not his business to say anything against the fellow.

"I saw him in the quadrangle, and I am assured that he saw me, though he did not come up to speak to me, doubtless for reasons of his own," said Colonel Lyndon quietly. "My nephew appears to be avoiding me."

Tom was uncomfortably silent. His message was delivered, and he made a movement to back to the door. The colonel raised his hand.

"Stay a moment, Merry. As my nephew is not here I wish to speak to you. I understand from what you told me that your faith in my other nephew, Talbot, remains unbroken?"

"Quite, sir," said Tom steadily.

"I am glad to hear it, my boy. I have stated the same opinion to your Housemaster. What has happened has not altered my opinion of Talbot in the slightest degree."

"I—I'm glad, sir," said Tom. "I—I was afraid— But I might have known you would stand by him, sir. Talbot has lots of friends left here; though, of course, fellows who don't know him very well go by the evidence. I—I can't understand myself why old Talbot should leave the school and leave fellows to think that he's cleared off because he's guilty."

"Either Talbot is guilty or he is defending some wretched fellow whose guilty secret he knows."

"That's what it is, sir, I believe, only—only—"

"It is necessary to find the skulking offender whose guilt has been placed on Talbot's shoulders. You were Talbot's best friend here, I think. Cannot you make a guess at the identity of the miserable wretch for whose sake my nephew is making this insane sacrifice?"

(Continued on page 17.)

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OF SCHOOL LIFE!

TH THE HEAD!

With thumping hearts we wend our way

In a polite procession;

Arthur Augustus feels quite gay

To judge by his expression.

The rest of us begin to quake,

With apprehension lurching;

How can we munch the Head's plum-cake

Under his glance so searching?

But when we meet our kindly host,

Our fears are promptly banished;

He chats with us until the toast

And tarts and cakes are vanished.

Indeed, the Head seems young again,

One of your care-free schoolboys.

He makes his invitation plain—

"Pray eat until you're full, boys!"

We do his bidding with a will,

There's not the least compunction;

And every fellow eats his fill

At that most cheery function.

No study banquet can compare

With this (its memory lingers):

For jam's served in a soap-dish there,

And forks are human fingers!



remembered him again when the lesson was over. He called to Tom Merry when the class was dismissed.

"Merry!"

The captain of the Shell stayed behind the others.

"Yes, sir?"

"Doubtless Crooke has come in and is with his uncle, Colonel Lyndon," said the master of the Shell. "It is barely possible, however, that he has not done so. Kindly go to the visitors'-room and see whether Crooke is there. If he is not, inform Colonel Lyndon that his

RESULT OF SPECIAL "BICYCLE" JOKE COMPETITION NO. 4.

STAFFORDSHIRE READER SUCCESSFUL!

EIGHT OTHER READERS WIN CONSOLATION PRIZES!

THIS WINS A BICYCLE.

A STICKY BUSINESS!

Glancing cautiously round to see that no one was watching him, Baxter dropped one of his gloves on top of the coin he had suddenly noticed on the floor of the shop. Then, stooping leisurely, he proceeded to pick up his glove. But the coin did not accompany it. He made another attempt with the same result, and was contemplating a third when a shopwalker approached him. "Morning, sir!" he beamed. "Allow me to show you a bottle of our famous glue. I believe you are now fully acquainted with its sticking powers!"—The special prize of a famous "Mead" Bicycle has been awarded to Roland Slater, 6, St. Stephen's Avenue, Willenhall, near Wolverhampton, Staffs.

RESOURCEFUL!

"When I was only a lad," continued the millionaire, who was telling his fellow club members at their annual dinner some of the troubles of his earlier life, "I walked to Devonshire. I found a job and, after five years' hard work, managed to save enough to buy a bicycle." There was a gasp of astonishment from the listeners. "Not long after this," began the other afresh, "I got a letter from home informing me that my mother was very ill. Jumping on my bicycle, I rode into London just in time to hear the doctor say that the fresh air of Devon was the only thing that would save mother." The audience gasped again. "You didn't take her back?" they questioned. "No," said the millionaire; "I dragged the old bike in, let the wind out of the tyres, and mother's alive to-day!"—A topping Table Football game has been awarded to Cyril Morris, 26, Addison Avenue, Lyndale Road, Normanton, Yorkshire.

A GOOD START!

Farmer Brown: "How is your new hired man working?" Farmer Tomkins: "Well, he broke two hoe-handles yesterday." Farmer Brown: "Working so hard?" Farmer Tomkins: "No; leaning on 'em!"—A topping Table Football game has been awarded to James Foggin, 17, Victoria Street, Seaham Harbour, Co. Durham.

NO WONDER!

Little Maggie was taught over and over again: "If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again." One day she approached her mother. "Mother," she said, "I don't believe that 'Try, try again' motto." "Why, dear?" asked the fond parent. "Because I've been blowing soap bubbles all the afternoon," answered the little one, "and I simply couldn't pin them to the clothes-line!"—A topping Table Football game has been awarded to M. O. Aitken, 19, Barrie Terrace, Ardrossan, Ayrshire.

A HIGH RECOMMENDATION!

Manager: "What are your qualifications for the post of night-watchman?" Watchman: "Well, sir, the slightest noise awakens me!"—A topping Table Football game has been awarded to P. T. Robertson, George Hotel, Glasgow, C.I.

WHAT DID HE MEAN?

Farmer (presenting a farmhand with a pig for good work): "I'm going to give you this pig as a present." Farmhand: "Thank 'ee kindly. It's just like you, zur!"—A topping Table Football game has been awarded to J. R. Jones, 149, Gatley Road, Gatley, Cheshire.

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A
Representation
of the Famous
"MEAD"
Bicycle—Listed
at £7 12 6—
awarded for
this week's
winning joke.

BY REQUEST!

It was one of those smart restaurants painted exquisitely in gold and white. The band was blaring out its most blatant melody. When they finished a tired-looking diner beckoned to the conductor. "Do you play anything by request?" he asked. "Certainly, sir," replied the conductor. "Well, then," retorted the diner, "for goodness' sake go and play draughts till I have finished my dinner!"—A topping Table Football game has been awarded to Leslie Wildey, 43, Cheverel Street, Nuneaton, Warwickshire.

AN AWKWARD SITUATION!

A lady was showing her small son round the Zoo. Presently they came to the monkey house. "Oh, mother," cried the little one, pointing to one of the cages, "isn't that monkey in there like Uncle Jim?" "Hush, dear!" said the mother. "You should not say things like that." "But, mother," spoke up the little one, "the monkey can't possibly hear!"—A topping Table Football game has been awarded to W. D. Smith, Simonside House, Simonside, South Shields.

SAFETY FIRST!

The village teams had been playing for about half an hour when one of the visiting side was ordered off the field for fouling. Immediately the captain of the home side sent one of his own men off. "Jolly sporty of you to do that!" said the skipper of the visiting team. "I suppose you don't like the idea of playing eleven men against ten?" "Well, it's not exactly that," answered the other, with a peculiar smile. "You see, five of my men have silver watches, and they've left them in the pavilion!"—A Topping Table Football game has been awarded to Jack Wilde, 40, Glencoe Road, Norfolk Park, Sheffield.



TRUE AS STEEL!

(Continued from
page 15.)

Tom Merry's face flushed.

He guessed—he more than guessed. It was fixed in his mind that Crooke was at the bottom of the trouble. But it was only a suspicion. He could not put such a black suspicion into words without a particle of proof; above all to Crooke's uncle. He stood flushed and silent.

The colonel's keen eyes seemed to penetrate to his very heart.

"You have made a guess," he said.

"It wouldn't be fair play to mention a name, sir, without an atom of proof," faltered Tom.

"Quite so. I fully agree. More especially as the name you are thinking of would be very painful for me to hear in the circumstances," said the colonel grimly.

Tom started, and his face grew crimson. The colonel knew that he was thinking of Gerald Crooke! Unless he was a thought-reader, that showed that Colonel Lyndon's own suspicions had already turned in the same direction. Neither the start nor the sudden crimsoning of Tom's face was lost on the colonel's penetrating eyes. His grim face grew harder and sterner.

There was a long pause, and then the colonel remarked, in quite a casual tone:

"My two nephews have never, I think, been on very good terms? You should know, as the closest friend of one of them."

"Well, they weren't much alike, sir—different tastes, and all that," said Tom.

"They had little to do with one another, as a rule?"

"Very little."

"Has there been any change in this respect of late?"

Tom did not answer immediately.

"If there has been such a change, you would naturally have noticed it," said the colonel. "I have a reason for asking, Merry. Has my nephew Talbot of late been more in company than usual with my other nephew, Gerald Crooke? Have they seemed to associate more than was their wont?"

"Well, yes, sir," said Tom.

"What attitude does Crooke take up on this matter? I am questioning you, Merry, because my nephew does not apparently choose to be here himself."

"Crooke is standing by Talbot like a brick, sir," said Tom, glad to be able to say something in the black sheep's favour. "He is frightfully cut up over this."

"Indeed?"

"He believes in Talbot, sir," said Tom. "He stands by him through thick and thin. It was Crooke who suggested to Mr. Railton that his key might have been got hold of by some fellow, and it was that that led to Trimble of the Fourth being found with the currency notes. Crooke was doing all he could to help Talbot."

"This theory that Mr. Railton's key might have been purloined somehow occurred only to my nephew Crooke?"

"Well, nobody else seems to have thought of it, sir," said Tom.

"Quite so!"

The grim face gave no clue to the thoughts behind it. But Tom Merry knew what was in the colonel's mind, for it came into his own mind like a flash. It was Crooke who had found Mr. Railton's key and used it—Crooke of the Shell! That was why it had occurred to his mind and not to anyone else's. Crooke was guilty!

Tom Merry caught his breath.

His heart was beating fast. Crooke—Crooke was guilty! It was Crooke whom Talbot was shielding at the cost of his own good name. Now that he thought

of it, a thousand circumstances recurred to Tom's mind, all of them pointing to the same conclusion.

The colonel was watching his flushed, excited face with a kind of grim curiosity. It was not difficult for him to read the junior's thoughts. Harder and grimmer the brown old face grew.

"But—but," faltered Tom, "Crooke's been standing up for Talbot like a brick! He struck a fellow last night for calling Talbot a thief—a fellow who could have smashed him, and would have, too, if another chap hadn't chipped in. Nobody would have expected Crooke to show so much pluck. I—I—I mean—" Tom stammered.

"Thank you, Merry," said Colonel Lyndon calmly. "May I ask you to keep an eye open for my nephew Crooke, and send him to me as soon as he returns to the school?" His grim mouth set. "I shall wait all day if necessary."

"Certainly, sir!" gasped Tom.

He left the visitors'-room, his heart beating almost to suffocation. He knew now. It had come like a revelation, and he knew. It was Crooke! Crooke was guilty! It was to save his worthless cousin that Talbot was silent at so fearful a cost. Crooke was guilty! The colonel suspected it, Tom Merry knew it. But proof was another matter.

CHAPTER 8.

Struck Down!

"MORNIN', Master Crooke!"

Crooke started violently.

His eyes almost blazed at Mr. Lodgey as the squat, bristly, horsey-looking man addressed him.

Mr. Lodgey's manner was amiability itself.

He seemed to have forgotten that only a few days before he had been threatening the black sheep of St. Jim's with ruin, threatening to expose him at the school, to show his reckless IOU to Dr. Holmes as proof, if his demands were not satisfied.

Mr. Lodgey had been paid. His threats had borne good fruit. Fifty pounds, the amount of the wretched Crooke's indebtedness to him, had been duly paid over to him, and Crooke's incriminating paper had been handed back and destroyed.

*Mr. Lodgey was only too eager to forget all unpleasantness. A fellow who could—under a little judicious urging and threatening—produce such a sum as fifty pounds, was a fellow whom Mr. Lodgey delighted to honour.

He had been quite concerned by the fact that Gerald Crooke had not called upon him since that episode.

Mr. Lodgey was more than willing to resume friendly relations—with an eye to another possible fifty pounds. He had allowed the sportsman of the Shell to run into reckless debt, knowing that Crooke had a rich father and rich relations. Obviously—to Mr. Lodgey's mind—the rich relations had turned up trumps. He was far from guessing to what a depth of misery and shame his persecutions had driven the wretched fellow.

A fellow who could persuade his people to "see him through" to the extent of fifty pounds was not a fellow to be dropped out of Mr. Lodgey's sporting circle, if Mr. Lodgey could help it.

So the beery, horsey gentleman was very pleased indeed to sight Crooke that morning, and he bore down on him with his most ingratiating smile.

Crooke backed away from the man as if he had almost trodden upon an adder.

"Leave me alone!" he panted.

"Oh, Master Crooke—"

"Leave me alone!"

Crooke's face was almost wild.

He had fled from the school, not daring to face the keen eyes of his uncle—Talbot's uncle. Colonel Lyndon could know nothing—could suspect nothing—how could he? Yet the wretched fellow, with his nerves in rags, dreaded to meet the quiet, penetrating eyes—dreaded lest that piercing gaze should draw from him the secret locked up in his breast.

A caning from Mr. Linton for cutting class was nothing. Crooke only desired to escape an interview with his uncle.

mucker. No wonder, if he's the guilty party all along. He's done his best—all that he could do without owning up. But"—Tom clenched his hands—"that's not good enough! He's got to own up to the truth! Talbot's not going to be branded as a thief because Crooke dare not face the music for what he's done."

Manners and Lowther exchanged dubious glances. They admitted the probability of it, but—there was a "but." Obviously, it did not seem so clear and certain to them as it did to Tom Merry.

"I tell you it's certain!" muttered Tom.

"It's likely enough," said Manners; "but it's not certain, Tom, or anything like certain. For goodness' sake, old fellow, don't speak this out to the other fellows—till there's something to go upon, at least. You can't make an awful accusation like that without something—"

"Colonel Lyndon thinks the same as I do. I'm certain of that!" said Tom. "It was the way he was questioning me about Crooke that made it break into my own mind."

"A rotten position for him, if he does," said Manners. "He can only prove one nephew innocent, in that case, by proving the other guilty."

"Rotten enough," said Tom, "but justice has got to be done. We were fools not to think of it before. Talbot is shielding someone. And whom should he be shielding except his cousin? Who else has such a claim on him? Crooke isn't the only rotter here, or the worst one, if you come to that; but he's the rotter at St. Jim's with a claim on Talbot—the claim of blood. Racke's a worse fellow—Clampe and Scrope are as bad—but they've no claim on Talbot. Crooke has—and we know that he has been thick with Talbot lately, sticking to him like glue. It's Crooke that Talbot is shielding, if he's shielding anybody."

"If!" said Manners quietly. "But bear in mind, Tom, that only Talbot's own friends believe that he is shielding anybody."

Tom's excited face calmed.

"I know," he said; "but—"

"If Talbot's uncle thinks as you do he will go deep into it," said Manners. "But you can't say anything—not without proof. Come on, Tom, the bell's stopped and Linton will rag us for being late!"

Tom Merry went into the School House with his chums. He was still absolutely convinced of Crooke's guilt. He felt that the knowledge of it had been lurking at the back of his mind all the time. But he was a little dashed by his comrades' doubts, and he realised that, for the present at least, he could say nothing. Crooke, guilty or innocent, was entitled to fair play; and no one would regard it as fair play to bring a wild accusation founded only on an instinctive feeling that it was true. Tom realised that very clearly.

There was a vacant place at the Shell table, and it was noticeable that Mr. Linton's brow was very severe. Gerald Crooke had not come in to dinner.

For a fellow to cut class without leave and stay out over dinner was unprecedented, and the master of the Shell was deeply annoyed. He was still more annoyed because the delinquent's uncle was at the school, waiting to see him. Twice or thrice Colonel Lyndon had inquired whether his nephew had come in, to receive only a negative answer. The colonel was staying to lunch with the Head. He had stated that he could not leave the school until he had seen his nephew. As an old comrade-in-arms of Mr. Railton, as a governor of the school and a friend of the headmaster, Colonel Lyndon was doubtless welcome at St. Jim's at all times. But in the present circumstances it was probable that both the Head and the Housemaster would have been relieved by the departure of the grim-featured old military gentleman.

However, as he had announced that he was decided to see his nephew before he left, it was scarcely possible for any objection to be raised. The Head had courteously asked him to lunch—perhaps wondering whether the grim guest would stay to dinner also if his nephew did not return to the school before the evening.

Crooke's conduct was unaccountable, and some of his

friends surmised that, having taken the bit between his teeth, as it were, he was going to make a day of it. All the Shell wondered at Crooke's nerve in braving the wrath of his Form master and Housemaster in this manner. Assuredly it was not like Crooke.

"Seen anything of Crooke?" Kangaroo of the Shell whispered to Tom Merry, as he sat down at the table.

Tom started.

"Hasn't he come in to dinner?"

Kangaroo grinned.

"No; and Linton's got his rag out! Shouldn't care to be in Crooke's shoes when he does come in."

Tom Merry noted now that Gerald Crooke's place was empty.

His lip curled bitterly.

Knowing what he knew now, he had no doubt as to Crooke's reasons for absenting himself. He was not surprised that the wretched, nerveless fellow lacked the courage to face Talbot's uncle. It was clear enough to Tom Merry that the black sheep of St. Jim's was deliberately avoiding a meeting with Colonel Lyndon.

After dinner Colonel Lyndon was seen walking in the quad, smoking a cigar, and with his brows darkly knitted. Many fellows looked curiously at Talbot's uncle, and wondered what he was thinking of; wondered, too, why he was still "hanging on" at the school. Talbot of the Shell was gone. The matter was officially settled, and there seemed no reason why Colonel Lyndon should remain. Yet he stayed.

Only Tom Merry knew why he stayed, and he drew comfort from it. The colonel was waiting for Gerald Crooke, with the intention of questioning him closely, ruthlessly. If Crooke was innocent, he had nothing to fear from the most rigorous cross-examination. But if he was guilty, as Tom believed, he had everything to fear. He was not a hardened rascal like Racke of the Shell, or Cutts of the Fifth. It was weakness of character that had landed him in his fearful position, and the same weakness would be his undoing when he came to face the colonel's searching eyes and searching questions.

Guilty, he could never pass through the ordeal without breaking down and betraying himself. Indeed, the fact that he had fled from a meeting with his uncle, was proof enough, to Tom's mind, that Crooke foresaw such a disaster, and he did not know yet that he was suspected.

Crooke was still absent when the dusk was falling on St. Jim's, and his prolonged absence was exciting general amazement now. Racke and Clampe opined that he was "making a day of it," perhaps at the races; but they could not understand such an astounding "neck" on the part of a weak-kneed fellow like Crooke. Other fellows wondered whether something might have happened to him.

"It's jolly queer that Crooke doesn't show up," Lowther remarked at tea, in Study No. 10 in the Shell. "He's sticking it out."

"He doesn't mean to come in till Colonel Lyndon is gone," said Tom Merry.

"Old Lyndon seems to mean to wait till he does come."

"Crooke can't know that."

"No; I suppose he thinks the old johnny will have gone by dark at latest," assented Lowther. "I can't quite see myself what he is staying on for, unless you're right, Tom, and he suspects his dear nephew Gerald of being the nigger in the woodpile."

"I'm sure that he does."

"If so he will turn Crooke inside-out in a brace of shakes once he gets him face to face," said Monty.

"I feel pretty certain of that. I suppose Crooke does, too, and he's keeping clear," said Tom. "But he can't stay out after calling-over; he can't make a night of it."

The Terrible Three left their study after tea. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy hailed them in the passage.

"It's vewy wemarkable about Cwooke, you fellows."

"Very!" said Tom dryly.

"Howwid bad form, you know, to cleah off when his relative is heah," said Arthur Augustus. "Of course, the colonel came down about Talbot, and Cwooke may not know that the old gentleman wishes to see him."

"He seems to want to," grinned Blake. "He's inquired after him about a dozen times, I think."

"Yaas, wathah! It's vewy odd. I weally twust that

nothin' has happened to Cwooke," said Arthur Augustus. "His conduct seems vewy diswepful; but, of course, it would be a full excuse if he had been wun ovah by a motah-car, or somethin'."

"You fellows heard?"

Baggy Trimble came up the passage, his fat face full of excitement.

"Heard what?" grunted Manners.

Tom Merry only bestowed a glare on the fat Baggy.

Apparently Baggy Trimble had recovered from the flogging of the day before, and the fact that he had narrowly escaped the "sack" had made no special impression on his fat mind. He was still the same fat and fatuous Baggy.

"About Croke!" gasped Trimble.

"Cwooke? What about Cwooke?"

"They're bringing him in," said Baggy.

"Bringing Croke in!" repeated Tom Merry, his face paling. "Has anything happened to him, then?"

Baggy grinned.

"Something must have happened, or they wouldn't be bringing him home on a stretcher!" he answered.

"Bai Jove!"

"I knew there was something on," pursued Baggy, as the juniors stared at him in consternation. "The telephone was buzzing like anything in the Head's study, and Railton was sent for, and he looked jolly disturbed when he went to fetch Colonel Lyndon. That old scout looked a bit knocked over, too. You fellows never notice anything. I knew something was on, and then I happened to hear Railton tell Linton—"

"Eavesdropping, as usual!" grunted Blake.

"Look here, you know—"

"Go on, Trimble!" said Tom Merry quickly.

Railton said Croke had had an awful whack on the napper," said Baggy.

"Wats! I am suah that Mr. Wailton nevah used such expressions in speakin' to a Form mastah."

"Hardly!" grinned Blake.

"Well, they weren't his exact words," admitted Trimble. "But he said that Croke had been banged on the crumplet with a stick, or—or words to that effect, you know. Stunned, you know. Some tramp, they think. I say, I wonder if Croke has been having a shindy with his pals at the Green Man—what? They're a rough lot, you know."

"Where is he now?" asked Tom.

"They're taking him into sanny. I dare say he's there now. The doctor came in his car. I saw him. I say—"

But Tom Merry & Co. did not stay to hear more. They hurried downstairs, where they found the whole House in a buzz of excitement. Croke of the Shell was in the school hospital, under the care of doctor and nurse, the victim of a brutal attack, and the police had already been informed. So much was common knowledge in the House. And the new sensation almost drove from the fellows' minds the affair of Talbot of the Shell and the Toff's flight from St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 10.

Light at Last!

TALBOT, old chap! Talbot! Send for Talbot! I did it—I did it—I did it!"

The words came again and again in an unending, delirious stream from the lips of the hapless junior in the bed.

In the ward of the school hospital Gerald Croke lay, not knowing where he was, not knowing what had happened to him. He had recovered consciousness, but he had not recovered his senses. Delirium had seized upon his nerves was taking its toll at last. The injury he had received from Lodgey was not very serious in itself; but it had come as a finishing touch, and Gerald Croke was down and out.

His head was covered with bandages, his face gleamed as white as the bandages in the shaded light. From his lips poured a ceaseless stream of words.

At a little distance from the bedside sat the Head of St. Jim's. Mr. Railton stood by his chair. Like a figure of bronze, Colonel Lyndon stood by the bedside,

his brown face pale and drawn. Upon the ears of the three gentlemen fell Croke's unending babble of words, telling over and over again the miserable, sordid story of the past few weeks.

Not a word was spoken by the hearers; there was no sound, save that tireless, unconscious babble from feverish lips.

"Talbot! Talbot! You can't go—you can't! I tell you, I'll go to the Head—I'll own up! He won't believe I never meant to steal the money; but you know—you know, old chap, I never meant to. You know I tried to put it back, only I couldn't get the key again—you believe that, Talbot! You know you made me try to put it back, and I tried—and I couldn't, I couldn't. I never knew you'd got the money for me—I never knew."

Croke's wild eyes stared about him.

"Where's Talbot? Send for Talbot! I tell you he never did it—he never touched it! Fools, fools, fools! He only helped me out, and a fool for his pains. The only fellow who would help me—the only fellow I dared speak to. Talbot, old man, if I'd dreamed they'd fix it on you, I'd have cut off my hand sooner. Why don't you go to the Head? Why don't you tell him? I can't—I haven't the pluck. How could I guess they'd fix it on you? I couldn't guess that, could I, old chap?"

It was terrible to listen to—ceaseless, unending—while the wild eyes stared, and the nerveless fingers plucked at the sheets.

"If they'd believe me—if they'd believe I never meant to keep it—but they wouldn't. I can't, Talbot, I can't! I daren't! You go to the Head and tell him—I can't! No, don't—don't give me away, Talbot! You promised—you promised! I tell you, I can't face it. I can't go home. If it wasn't for the mater, I'd go—I'd go instead of you—I swear I would! You remember what you said—you helped me for her sake! Stick to that! Don't let my mother know I'm a thief, Talbot!"

There was a faint sound from the iron lips of the old colonel.

But he did not stir.

The babble ran on, and on, and on; sometimes clear, sometimes incoherent. The story of the stolen visits to the Green Man—of the gambling with Lodgey, of the sharper's bitter persecution, of the terrible dread that had been on the wretched junior's mind for days and weeks—it all came out in babbling and muttering, and alternately the delirious boy urged Talbot to speak out, and implored him to keep the miserable secret. Talbot was not there to hear; but had he been, probably he would have been glad that he had done his best to help the weak, wretched fellow, who was tormented by remorse, but whom remorse could not sting into courage to do what was right.

"You brute! You rotter!" came in a scream from Croke. He was thinking of Lodgey now. "It was all your doing! Leave me alone! I'll smash you if you speak to me again! Leave me alone! Can't you let me alone after the harm you've done?"

His voice died into muttering.

The Head made a movement. Then Croke's voice came, clear and calm, as if he were speaking normally.

"Under the loose board in the box-room—you'll find it there! Every shilling! I put it there! I took it away once, to put back into Railton's desk—but I couldn't get the key! I couldn't get the key again. You know I couldn't! You'll find it all under the floor in the box-room. Do you think I'd touch it? I'm not a thief!"

"Wretched boy!" whispered the Head.

Croke's voice rose again—the momentary spell of calmness was over.

"Talbot, don't give me away—you promised! I tell you, I can't let my mother know. You fellows don't think much of me, but she does—she does! A fellow's mother is different. Why, it would break her heart if I were bunked. I can't go home. The pater would be wild! I don't care about that—I could stand the pater! What do I care? But I can't let my mother know I'm a thief. I can't! Keep your promise!"

Dr. Holmes rose to his feet.

"I can bear no more of this!" he whispered.

He left the ward. Mr. Railton remained, but Colonel Lyndon followed the headmaster of St. Jim's. They left the school hospital in silence, and not a word was

The colonel had, of course, come to St. Jim's on Talbot's affair. He would naturally ask his other nephew about it—discuss the matter with him. But if Crooke was not there he would not wait for him—it was on Talbot's business that he had come. It was scarcely likely, in the painful circumstances, that he would even stay for lunch with the Head. But Crooke was determined to run no risks on that point. He dared not face his uncle's eyes. He had resolved to keep out of gates all day and chance the consequences. A caning—a flogging—anything was better than trembling in terror under the piercing eyes of Colonel Lyndon.

Certainly he had not been thinking of Mr. Lodgey as he tramped by a wet field-path between the Green Man Inn and the river. A poisonous snake in his path could not have startled and horrified him more than the sight of the sharper who had caused his ruin—and Talbot's ruin.

He backed away, his face white and almost wild. "Leave me alone!" he panted.

Mr. Lodgey had a pained look.

"You got it up agin me that I was a bit sharp arter my money, sir?" he asked. "But look at it, Master Crooke—I trusted you. I was deep in myself—I was relying on that money. I'd 'ave got my jaw broke as a welsher if I hadn't paid up—and I couldn't unless you squared. Look at it reasonable, Master Crooke."

"Leave me alone."

"You ain't the young gentleman to owe a man a grudge," said Mr. Lodgey. "Let bygones be bygones, sir. If I went over the limit a bit, as I was 'ard pushed myself, I asks your pardon, sir. Can't say fairer than that. It's all over now, anyhow!"

Crooke laughed—a harsh, discordant laugh. It was all over so far as Mr. Lodgey was concerned; to Crooke it seemed as if it was only beginning.

"You got leave from school to-day it seems, sir," said Mr. Lodgey. "Tain't a reglar 'oliday. Well, sir, if you'd care to look in on me you'd find a smoke and a comfortable seat by the fire, sir, and a little game to pass an hour or two, if you was so disposed, sir."

Crooke laughed again—an ugly laugh. After all he had gone through—with the thought in his mind of his hapless cousin an outcast in the wide world owing to this villain's tempting and his own vicious weakness, the man supposed that he was still open to temptation. As if wild horses would have dragged him into Mr. Lodgey's parlour at the Green Man again!

"It ain't like a gentleman of your sort—a sporting gent—to bear malice, sir," went on Mr. Lodgey persuasively.

"Get away!"

"Look 'ere, sir—"

"You hound!" said Crooke, between his teeth. "You dastard! You've ruined me—you've driven me nearly out of my senses. You've made a villain of me—as bad as yourself! You ought to be in prison."

The ingratiating expression faded from Mr. Lodgey's face.

The sharper had a stick under his arm, and he looked disposed for the moment to slip it down into his hand and lay it about the sporting young gentleman. But Mr. Lodgey restrained that impulse. It was not business. Too much civility could not be expended upon a fellow who could raise such a sum as fifty pounds under pressure.

"Oh, draw it mild, sir!" said Mr. Lodgey remonstratingly. "You're 'ard on a man, sir! I ain't got any ill feelings—"

"You villain!" said Crooke.

"Look 'ere—"

"If I were a man I'd thrash you till you couldn't crawl back to your boozy den!" hissed Crooke, clenching his hands wildly.

Mr. Lodgey showed his teeth at that. It was borne in upon his mind that he had, in point of fact, driven his dupe too hard, and that the sporting young gentleman was done with him. There was no mistaking the bitter hatred and rage in Crooke's livid face.

"Oh, cut it out, young feller!" said Mr. Lodgey derisively. "You a sportsman! You'll pocket your

winnings fast enough, but when it comes to paying losses, you don't want to see Bill Lodgey, you don't! White-livered rabbit you are, and no error!"

"You swindler—you thief—"

"Chuck it!" said Lodgey threateningly. "I don't take that sort of talk from nobody, least of all from a whining young cur like you, young Crooke. If you want a hiding I'm the man to give you one. 'Ere, hands off, you young fool!" roared Mr. Lodgey, as the Shell fellow came at him furiously.

"You rotter—you beast! Take that—and that!" panted Crooke.

His tattered nerves had given way. It was a sort of relief to him, in his overwrought state, almost on the verge of a breakdown, to hurl himself at the man who had ruined him and drive his clenched fists into the evil face.

Crash! Crash! Crash!

Mr. Lodgey staggered back under the furious attack. A fist crashed on his bulbous nose, and again into his eye; and as he jumped away Crooke followed him up, still lashing out with savage fists.

"'Ands off!" yelled Lodgey.

In ordinary circumstances the sharper, beery and unfit as he was, could have handled the junior easily enough. But Crooke was almost frantic now, wound up to a pitch of hysteria, and he seemed to have the strength of a madman. Mr. Lodgey strove in vain to ward off the shower of furious blows that rained on him and blinded him.

"Keep off, you young madman!" shrieked Lodgey, grasping his stick now in his hand. "Keep off, or I'll brain you."

A crashing blow in the beery face was Crooke's only answer, and Lodgey reeled back. Crooke rushed on savagely; and the ruffian's stick swung up and crashed on his head.

Crooke gave a sharp cry and staggered back, and fell in a heap in the grass.

"Now then, you young 'ound!" panted Lodgey, grasping the stick for another blow. One of the rascal's eyes was closed, and his bulbous nose was streaming crimson. He whirled up the heavy stick to strike again, but his arm dropped to his side and the rage in his face gave place to uneasiness.

Gerald Crooke lay where he had fallen—without motion. Lodgey glared down at him.

"Get up, you!" he snarled. "Don't lie malingering there! I ain't going to hit you!"

But Crooke did not move. He lay on his side, his face white and set, and a trickle of red oozing from under his hair.

Mr. Lodgey gave a quick, scared look round him. He dropped beside Crooke in the grass, his brutal face pale now. The schoolboy was insensible—that savage blow had stunned him. Whether it had done more damage than that Mr. Lodgey did not know, but he feared it. The white, fixed face sent a chill of dread to his heart.

He rose to his feet and again cast a scared look round. But there was no one in sight—trees shut in the field-path—only, in the distance, the smoke from a chimney of the Green Man rose against the steely sky. Mr. Lodgey breathed hard.

"He asked for it," he muttered. "He made me do it! 'Ang him! But—but the sooner you're out of this, Bill Lodgey, the better for you!"

And the sharper hurried away, leaving Crooke lying senseless in the grass. At the Green Man Mr. Lodgey, rather to the surprise of his associates there, stayed only to pack a bag, and went. Gerald Crooke was still lying white and unconscious under the trees by the field-path when a train bore Mr. Lodgey away from Rylcombe, and the Green Man knew him no more.

CHAPTER 9.

Startling News!

"TOM!"

"Tom, what's the row?"

Manners and Lowther were looking for their chum. The dinner bell was ringing, but Tom Merry did not seem to hear it. His comrades found him



"Look here, Crooke, what's the game?" exclaimed Racke. "Why are you going out when your uncle's here?" Crooke halted and turned on Racke fiercely. "Mind your own business, confound you!" he hissed, and he hurried on again, leaving Racke staring after him, blank amazement in his face. (See Chapter 7.)

tramping on the gravel path under the Form-room windows, his hands driven deep into his pockets; his brows knitted.

Tom's brain was almost in a whirl in the light of the new discovery that had burst upon his mind. What to do—whether anything could be done—he did not know. He was trying to think it out. To accuse Crooke without a particle of evidence was impossible. Yet the absolute certainty was in his mind of Crooke's guilt. He was sure, he was certain, that the same suspicion was in Colonel Lyndon's mind. Indeed, now that he had seen the light, as it were, it all seemed sun-clear to the captain of the Shell, and he marvelled that others did not see it as he did.

"What is it, Tom?" asked Manners, quite startled by the expression on Tom's face. "We've been looking for you—"

"I've found it out," said Tom. "I mean, I've guessed! Fool not to guess before! It was Crooke!"

"Steady on!" said Lowther. "What was Crooke, Tom?"

"The thief."

"Tom!" exclaimed the two juniors together.

"Can't you see?" exclaimed Tom impatiently. "Didn't we know that Crooke was hard hit for money? He scrapped with Racke because that cad wouldn't help him. All the House knew he was in a hole. Everybody knew he was dragging Talbot into it—landing his troubles on Talbot's shoulders. It was Crooke who wanted money, and—and—"

"We know that Talbot was backing him up," said

Manners, with a nod. "But he wouldn't have touched Railton's money to help Crooke or anybody else."

"I don't mean that. It was Crooke who robbed the Housemaster's desk; it was he who was up against it. If there was any truth in the yarn that Talbot wanted money, it was to help Crooke that he wanted it."

"I shouldn't wonder. But—"

"It's clear—clear to me now!" breathed Tom.

"Not too fast, old chap," said Manners in his quiet way. "Railton's desk was opened without a key. That's why they pitched on Talbot in the first place—he's the only fellow at St. Jim's who can open a locked desk without a key. Crooke could not have done that!"

Tom made an angry, impatient gesture.

"Don't you see? Why did they get after Trimble? It was Crooke suggested to Mr. Railton that his key might have been pinched, and shoved back into his coat in the study after being used. I know he was trying to clear Talbot if he could—he wasn't villain enough to let Talbot suffer if he could help it. But the thought would never have occurred to him, only he—"

"Only what?"

"Only he himself was the fellow who got hold of Railton's desk key and used it," said Tom.

Monty Lowther whistled.

"If that's the fact, Tom, Crooke was taking a frightful risk in speaking to Railton as he did. He was risking betraying himself."

"I know—he's not all bad," said Tom. "Anybody can see he's awfully cut up over Talbot coming such a

spoken as they crossed the dusky quadrangle to the School House.

In the Head's study, their glances met. Dr. Holmes' face was quivering, his lips trembled. There was emotion in the bronze face of the old colonel.

"We need seek no further for the truth, sir, I think," said Colonel Lyndon quietly.

"All is indeed clear now," said Dr. Holmes. "That noble, unhappy lad, Talbot, has suffered for his cousin's sake. And—and but for this accident, the truth might never have been known."

"That is not quite correct," said Colonel Lyndon composedly. "My suspicions had already turned upon my nephew Gerald, for many reasons into which I need not enter now—that is why I waited for his return. I have little doubt that I should have drawn the truth from him."

"I had no suspicion——"

"The miserable lad was safely screened behind a nobler boy," said the colonel. "But you are satisfied now, sir, that my nephew Talbot is innocent?"

"Unquestionably," said the Head. "From what we have heard of Crooke's delirious ramblings, it is clear that Talbot sought to save him—sought to help him—and, indeed, did save him from actually using the stolen money. And he had promised Crooke to help him, to keep his secret—how can I blame the boy for not breaking a promise?"

"Then——"

"Talbot must be found—he must return," said the Head. "He will return with all honour. Surely you have no doubt of that?"

The colonel gnawed his lip.

"Justice must first of all be done," he said. "But—but that wretched lad yonder is also my nephew—his mother is my sister. Wicked and reckless as he has been, he seems to have been more sinned against than sinning. He has suffered. Is there no pity for him?"

The Head was silent.

"When he recovers, he must go!" said the colonel, with a sigh. "It is only just—I do not complain. Yet even in the midst of his wretched wickedness, he seems to have thought of his mother—his chief anxiety seems to have been for her, rather than for himself. That is a sign of good, at least. I have hope for him yet, if he could be given a chance, and remain where Talbot's influence may help him to keep the straight path. Talbot has saved him from becoming a thief—he might save him yet from being the weak, vicious slacker he has been."

Still the Head was silent. The old colonel's face froze up again into bronze immobility.

"That is for his headmaster to decide," he said. "I will take my leave now, sir. Talbot must be found, and I must find him."

"Not a moment must be lost," said Dr. Holmes. "I am anxious to see that noble lad—to welcome him back to the school. As for his cousin—he paused—"I must take time to reflect, sir. I must judge by what signs of repentance Crooke may show, when he has recovered his right senses. I can say no more than that."

And Colonel Lyndon went out to his car.

Tom Merry was waiting by the School House door.

He did not speak, but his eyes were fixed on the old military gentleman's bronze face questioningly. Colonel Lyndon was going. But what of Talbot? The colonel smiled faintly at the Shell fellow's anxious face.

"I am going, Merry," he said. "I am going to find Talbot—he is to return. His innocence has already been proved. You may tell all your friends—the Head is about to announce it to the House."

Tom Merry's face brightened, and his eyes danced.

"Oh, sir!" he gasped.

"Not a stain remains on Talbot's name," said the colonel, raising his voice a little for others to hear.

"Dr. Holmes has learned that my nephew was shielding another person, and it is proved beyond the shadow of a doubt. Talbot will return in honour."

"Hurrah!" yelled Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! Huwway!" chortled Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

And there was a cheer from all the School House fellows who heard the colonel's words.

"And the thief is known, sir?" exclaimed Tom.

The colonel's lips shut.

"All is known to your headmaster," he said. "Doubtless he will make public what he thinks fit. Good-bye, my boy!"

Colonel Lyndon shook hands with Tom Merry, and stepped into his car.

Tom turned back into the House, as the car glided away down the drive. The clouds had rolled by now; and Tom's face wore its sunny look of old.

"Bai, Jove, it's wippin', you know!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Wippin' for old Talbot to be cleahed like this, you know. Of course, I nevah had any doubts myself. No fellow of tact and judgment could have doubted old Talbot for a single moment."

"Hear, hear!" said Tom, laughing.

"But it's wippin', you know, to have it stwaight from the horse's mouth," said D'Arcy; "and, as a mattah of fact, you fellows, I have been thinkin' ovah the mattah, and I wathah fancy I have hit on the twuth."

Tom Merry started.

He was assured, in his own mind, that he knew the truth. But since Talbot was cleared, and was to be reinstated, it was useless for anything to be said on the subject of Crooke—Tom had only pity for the poor wretch who was lying ill in the school hospital. His punishment, if he was guilty, was for the Head to decide; it was not for Tom to speak. And he looked at Arthur Augustus very anxiously.

"Trot it out, Gussy!" grinned Blake. "What mare's-nest have you discovered, old bean?"

"Weally, Blake——"

"Give it a name!" said Cardew, of the Fourth.

"My theowy," said D'Arcy, with dignity, "is this—that there nevah was a theft at all."

"What?"

"Which?"

"Oh, my hat!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had succeeded in astonishing the natives!

"Thinkin' it out, you know, as a fellow of tact and judgment," said Arthur Augustus, "I wathah think I have done it, you know. My ideah is, that it was a practical joke."

"A—a—a practical joke?" stuttered Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Oh, my only hat!"

"You see, deah boys, it's wathah widiculous to suppose that there could be a thief in the School House!" explained Arthur Augustus. "Even in the New House, you know, they dwaw the line at that."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Some fwabjous ass bagged those cuwwency notes, you know, and hid them undah the box-woom flooah!" said Arthur Augustus sagely. "It was a wotten practical joke, in the worst of taste. Some practical jokin' ass did it to wowwy old Walton. Now he has owned up, seein' the misappwehension that has awisen. He would natuwallly own up, in the circumstances, and take a lickin'. Believe me, deah boys, that is how the mattah stands."

"Good old Gussy!" said Blake admiringly. "What a brain!"

"Weally, Blake——"

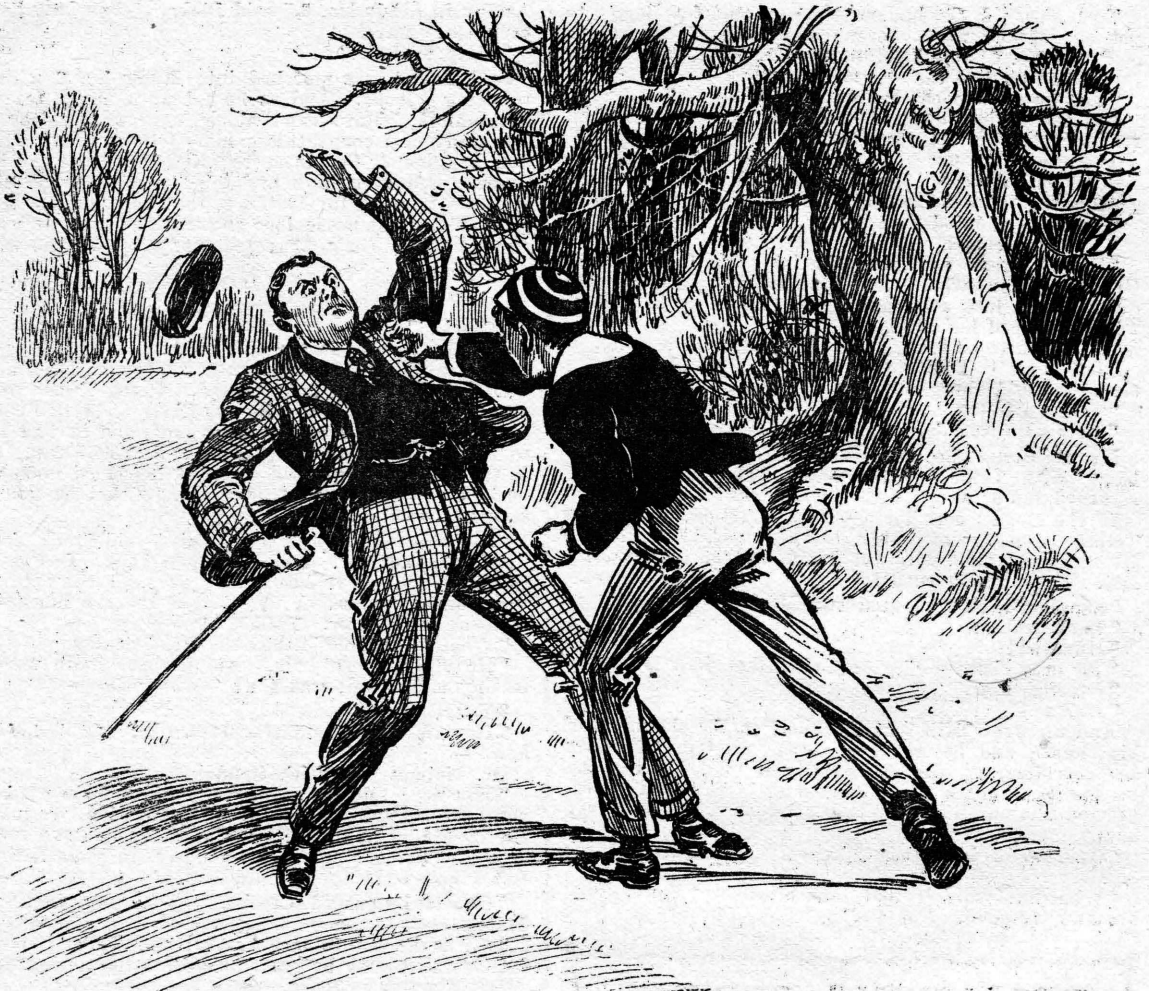
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"You rotter! You beast! Take that—and that!" panted Crooke. His tattered nerves had given way. It was a relief to him, in his overwrought state, to hurl himself at the man who had ruined him. Crash! Crash! Crash! Mr. Lodgey staggered back under a furious rain of blows. "Ands off!" he yelled. (See Chapter 8.)

"Let's hope it was nothing worse than that!" said Tom Merry, laughing.

"You'll find that I'm wight, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus serenely. "You fellows have noticed that I genevally am wight."

And Arthur Augustus, at least, remained quite satisfied with his solution of the problem. But the other fellows were thinking less about the solution of the problem, than about the fact that Talbot's innocence was proved, and that he was to return to St. Jim's. That evening there were great rejoicings in the School House studies.

CHAPTER 11. Talbot's Triumph!

"YOU fellows!"
"Hook it, Trimble!"
"But—"

"I tell you!" roared Baggy Trimble excitedly, in the doorway of Study No. 6. "I tell you—"

"Buzz, you fat wasp!"

It was several days later, and in Study No. 6 the Terrible Three were at tea with Blake & Co. They were discussing Talbot, of the Shell—of whom no news had yet been received.

It was known that Colonel Lyndon was leaving no stone unturned to trace the junior who had left St. Jim's and vanished into the wide world. It was certain that Talbot would be found sooner or later—sooner more likely than later. His chums were eager to see him return to the old school, but, knowing that there was no doubt on the subject now, they could be patient.

As soon as his uncle had found him he would return, and then all, as Monty Lowther expressed it, would be calm and bright.

"We shall have to have some sort of a weception," Arthur Augustus was remarking as Trimble appeared in the study doorway. "It will be good news for poor old Cwooke, too. Pwobably it will help him to wecover, and we shall see him back amongst us, you know."

"Which will be no end of a catch!" murmured Monty Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah!"

"Well, Crooke's been through it," said Tom Merry. "We'll let bygones be bygones when he comes out of sanny."

"Look here—" roared Trimble.

"But I jolly well wish Talbot was back," said Tom. "Fancy seeing the old chap trotting in!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"If you fellows won't listen to me—" howled Trimble.

"Buzz off!"

"All right," snorted Trimble. "If you don't want to know that Talbot's just come in—"

"What?"

"Bai Jove!"

"Oh, my hat!"

The tea-party in No. 6 jumped to their feet so suddenly that the table rocked and the chairs went flying.

"Talbot back?" exclaimed Tom.

"Just come in. I— Yaroooooh!" roared Baggy Trimble, in great wrath and indignation, as he was swept aside by a rush of the juniors from the study.

Tom Merry & Co. had no time to wait for Baggy to get out of the way. Seven eager fellows rushed out of Study No. 6, and Trimble was strewn on the floor as they tore along to the stairs.

"Yow-ow-wooop!" roared Trimble.

But the juniors did not heed Trimble. Leaving him roaring, they rushed down the staircase.

There was a buzz of excited voices below. In the lighted hall a sturdy figure stood amid a crowd of congratulating fellows. Talbot of the Shell had returned.

"Talbot!" shouted Tom Merry.

"Tom, old chap!"

"Here, whom are you shoving over?" exclaimed Grundy indignantly. But Tom did not answer. He did not even look at Grundy. He rushed up to Talbot. Talbot gripped his hand.

"It's good to be back, Tom!" he said, with a smile.

"Bai Jove! Your jolly old uncle found you, old chap!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Yes, old fellow."

"Here's Railton!"

Mr. Railton came up with a smiling face and shook hands with Talbot of the Shell. Then he took the returned junior away to the Head's study.

In the Head's corridor a swarm of fellows waited for Talbot to emerge after his interview with Dr. Holmes. He was some time with the Head, but he came out at last. There was a rush for him.

"Shoulder high!" shouted Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hurrah!"

"My dear chaps—" protested Talbot, half laughing.

"Up with him!"

"Hurrah!"

And up went Talbot of the Shell on the shoulders of his chums, and he was borne away in triumph along the corridors, up the staircase, and landed breathless in the Shell passage. Welcoming looks and voices greeted him on all sides. Talbot's flushed face was very happy.

"Glad to be back, what?" chortled Kangaroo of the Shell.

"What-ho!" said Talbot breathlessly. "You fellows are awfully good. But—"

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"Tea in Study No. 6," said Blake. "You haven't had your tea. March!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

And Talbot was marched into Study No. 6 with his rejoicing friends. And as he sat at a merry tea with the juniors, fellows came along in crowds to look into the study and congratulate him—fellows of all Forms, and Piggins & Co. from the New House, Fifth-Form fellows, and even high and mighty men of the Sixth. It was a triumph for Talbot of the Shell, and the happy glow in his handsome face showed how glad he was to be back at St. Jim's, among so many fellows who wished him well.

"Crooke!"

The Head spoke in a gentle voice.

The white-faced junior turned his eyes on Dr. Holmes. The delirium had long passed. Crooke was himself again. He was still ill; he was likely to be ill for some time. But he was in his senses now, and he had asked to see the Head, and the Head had come. And, little as Gerald Crooke guessed it, much depended upon what he had to say to his headmaster now that he was conscious of what he said.

"I—I wanted to speak to you, sir," said Crooke feebly. "I must speak, sir. I can't keep it back. I—I've been thinking while I've been lying here. I can't let him suffer in my place. I don't seem to care much what happens to me now. Talbot, sir—"

"What of Talbot?" asked the Head gently.

"He was innocent, sir," said Crooke. "He was protecting me. It—it was I who—who—who—"

"You confess?"

"I confess, sir," muttered Crooke. "I'll tell you how—"

Dr. Holmes raised his hand.

"You need tell me no more, Crooke. I am glad that you have resolved to make a full confession. It justifies me in giving you another chance. You have already told the whole story, unconsciously, in your delirium. But I hoped that you would confess."

"Oh, sir!" gasped Crooke. "Then you knew that Talbot—"

"All is known to me, Crooke, and Talbot has been found, and to-day he has returned to the school."

"Oh!" gasped Crooke.

"Ana you, my boy—"

"I've got to go, I know!" groaned Crooke. "I—I wouldn't care, only—only—for—for—" He broke off.

"I know of whom you are thinking, Crooke, and for your mother's sake, as well as your own, I shall give you a chance to amend and atone instead of sending you away from the school," said Dr. Holmes. "You have done very, very wrong, you have done great harm, but I believe that you repent; your confession convinces me of that. No one knows what you have done, and nothing will be said. When you recover, Crooke, you will resume your place in the school, and I shall trust you to prove to me that I have not done wrong in giving you this opportunity to retrieve the past."

"Oh, sir!" The tears were running down Crooke's white face. "You can trust me, sir. I've had a lesson I sha'n't forget what I've been through. And—and Talbot is back? Thank goodness for that! You can trust me, sir. I promise that you can trust me!"

"I shall trust you," said the Head.

And he left Gerald Crooke with a brighter face.

It was more than a week later that Crooke rejoined the Shell, and Talbot was the first to greet him. Tom Merry & Co. greeted him also, cordially enough. Of what they knew or suspected no word was said. Bygones were bygones, and the black sheep of St. Jim's had a chance to make good, and they could only hope and believe that he would make the most of it.

THE END.

(Look out for a topping yarn of the chums of St. Jim's in next week's GEM, entitled: "A Merseyside Mystery!" it deals with the thrilling adventures of Tom Merry & Co. in Liverpool and shows Martin Clifford in tip-top form. Be sure and read it, chums.)

TAKEN DOWN A PEG! Lieutenant J. S. Groot is new to soldiering and he takes his job mighty seriously. But he bites off more than he can chew when he leads his small force of soldiers against White Eagle, otherwise, Tom Holt!



WHITE EAGLE!

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

Told By

ARTHUR PATTERSON.

The Troops!

THE voice was White Cat's, and the rifles were aimed at Black Hawk's breast.

This action roused Tom. He had stood in a dream as he heard his name echoing down the street. Now he started forward.

"Hold there!" he cried, throwing his body in the way. "I will not have Black Hawk hurt! Hold up, I say!"

The rifles were lowered, but the men stood fast; and from the concourse in the street and everywhere there came a joyous shout. As for Black Hawk, he merely stepped to one side, and, with a slap on Tom's shoulder which made the warriors smile, confronted Badger Head.

"Chief," he said quietly, "it is for you to speak once more. The nation has spoken. Give your commands again!"

An instant and very solemn silence fell upon the crowd. All eyes were upon Badger Head, and anyone who had not known what had passed before would have believed him to be in full authority. But the Apaches knew the truth, and so did Badger Head. It was a moment of the deepest humiliation. He had been beaten on his own ground, and by his own men. His power was broken to pieces. Black Hawk's words were the bitterest mockery. Badger Head by his own act, his blindness in interpreting the wishes of his warriors, would never command again.

But the man was game. He came well forward, placing himself purposely in front of the rifles.

"The nation has spoken," he said in a calm, indifferent tone. Then he turned to Tom: "White Eagle, you may go your ways without harm!"

At the words a cheer broke from the crowd like the rattle of machine-guns, a perfect tornado of short, sharp cries. Some warriors pressed forward to grip Tom's hand. Others waved their rifles in the air and laughed. In an instant the silent throng became a mass of chattering, excited men. But the confusion only lasted a moment. Black Hawk spoke to Tom at once.

"This fight is over. But we must not rest. What is to be done with Fat-face and the storehouse? The squaws are starving and all warriors are hungry. They look to you. Give word!"

"Right!" Tom answered, setting his teeth. He saw what he must do, though the action was not pleasant. "Call the men to order," he continued, "and say that I must speak."

A shrill cry went out, and in an instant the crowd was

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.

SOLOMON SLACK, a Government official in charge of the Reservations.

JEREMIAH MUSH, a hotel-keeper.

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 Redskins, and to save his life offers to accompany the tribe to the Reservations for the winter. From Black Hawk, Tom then learns

still again. The platform was almost empty now. The council had dissolved; Badger Head had disappeared. Only Tom stood there with Jeremiah Mush, White Cat, and men of the hunting party, Black Hawk and Hunks, who had been with White Cat all the time, and was now licking Tom's hand.

"Warriors," said Tom—his voice was cold and steady—"I now carry out my plan. You have suffered cold and hunger these long, hard weeks. Children have died. This shall be no more. The Big House is in my hands. I take from it all that you need. Black Hawk"—he turned to the chief—"I want twenty men to open with tomahawks and knives the stores that I shall choose. Every warrior, every squaw, and every papoose in all the nation shall be fed to-day."

The declaration was received with a cheer, but some voices at the back—Tom suspected to come from members of the council—shouted: "We want Fat-face! We want Fat-face to burn upon the fire!"

Tom's hand went up and his face grew stern. "Fat-face is mine!" he thundered. "I keep him prisoner. I make him take up keys and give out food himself. That will be torture to him worse than any fire. After that, I shall see. Is that good, warriors?"

He turned right and left, and a great roar of laughter gave him assurance that he had struck the right note. Indians have the keenest, though often a very cruel, sense of humour, and when they saw the wretched Slack released, and still in his pyjamas—for Tom dared not delay a moment—hurried here, there, and everywhere, to get out stores and open every lock, and show White Cat, who took charge of him, where all the treasures lay, they howled with delight, and forgot for the time all desire to roast him.

Black Hawk had responded to Tom's order by choosing the men of his hunting party, who could be depended upon; and in the shortest possible space of time the store was filled with Indians in orderly lines, receiving goods over the counter as on ordinary days, their squaws thronging behind to carry them away, for no warrior ever carries a burden of any kind.

The clerk of the storehouse, under superintendence of Jeremiah Mush, put down in the usual book—but, by Tom's order, in red ink—account of everything distributed, and it is a sad but undeniable fact that in all his official life that clerk had never enjoyed himself so much as when he witnessed his employer's deep distress and the unspeakable misery of his position.

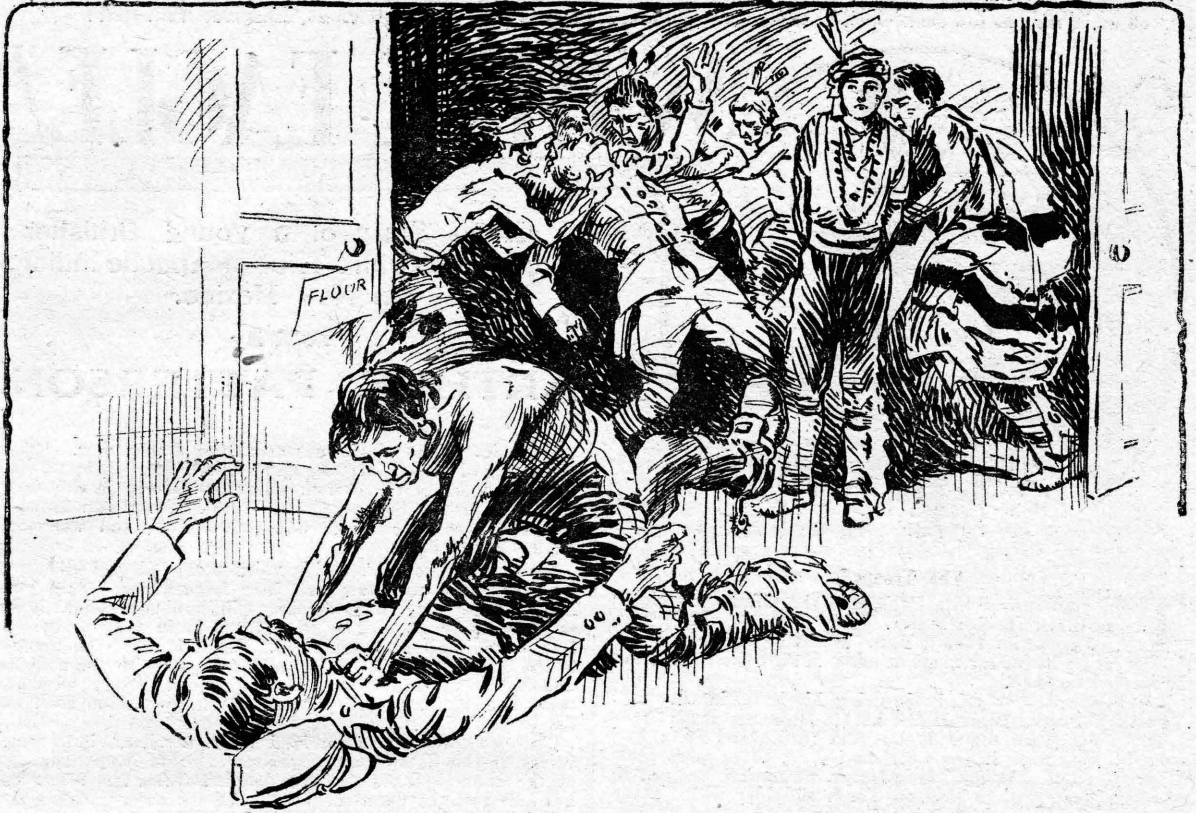
But suddenly a change was visible over the faces of the Indians. A warrior came flying into the store hot-foot and spoke to Black Hawk. The little chief went up to Tom and drew him aside.

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, where he finds Badger Head encouraging the Redskins to revolt against the "Whites." Hearing in advance that Badger Head intends to pillage the storehouse, Tom rushes to the scene, and for Slack's own sake, takes him prisoner. Badger Head arrives with his braves, and is so enraged to find that he has been forestalled that he quarrels with Tom. The Britisher commits the grievous error of laying hands on the Supreme Chief, and is sentenced to death by the Council—Badger Head insisting that Black Hawk's is to be the hand that strikes him down. Then, at the critical moment, a shrill cry is heard:

"White Eagle is our brother and no man shall kill him! Warriors, are you ready?"

(Now read on.)



Suddenly a man's body shot from the skylight, dropped heavily upon the sergeant's shoulders and flattened him upon the floor. It was White Cat! At the same instant half a dozen Redskins hurled themselves upon the soldiers escorting White Eagle. (See page 28.)

"We are trapped. Someone has lied. The soldiers are coming in the steam puffer-cars. Badger Head has taken the guards away—and is not here. Warriors fear soldiers now. What shall we do?"

Even as the little man spoke the shriek of an engine's whistle was plainly heard, and everyone turned to Tom. His attention was caught by Mr. Solomon Slack. The sound was heavenly music to Sol's ears. He sprang to his feet—he had been groaning over a sack of potatoes which White Cat had made him drag across the floor—and now, with an activity no one would have suspected, began to run towards the front door. But Tom was not taking any chances.

"Stop, Fat-face!" he cried. Then, as an Apache swept in the agent's path and tripped him so that he rolled helplessly on the floor at the feet of a laughing group of squaws, an idea struck Tom.

"Put him in his room!" he said to Black Hawk. "Let squaws guard him. There will I bring the commander of the troops. Quickly now. Jeremiah, will you come with me and face the music?"

The hotel-keeper, who was hard at work in his shirt-sleeves, put on his coat and thrust his hat rakishly at the back of his head.

"Waal," he said, with a wooden face, "I guess I have to obey my chee-eff. But I reckon now"—he looked Tom over slowly—"that while it is penitentiary for mine, for yew, in them clothes, it will be the electrocuting chair! Sakes, though, you will look bonny dyin' in that little suit!" Then he slowly grinned. "Another fight—this time with Solomon. Cheer up! It will be the biggest show-down in creation!—And you'll win through, White Eagle. You can bet your beaded boots on that!"

Surrender!

THE commander of the soldiers, Lieutenant J. Stenover Groot, took himself and his military duties very seriously, and looked upon Indians as the scum of the earth. He had heard a lurid tale from the released telegraph operator, who was a faithful disciple of Solomon Slack, and thereupon had detained his men, a squadron of

troopers and a machine-gun detachment, with great despatch, and was prepared for the worst.

The approach of Mush and Tom, heralded by the fluttering of a large handkerchief, which had once been white, and was energetically waved by Jeremiah at the end of a broom he had stolen from the storehouse, did not impress him at all.

The lieutenant addressed himself to Jeremiah.

"Are you a prisoner? I shall arrest this Apache. Tell me about things, will you?"

He was looking Tom all over as he spoke with severe disapproval, to Tom's extreme surprise. It had never occurred to him that he would be taken for an Indian. He had forgotten his dress, in spite of Mush's reminder, and was equally unconscious that his complexion, through long exposure in the open air, was nearly brick-red. He would have now disclosed his identity, but Jeremiah gave him a secret kick and spoke first.

"A fine maw'nin', colonel," he said in his slowest drawl, with emphasis on the title. "No, I ain't been confined any. I thank yew. My name is Jeremiah Ezekiel Mush, and I keep an hotel in this town. I have pleasure in introjewcing to you, a very good friend of mine, a Chee-eff who's takin' temporary charge of the Apache Nation. As to things in Trantville, you will find them in his hands."

The little officer stared at the speaker, and then at Tom, and frowned heavily. He had no sense of humour whatever, and began to suspect that this lantern-jawed American was pulling his leg. Tom irritated him still more. He expected that an Indian, when confronted with an officer of the United States Army in uniform, would be exceedingly respectful, and dignified. This Apache was neither respectful nor dignified. The lieutenant's sharp eye detected a hardly-repressed smile about his lips while the American was speaking, and he stood now, with feet apart, in an easy, devil-may-care attitude which was most improper. Incidentally, he was a head taller than the lieutenant himself, which did not make him any the more acceptable.

"Speak English?" the officer snapped at Tom, who, put off by the tone of the man, nodded carelessly—much too carelessly.

Lieutenant Groot flushed to the roots of his light, red hair, which was beautifully brushed under the blue cap, and parted, with geometrical accuracy in the middle of his head.

"Is that so? Then let me tell you—whatever-your-name-is—that I have come to straighten things out here. Answer this question now: Where is Mr. Solomon Slack, the agent? I hold you responsible for his safety. If anything has happened to him, you hang. Understand that!"

Having delivered himself of these resolute words, Lieutenant J. Stenover Groot saw a change in the Indian which greatly pleased him. He had ceased to smile; his cheeks had become several shades redder, and his face stiffened as if he had been struck.

Tom, indeed, was very angry, but Miah winked, and he gave his answer in a deep, guttural voice.

"Fat-face safe. You come see him—this way."

He waved his hand in the direction of the town and began to walk there, beckoning to the lieutenant to follow. The troopers surrounding them did not seem to impress this Indian at all. The horse of one which blocked the way was coolly taken by the bridle and turned aside, the Apache passing swiftly on before he could be stopped. There he stood waiting. The lieutenant was about to order him to be seized when Jeremiah intervened.

"Excuse me, colonel," he said, with a respectful gravity so profound that this time the officer believed him. "I'd leave the cuss loose, or there'll be unholy mess with those Red boys. And there's 'bout two thousand of 'em here armed to the very teeth. You'll pardon me for buttin' in—but blood I cyan't abide."

This statement impressed Lieutenant Groot. He had a quick eye, and he saw that there was cover in that town on the hill for any number of Indians, and he detected scouts on the move there; and though it was inconceivable to him that a dirty crowd of Apaches would dare to resist troops, it behoved him to be careful.

"Let the man alone," he said to the troopers. "Go carefully, boys. No firing. But be ready!"

As they proceeded, Tom leading the way, all trace of Indians disappeared; and Trantville, to the lieutenant's surprise, might have been a city of the dead. He did not like this at all, and to Jeremiah's delight, the soldiers were re-cautioned, and the whole party went forward on tiptoe, expecting every moment to be heavily attacked.

Meantime, Tom was turning things over in his mind. He felt the joke had been carried far enough. Jeremiah was a born practical joker. But this Army man was so very much in earnest that it was not playing the game. Therefore, just before they reached the storehouse, Tom turned back and, disregarding another signal from the American, addressed the lieutenant in his natural voice.

"I think you ought to know that I am not really an Indian, though I have some authority with the Apaches here. We were having a joke upon you."

The lieutenant's face blazed up like a prairie fire.

"Give me your name!"

He was in a towering rage.

"Tom Holt. I wish to say—"

But he got no further.

"Cover that man!" the officer rapped out. Then, as the troopers raised their carbines to the shoulder: "Shoot if he moves! Thomson, tie him up!"

A burly sergeant swung off his horse, and before Tom had recovered from his amazement, which luckily prevented him from making any resistance, he found himself stripped of his revolver and knife and his hands securely bound behind his back.

In the meantime something else happened. Jeremiah had quietly disappeared. The concentration of the soldiers on Tom had taken their attention from his companion, who had stepped round a corner of the street before anyone could stop him. At this untoward incident the lieutenant boiled over, drew his revolver, and brought the muzzle down between Tom's ribs.

"Tell me who that man is! The truth, now!"

It was about time Tom faced the situation he had fallen into. But he found it very difficult. He wanted to laugh. The whole thing was ridiculous. Only the timely remembrance of his responsibility to the Nation prevented an outburst which might have had fatal consequences all round.

"That man is my friend," he said, trying to speak calmly.

"He is a citizen of this town. What on earth's the matter with you?"

"Why did he run away?"

The question was rather a facer, and Tom grinned feebly.

"I have not the least idea."

"I guess we must help your ideas," was the grim reply.

"I will tell you something. Your name has just been given to me as the Filibuster Britisher, who is the cause of all this trouble. I told you just now what you would have if the Government agent here were not safe. I mean it! Bring him to me now, and we'll hear what he has to say."

Tom had a vision of Slack in his pyjamas, surrounded by six playful squaws, who by this time had probably pinched him black and blue. Matters were getting serious.

"You have been told lies," he said quietly. "I have saved the man's life—which is more than he deserved. He is in this storehouse under guard."

The lieutenant examined the building. It appeared to be empty, and the front door stood invitingly open. He called up the machine-gun detachment.

"Cover the place," he commanded—"every window and door. Sergeant, go inside with the prisoner. Take a file of six men. Bring Mr. Slack to me—and his guard. If you see any sign of foul play shoot the prisoner through the head!"

Six troopers fell out and dismounted, and with a seventh to hold Tom, and the sergeant leading, they marched up the steps of the store with heavy, measured tread.

Tom wondered what was happening inside. He earnestly hoped that Hunks was nowhere about loose. There would be murder and sudden death if he saw his master's plight. The prospect would not be much rosier if the warriors were here—if he knew anything about the mentality of White Cat. Yet he dared not give anything which might look like a warning.

As the men marched through the large room Tom heard a sound behind him—a low hiss. It was so low that the ears of the soldiers, untrained to frontier life, did not catch it; but Tom, as he heard it, knew that the fate of his guards was now a foregone conclusion. The place was garrisoned by the Indians. They must have seen him taken prisoner and were bent on his rescue. He was glad of this, but he began to be sorry for the honest boys in blue who guarded him—fine, bronzed, open-faced chaps; far too good to be under the command of that red-haired rat. His own extreme danger in the circumstances did not strike him.

"Turn to the left, sergeant," he said, as they reached the passage leading to Mr. Slack's private room. "Go straight on. Last door on the right."

There were six doors in this passage, three on a side, each with the name of the stores contained in the room behind it neatly printed upon a piece of cardboard hung on the handle. There was a skylight above the passage, and as the day was fine it was, naturally, wide open. The whole place was very quiet and looked most businesslike, and the sergeant stepped forward with confidence. He had

(Continued overleaf.)

BEST VALUE FOR TWO PENCE

Cadbury's Chocolate
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WHITE EAGLE!

(Continued from
previous page.)

taken a fancy to Tom, and thought his officer a fool. His faith was to be rudely disturbed. He had hardly taken three paces towards the door Tom had indicated, marked "Private," when a man's body shot from that skylight, dropped heavily upon his shoulders and flattened him upon the floor. It was White Cat. At the same instant all six doors opened at once, and before the soldiers had time to pull a trigger, much less to aim at Tom, they found themselves pincioned hand and foot, gagged with pieces of wool, and at the mercy of a dozen half-naked Apache Indians.

The whole affair did not occupy two minutes, and not a sound reached the troops outside. Meantime Tom was instantly released, and found White Cat patting him delightedly upon the shoulder, Jeremiah shaking him by the hand, and Hunks, who had appeared with all the rest, licking his face with tempestuous sniffs of delight.

"Miah," he exclaimed, as he gripped White Cat's shoulder with one hand and the pup's neck with the other. "This is you! What did you do?"

"Got busy," the hotel-keeper answered gravely. "The Government not seemin' to require my services, I jined the Opposition. But say! Tommy, Tommy, you don't understand the Army of the United States one little bit. I thought you did. I tell yew them fellers, when they gets peeved, like little suck-me-thumb, ain't human. The boys here are all right"—nodding at their captives—"but an officer such as him! You might as well start patten' an angry rattler on his little nose. But all's well! We've only to corral the crowd out there, and their pop-gun show. How'll we do it?"

The question was easy to ask, but most difficult to answer. Tom, after relieving the anxiety of the sergeant and his men—who expected every instant to find the knives which the Apaches out of sheer mischief were waving in their faces, scraping off their scalps—took observations.

Lieutenant Groot was a soldier. He had placed his men carefully, and, at the first sign of trouble there would be a hail-storm from the machine-guns which might lead to anything. Bloodshed, in any case, was not to be thought of. Then an idea came to Tom.

"Where's the agent?" he asked Black Hawk, who had silently appeared as it seemed from nowhere. "I hope the squaws have not hurt him."

The chief slowly grinned. "Squaws make so much love to Fat-face that we stop them.—Warriors get jealous."

"What did they do?" Tom asked anxiously.

"Well—he very fat. Squaws took pins to him."

"Great pip!"

Black Hawk raised a hand.

"Very little pins. Come see him. He all well."

Tom found Mr. Slack almost out of his mind, though physically unhurt. He was huddled in a corner on a dirty piece of sacking. Sitting round him were the squaws; while farther away lounged two warriors. The women each held a hatpin about six inches long, and from time to time they made a sudden dart with their horrible weapons as if about to pierce his flesh to the bone. They did not actually touch him, being under strict orders, but the effect on the wretched Slack's mind was a fiendish torture in itself.

When he saw Tom he sprang up like a great india-rubber ball.

"Oh, thank goodness!" he cried, in a voice which was half a sob. "They told me a lie—they told me a lie!"

"What did they say?"

"That you was dead. Soldiers got you, or something. They were a-go'in' to kill me—by the inch!"

He shuddered violently.

"Mr. Holt, if you leave me one more minute with them women I'll go stark insane! I'd rather you killed me!"

There was something utterly pitiable about the creature. Nerve, courage, manhood, all gone. Tom had a word with Black Hawk; the Indians departed; and in a few minutes Mr. Slack's wardrobe was returned to him. As he dressed Tom told him the situation—or as much of it as seemed advisable.

"What I propose," Tom said at the end, "is that you, with Jeremiah Mash and myself, interview Lieutenant Groot together, and tell him that if he uses force he'll be wiped out; that the whole upset has been caused by the starvation of these people; and that we will jointly undertake to put all right if the troops move off into camp somewhere, and the Indians are fed."

Mr. Slack's dull eyes blinked—once; but he showed no sign of disagreement.

"Whatever you wish, Mr. Holt," he said humbly, "shall be done. But there's the goods that's been stole; and there's no authority to give more."

"You must give it, all the same," Tom said shortly. "A statement in writing which I can approve shall be drawn up, signed by you and countersigned by Lieutenant Groot, and sent to Washington. If that is done, I will guarantee peace and submission by the Apaches. That statement will show that Badger Head caused all the trouble. You will tell the lieutenant this. I believe it is true—but you know best."

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