

# To Save His Honour!

*A Magnificent, Complete  
Story of St. Jim's, Intro-  
ducing Tom Merry and Co.,  
Talbot, and Miss Marie  
Rivers*



By MARTIN CLIFFORD

## THE FIRST CHAPTER

### Figgins is Obstinate!

"**B**LOW the rain!" said Figgins.

"Yes, but——"

"Besides, who cares for getting wet?"

"Nobody; but——"

"If you School House chaps are afraid of wetting your tootsies, you can go and wrap yourselves up in cotton-wool!" snorted Figgins. "And you can call it a win for the New House."

To which Tom Merry and Co. replied with a general snort.

Certainly the weather was not promising. It was a half-holiday at St. Jim's, and the junior house match was fixed for that afternoon. But the rain, which had been threatening all the morning, was coming down at last in earnest. There was a steady drizzle in the quad, and the leafless elms were simply weeping. And the footer ground was, as Monty Lowther remarked, in a splendid condition for making mud-pies, but not for playing football.

Naturally Tom Merry and Co. deemed it advisable to postpone the match. But Figgins, the junior skipper of the New House, was intractable.

Figgins was not usually obstinate, but he could be very obstinate when he liked. Apparently he liked now.

Figgins wanted to play that match, weather or no weather. He had reason. In the last three matches the School House had beaten their old rivals. Figgins wanted to change all that. He had nigger-driven his team till they were at the top-notch of their form, and he anticipated victory. From the point of view of the New House team all was clean and bright so far as the prospects of the game were concerned. Now the weather had taken a hand in the game, and the ground wasn't really fit for playing on. But, as Figgins declared warmly, it was as fit for one side as the other. If the blessed match was postponed, goodness only knew when it could be played. Most of the dates were taken up with regular matches, and the weather might play the same trick again at any time. Figgins and Co. were eager to wipe out the galling record of their defeat, and they wanted to go ahead and "blow the rain!"

Tom Merry, with his coat collar turned up, surveyed the ground on to which the rain was falling. It was not a cheerful view.

"It's all rot," said Tom, with a shake of the head. "You're an ass, Figgy!"

Figgins grunted.

"Oh, chance it, and play!" he said.

"'Twouldn't be footer——"

"Wubbish!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the most elegant member of the School House team. "Wats! We should uttably wuin our clobbah, Figgay!"

"It's rather thick, playing in this weather, Figgy," said Talbot of the Shell, Tom Merry's best winger.

Another grunt from Figgins.

"And don't be scared of a little wet," he said. "Don't be soft."

"Soft!" roared the School House juniors, in an indignant chorus, much incensed by that imputation.

"Weally, Figgins——"

"Yes, soft!" sniffed Figgins. "Look here, we don't agree to calling it off, and if you shirk it we shall count it as a win for the New House."

"Rats!"

"Rubbish!"

"Piffle!"

"Bosh!"

"That settles it," said Tom Merry, frowning. "You're a silly, obstinate ass, Figgy, but if you are going to call us soft, we'll play you if it's raining in cartloads! We'd play you if it was raining Prussian Uhlans. Come on, you chaps!"

"Bai Jove, we shall be wet ththrough, and smothahed in mud, you know."

"Can't be helped."

"Oh, play up," said Talbot laughing. "It's as fair to one side as to the other. And the rain may go off."

"Doesn't look like it," said Blake of the Fourth, blinking at the lowering sky. "But we'd play in a dozen thunder storms at once rather than call it a win for the New House."

"Hear, hear!"

Figgins grinned.

"That's right, buck up," he said. "Who cares for the weather? Though you may as well call it a win for us, for we're going to lick you out of your boots this time!"

"Bow-wow!" said Lowther.

Tom Merry made up his mind. It might have rained pitchforks and '75-guns, and Tom Merry would have played rather than submit to the imputation of softness. The

two teams came out of the pavilion into the dripping rain.

"Where's the giddy referee?" asked Tom Merry.

Lefevre of the Fifth was to referee the match, but he was not to be seen. Doubtless he concluded that his study was a more comfortable place in that kind of weather, and certainly his conclusion was a reasonable one.

"Cut off and call Lefevre, someone," said Figgins.

Talbot of the Shell sped off towards the School House. The juniors crowded back into shelter to wait for his return. There was not a single soul near the field to see the match. Nobody was likely to come out in that downpour to be a spectator. The rain was simply splashing down on to the football field, and the goal-posts were running water. But Figgins' obstinate face showed no signs of relenting, and Figgy's team backed him loyally. Redfern was overheard to whisper that Figgy was a blithering cuckoo, but he backed up his leader all the same.

Talbot was not long gone. He was soon seen speeding back from the distant School House. But he came alone.

"Well?" exclaimed Tom Merry, as the Shell fellow came up dripping and panting.

"Is Lefevre coming?"

Talbot grinned.

"No. He says he's not a duck, and this weather is only suitable for ducks to play footer. He says that if you're going to play this afternoon you must be ducks, or else——"

"Or else what, fathead?" said Blake.

"Geese!" said Talbot.

"And he's right, too," growled Kangaroo of the Shell. "You're an ass, Figgy. Where are we going to dig up a referee, if Lefevre won't come? I suppose we're not going to play without a referee?"

"A junior will do if we can't get a senior!" snapped Figgins. "You cut off, Kerr, and call one of the fellows."

"Right-ho!" said Kerr. "You chaps agree?"

"Oh, anything for a quiet life," said Manners resignedly.

Kerr rushed off to the New House, and he did not come back alone. He brought



Thompson of the Shell with him. Thompson had put on his overcoat and a waterproof after that, and a cap with flaps that pulled down over his ears. He looked more as if he was going to start upon an aeroplane journey than merely to referee a football match.

"Ready?" said Figgins.

"Well, you are a set of blessed duffers," said Thompson. "You'll all jolly well catch your death of cold."

"Well, you jolly well won't with all that clobber on!" said Figgins sarcastically. "Now, if you School House kids ain't afraid of a little rain, we'll start."

"Oh, pile in."

And the teams went out into the field. Figgins and Tom Merry tossed, and the kick-off fell to Figgins, against the wind and rain. By the time the ball had started rolling the players were already wet through to the skin. Still, Monty Lowther remarked that it was a comfort that they couldn't get any wetter, for what that was worth.

Thompson of the Shell blew the whistle, and the ball rolled, and the rainy match began, amid an unaccustomed silence. There was not a single spectator on the ground. The cheers and shouts that usually accompanied a football-match were conspicuous by their absence. But as the game proceeded, the fellows in the houses became aware of what was on, windows that gave a view to the ground were crammed with faces, to catch distant glimpses of them through the falling rain. And the general opinion of both houses at St. Jim's was that twenty-two fellows were off their rockers.

## THE SECOND CHAPTER

### An Unfinished Match

"PLAY up!" gasped Tom Merry.

"Groooh! On the beastly muddy ball!"

Splash! Squash! Skid!

"Bai Jove!"

The rain was coming down harder. It was coming down so hard, in fact, that even Figgins thought that perhaps he had been a little too obstinate. But Figgins would not have admitted that for worlds.

In the drenching downpour the two teams did their best.

The ground was slippery and muddy. Nearly every rush led to falls and bumps. The ball might have been rubbed in lard for its slipperiness.

The two unhappy goalkeepers rubbed the rain out of their eyes and peered at the field. The players kept themselves warm by their activity, and they were soon streaming; but Fatty Wynn in the New House goal, and Herries in the School House goal, hadn't so much exercise, and they were soon sneezing instead of steaming.

The juniors ploughed their way along, and in ten minutes they were smothered with mud, and it was impossible to recognise the colours of the opposing teams. It was difficult to recognise the mud-bespattered faces, which led to some mistakes, Arthur Augustus passing the ball to a New House forward and Kerr sending it to a School House man. But little mistakes occurred like that on both sides, so it was as good—or as bad—for one side as the other.

Figgins and Co. made determined attacks. The New House team was in unusually good form, and in better weather they would have had a good chance of wiping out their record of defeat, but in that weather was at a discount. It was now a game of kick and rush and splash.

The wind drove the heavy rain into the faces of the New House, and they simply hadn't a chance in the first half, with all their determined rushes. Tom Merry and Co. came right down the field at last, and Talbot, beating the bewildered backs, sent in a swerving shot for goal. If Fatty Wynn had been on the alert as usual he would have saved that shot from the wing; but at that moment Fatty Wynn was nearly doubled up with a Gargantuan sneeze.

"Atchooo-chooo-chooo!"

The ball whizzed over his shoulder, and lodged in the dripping net. There was a gasp of triumph from the School House side.

"Goal!"

"Bravo, Talbot!"

"Atchooo-chooo-chooo!" sneezed the fat goalkeeper.

"Chuck the ball out, Fatty!" growled Figgins.

"Atchoooo-choooo-choooo!"

"Oh, my hat! Don't catch a silly cold in the middle of the match!" howled the exasperated Figgins. "You might have a little consideration for your side, Fatty. Chuck out that ball!"

Fatty Wynn pressed the handkerchief to his nose with one hand and chucked the ball out with the other.

"I can't help gadging gold in this rain, fadded!" he gasped.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It isn't a laughing madder," gurgled Fatty Wynn. "I've got a frighdful gold in by dose!"

"Oh, blow your nose," growled Figgins crossly.

"That's what he's doing!" grinned Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Atchoooo-choooo-chooo!"

The teams lined up again. The first half was getting to its end, and only that goal had been taken. But the School House piled in again, with the wind and the rain behind them, when the whistle went. They brought the ball down and Talbot centred to Tom Merry, and Tom slammed it in. Fatty Wynn could have stopped that shot, too, at any other time. But at that critical moment he was blowing his nose. The ball rolled over his head.

"Goal! Hurray!"

"Buck up, Fatty, you ass!" shrieked Figgins. "Have you come out goal collecting?"

"I can't buck ub wid this gold in by head!" groaned the unfortunate Fatty.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Atchoooo-choooo-chooo!"

"Oh, don't you begin sneezing, Blake!"

"Atchoooo-choooo-chooo!"

"Keep moving!" gasped Lowther. "We shall all be laid up at this rate. I hope Figgins will catch complicated pneumonia and plenty of pleurisy and lumbago and rheumatism!"

Figgins opened his mouth to retort, but the retort did not come forth. A tremendous sneeze came instead.

"Hallo! Figgy's got it! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Atchooo-chooo-chooo!"

"Whad you gagging ad?" growled Figgins. "Blay ub!"

They played up. Figgins succeeded in getting through this time, and he put the ball in unresisted, for Herries was in the throes of coughing.

"Thad's wud vor uds, anyway," said Figgins as they walked back to the centre of the field. "We'll bead the bounders yed!"

"My only hat!" exclaimed a sharp voice. "You silly little asses, what are you doing down here in this rain?"

Thompson of the Shell was about to blow the whistle for the restart, when Kildare's voice was heard. Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, had just come in, muffled up, and with an umbrella, and he caught sight of the players in the distance, and hurried down at once to the football ground.

"You muddy little sweeps!" shouted Kildare. "What are you doing?"

"Gadging golds!" replied Monty Lowther humorously.

"Blayig voodball," said Figgins. "Whad do you subbase we doig?"

"Playing football! Playing the giddy ox, you mean! Come out of that field at once!"

"Whad?"

"Get indoors, and rub yourselves dry instantly!" shouted Kildare angrily. "My only hat, the whole lot of you will be laid up! Get a move on; do you hear?"

"Weally, Kildare, we haven't finished the game!"

"Get in, I tell you!"

The juniors looked at one another. The word of the captain of the school was law. As a matter of fact, most of the players were not sorry that Kildare had chipped in. The moment they stood there they shivered, and it was pretty certain that most of them were booked for pretty bad colds.

They marched off the field sheepishly.

Figgins and Co. disappeared in the direction of the New House, and Tom Merry and Co. followed Kildare in a draggled crowd to the School House. As they came in, leaving mud-pools and streams of water where they trod, Mr. Railton met them. The Housemaster gave a jump at the sight of them.

" Bless my soul ! What is this, Kildare ? "

" The little idiots have been out playing footer, sir, and I fetched them in," said Kildare.

" Playing football in the dreadful down-pour ! Go to your dormitories at once, and rub yourselves dry and get into bed."

" To b-b-bed, sir ? " stammered the juniors in dismay.

" Yes, at once. I will have hot-water bottles sent to you."

" B-b-but we're all righd, zur ! " said Blake.

" We don'd veel ad all lige gatching golds, sir, nod ad d. Atitchoo ! Atitchoo ! Atitchoo ! "

" Blake ! "

" Atchoo ! Atitchoo-choo-choo ! Atitchoo-chew-ew-ew ! " sneezed Blake. " We're quide all right, sir—atitchoo ! "

" Go to bed at once, all of you ! "

And the unfortunate footballers went to bed at once.

Rubbed dry, and tucked in with hot-water bottles at their feet, they had plenty of time to meditate on that disastrous football match.

Over in the New House, Figgins and Co. were suffering a similar fate, with the addition of five hundred lines each from Mr. Ratcliff, their Housemaster. And among all the heroes of that football match, the principle observations were " Atitchoo-choo-choo ! " and " Wo-ow-oooooch ! Grooooooooggggggh ! "

## THE THIRD CHAPTER

### On the Sick List

**T**HE next day there were many vacancies in the form-rooms of the Fourth and the Shell.

All the twenty-two, fortunately, were not " down." But the large proportion of them had paid severely for Figgins's recklessness. Figgins himself had a glorious cold, which the other fellows agreed was only just. Kerr had a cold, too, and Fatty Wynn was in a pitiable state. Redfern and Owen and Lawrence were all laid up.

In the School House, Blake and Herries, Kangaroo and Clifton Dane, Bernard Glyn, Manners, and Digby were sad sufferers. Of all the School House side, only Tom Merry, Lowther, D'Arcy, and Talbot had escaped.

Monty Lowther had got the snuffles, but it wasn't bad enough to confine him to his bed. There were seven in the School House, and six in the New House, which made the extremely unlucky thirteen. And that day the dreadful word " Influenza " was whispered.

" Influenza ! " growled Tom Merry, when he heard Dr. Taylor's report after visiting the unlucky juniors in the sanatorium. " Lucky for them it isn't pneumonia. Of all the silly duffers that ever duffed, I think Figgins takes the cake ! "

" Thirteen blessed invalids ! " said Talbot, with a whistle. " Laid up for days—perhaps weeks. Poor old Figgy ! If it's influenza it may spread."

" Oh, don't be a horrid Jonah ! " said Tom Merry, with a shiver. " I've had influenza once. I don't want any more ! "

" Wathah not," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with a shudder. " Bai Jove, what's the mattah with young Fwayne ? "

" Atitchoo ! " said young Frayne.

" Got a cold ? "

Frayne of the Third blinked at them with watery eyes.

" I feel as if I've caught something," he said. " Perhaps I got it from Wally. He's snuffling and gurgling like anything."

" Bai Jove, is my minah goin' to be ill ? " exclaimed Arthur Augustus in distress. " Weally, you fellahs, this is too bad of Figgins."

An hour later D'Arcy minor and Joe Frayne were in the sanatorium with the other sufferers. There was no doubt that it was influenza, and that it was going the rounds. On the following day Reilly and Hammond, of the Fourth, followed the others, and then Mellish and Durrance and Lumley-Lumley. In the New House, too, there were more sufferers. Digges, Clampe, Clarke, Thompson, French, Pratt, Monteith, Baker, Langton, and Grey of the Sixth.

The St. Jim's fellows were in a decidedly uneasy state by this time—just the state to catch whatever was going, as a matter of fact. Gore and Skimpole were the next to follow, and after them went Cutts of the Fifth, and St. Leger and Gilmore. Rushden of the Sixth and Darrel went the same way.

# A GLIMPSE OF THE FUTURE?



The Editor of that famous publication, "Billy Bunter's Weekly," looks forward to the time when he will possess an editorial sanctum like this, replete with every luxury, including unlimited tuck! For the present he has to be content to carry on his literary labours in a junior study at Greyfriars School.



"It's going the rounds," said Tom Merry gloomily. "Whether it started in that blessed football match or not, it's going round the giddy school."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus dismally. "It's wotten, béin' in Study 6. All on a fellah's lonelay own, you know. And they won't let me go and see Blake and Herries and Dig, in case I catch it too."

"And we can't go and see poor old Manners," said Monty Lowther.

"I'd like to give old Skimmy a look in," said Talbot; "but it isn't allowed."

Talbot shared a study with Gore and Skimpole, both of whom were on the sick list.

"You'd better dig with Lowther and me while your study mates are away, Talbot," said Tom Merry. "And you come too, Gussy. You don't want to have a study to yourself. We'll make it a foursome until some more of us go."

"Thank you, deah boy!"

It was not cheerful with influenza "going the rounds." The school sanatorium was pretty nearly full now. Two nurses had come from the Cottage Hospital in Wayland, but two were not enough. It was understood that the Head had sent for more nurses, but there was a hitch somewhere, probably due to the demand for nurses for other influenza victims.

Tom Merry and Lowther were a little glum in these days. They missed their chum and study-mate, Manners. Talbot and D'Arcy shared the study with them for a time, in Manners' place. Fortunately none of the four showed any signs of catching it.

But one evening, as he came into the study, Tom Merry had an alarm. Talbot of the Shell was sitting there alone, with a wrinkle on his brow and a gloomy expression on his face.

"Talbot, old man——"

Talbot looked up quickly. He had a newspaper in his hand.

"You've got it?" gasped Tom.

"Eh? Got what?"

"The flu!"

Talbot smiled.

"No, I've not got that! I'm as sound as a bell, thank goodness!"

Tom Merry drew a deep breath of relief.

"Jolly glad of that! You were looking so

down in the mouth, I was sure you'd got it coming on. The only way to dodge the flu is to keep cheerful, you know. Don't worry! What the deuce are you worrying about? Thinking of the footer matches we sha'n't be able to play till this is over? I've had to scratch with the Grammarians already."

"No, I wasn't thinking of that. Levison has just given me this paper. There's something that concerns me—in a way——"

Tom Merry looked uneasy.

"You remember that man who came here as a science master?" said Talbot quietly. "He called himself Mr. Packington here. He came with forged testimonials to the Head. He was really a cracksman; they called him the 'Professor' in the gang. Well, when I found it out, I gave him a chance to clear. And he tried to rob the Head, as you know, and was collared. He said when they took him that the lock wasn't made that could hold him. It seems it's true. He's got away."

"Got away?" said Tom.

Talbot nodded.

"But—but if he has, he can't hurt you," said Tom Merry uneasily. "It's a bit rotten, Talbot, old man, that you should be worried about what's long past and done with. But this man can't come back here, at all events."

Talbot was silent.

Tom Merry sat on the edge of the table regarding his chum anxiously. It was evident that the news of the Professor's escape from the police worried the Shell fellow.

"What's the trouble, Talbot, old chap?" said Tom. "You can tell me, I suppose?"

"You know my story," said Talbot, in a low voice. "But I haven't talked to you much about it. It's not a pleasant subject, you know. But I'll tell you now. You know I'm a cracksman's son, brought up in a gang in which my father was leader. You know the life I led before I came here, a thief among thieves." Talbot shivered a little. "It seems too horrible now to think of, but there it is! The Professor—his name is Rivers—Captain Crow's right-hand man in the gang—and Captain Crow was my father. He knew me from my childhood, the Professor did; and—and I was brought up with his daughter, Marie."

"He had a daughter!" said Tom Merry.  
"That ought to have kept him straight!"

Talbot smiled faintly.

"Marie was one of the gang," he said. "A better girl never breathed, and I was very fond of her; she was just my age. But she was brought up to help her father in his work—and you know the kind of work it is—just as I was brought up. I've thought about her very much since I've been here, and wished I could get a chance of finding her and helping her to do as I've done—throw the past behind and make a fresh start."

"A girl, brought up to be a thief!" said Tom.

"Yes. And yet a better girl never lived—except for that. And how was she to learn better?" said Talbot bitterly. "I've had my chance; but she never had a chance. And her father is the biggest rascal in a swell mob—the chief of the Thieves' Club now. And she's fond of him; he's her father."

"It's rotten!" said Tom. "Rotten! But, old chap, all that's done with now, as far as you are concerned. Everybody at St. Jim's knows your history, knows that you reformed and suffered for it. Everybody knows you're as straight as a die. They used to call you Toff—and you've proved yourself a toff, and no mistake! The gang can't hurt you now. They did their worst against you when you chucked up the old life, and they can't do anything more."

"I hope so!"

"But——"

"The Professor isn't a man to be beaten easily," said Talbot. "He wants me back in the gang. Kid as I am, I was the best cracksmen in the three kingdoms, and he knows it. I should be worth a fortune to them. When he was here in disguise under a lying name I gave him a chance to get out for the sake of old times, and for Marie's sake. Then he was arrested, at my word! The Professor doesn't forget! I have not heard the last of him, I know."

"But the police want him still; and if he should trouble you, a word will be enough to get him to prison," said Tom.

Talbot's face was almost haggard.

"There's Marie," he said, in a low voice.

"His daughter?"

"Yes, and my old chum. I denounced him when he was here, because he was here to rob the Head. After what Dr. Holmes has done for me, I—I couldn't keep silent, even for Marie's sake. But so long as he only tries to injure me, I'm helpless. Whatever he does to me, I can't hurt him without hurting Marie. And she's fond of him. He's her father."

Tom Merry set his lips.

"And you expect to see him again?"

"I fear it!" Talbot's lip quivered. "He won't leave a stone unturned to get me back into the old gang. And he's cunning—cunning as a fox! What he will do, I don't know—try to disgrace me here somehow, perhaps, and make it necessary for me to give up my scholarship and get out. Then I should be without resources, and he would think I should return to the old life for bread."

"But you wouldn't," said Tom Merry quietly. "I know you, Talbot. You would starve before you would steal."

"You're right there, Tom! I would starve before I would steal! I've seen the light now," said Talbot quietly. "But I've never been afraid in my life before, but now—You don't know that man's cunning and resources. Before I didn't fear him; he didn't know where I was—he had no suspicion that I was here, you see. When he came here under a false name, he knew me at once; and he was as surprised to see me as I was to see him when I found out his disguise and knew him. He knows where to find me now; and he will lay his plans, and——"

Talbot broke off.

"What a cad I am to bother you with all this, Tom! You've had enough to put up with on your own account."

"I'm glad you've told me," said Tom Merry. "You know you've got a pal to stand by you through thick and thin, anyway, Talbot. And if that scoundrel should try and trouble you again, he'll have two to deal with instead of one."

But the cloud did not leave Talbot's face.

It was a hard struggle the Toff had made to throw off the influence of the old, dark days of the past and face life afresh. But he had made it, and he had won. But the shadow of the

past was still over his young life. In the blackness of the past, when he looked back upon it, there was a bright spot. It was the face of his girl chum—a laughing face—with clear eyes of blue—a face he knew that he would never forget.

Marie—sweet, kind-hearted Marie—was still in the toils the Toff had escaped from. Her devotion to her father blinded her to everything else.

And her father was the Professor. John Rivers, the cracksman and forger! To save Marie, to lead her to tread a new path, as he had done, that had been the Toff's dream. And with the Professor safe behind prison bars it might have been possible.

But the Professor was free. And could Talbot raise his hand against the father of his old chum—the girl who in those old days had nursed him through a dangerous illness, and perhaps saved his life? He knew that he could not.

A wily and unscrupulous foe, who would hesitate at no cunning device, was already scheming against his honour and happiness. He knew that. And in a struggle with the wily enemy the Toff was disarmed.

## THE FOURTH CHAPTER

### The Polite Thing!

“PUT on your best bib and tuckah, deah boys!”

Thus Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form of St. Jim's.

It was Saturday afternoon, and the weather, having done its worst, had turned over a new leaf, and a keen winter sun was shining down on St. Jim's. Football practice was going on, but with so many members of the junior team laid up with influenza, the Grammarian match had been scratched for that afternoon. But Arthur Augustus was not thinking about football.

D'Arcy and Talbot of the Shell were sharing Study No. 10 of the Shell with Tom Merry and Monty Lowther, as Blake and Herries and Digby of the Fourth, and Manners and Gore and Skimpole of the Shell were all in the sanatorium.

At the present moment the swell of St.

Jim's was resplendent. Never had his trousers been so beautifully creased; never had his necktie been quite so natty, or his silk hat so beautifully polished. There was evidently something “on.”

“Hallo! What's the game?” asked Monty Lowther with a yawn. “Wherefore this splendour? Excuse me if I shade my eyes; you dazzle me!”

“Weally, Lowthah—”

“Why this thusness?” asked Tom Merry. “Is Cousin Ethel coming?”

Arthur Augustus shook his head.

“No, deah boy. But somebody is comin', and I wathah thought it was up to us to do the polite thing, you know. I've come for you fellahs to twot along with me to the station.”

“Who's coming?”

“I have just heard it fwom Mr. Wailton,” explained Arthur Augustus. “He is sendin' the twap for her, and I thought it would be wathah a good ideah to go in the twap and give her a gweetin' in the name of the school. You fellahs and Talbot had bettah come along with me.”

“But who is it?” yelled Lowther.

“Miss March, deah boy.”

“And who, in the name of thunder, is Miss March?” demanded Tom Merry. “I've never heard the name. One of your blessed cousins?”

“Certainly not. Miss March is the new nurse.”

“Oh, a nursey!” grunted Lowther.

Arthur Augustus turned his eyeglass severely upon Monty Lowther.

“You are pwobably awah, Lowthah, that there is a shortage of nurses. The Head has been wathah bothahed to get enough of them to look after the chaps in the sanatorium. There is a new one comin' to-day fwom an institution of young lady nurses in London—the Little Sistahs of the Poor, they are called. Wathah a nobbay title, isn't it? Well, one of the Little Sistahs is comin' heah to-day, and I considah it would be wathah decent for some chaps to meet her at the station. As they don't take any pay for nursin' people, it's vevy decent of them, and I wathah think we ought to testify some gwatitude to the Little Sistah—what?”

"Hear, hear!" said Monty Lowther. "I'm going down to the footer, but you can testify my gratitude for me."

"Lowthah, you ass——"

But Monty Lowther sauntered away, and D'Arcy turned his eyeglass upon Tom Merry and Talbot. He was full of his new idea.

"I twust you fellahs are comin'," he said! "It might look wathah pushin' if a chap went

alone. And this nurse is a wathah young one. Those who are already heah are vewy good persons, of course, but w a t h a h leathewy. But the Little Sistahs of the Poor are quite kids. Vewy likely she will be wathah nervous, and a kind gweetin' will buck her up, you know. You are comin', Tom Mewwy?"

"Well, there's the footer, you know."

"But the match is off."

"Footer practice," said Tom. "It'll be dark by the time you get back from the station. On reflection, I think I can safely leave it in your hands, Gussy. You can do the honours for the whole school. Put in a word for me, of course."

"You uttah ass! Pway don't walk away while I'm talkin', you duffah! Talbot, deah boy, I twust you are comin'. I don't want to go alone, you know. I have bwibed and

cowwupted Taggles to let me dwive the twap and fetch Miss March. It stands to weason she would, wathah be met by some nice fellahs like us than by a cwusty old boundah like Taggles. Come along, deah boy!"

Talbot cast a glance in the direction of the football field, and then gave in. He was always a good-natured fellow.

"Right-ho!" And prepared to start.

"Bettah put on a toppah," said Arthur Augustus anxiously.

"As many as you like, old chap," said Talbot affably. "Weally, Talbot——"

The Shell fellow went in for his topper, and came out looking quite satisfactory, from Arthur Augustus's point of view. They walked across the quad in great style, and found Taggles with the trap at the gates. Arthur Augustus was a first-class driver, and the trap was quite safe

in his hands; and Taggles, who disliked work of any kind, and was quite impervious to the charms of any member of the feminine gender, old or young, was glad to get out of going to the station. And five shillings, which had formerly belonged to Arthur Augustus, were now reposing in Taggles' pocket, and that had decided any doubts that he might have had.



Arthur Augustus gave a yell as a snowball caught his hat and sent it flying. "Ow! You awful wottahs!" (See next page.)



"All wight, Taggy, deah boy!"

The two juniors climbed into the trap, and D'Arcy took the reins, and they bowled away down the lane towards Rylcombe. It was a bright, keen winter afternoon. Behind the hedges snow was banked up from a late snowfall. The ride was most enjoyable.

The two St. Jim's fellows were not destined to reach the station without mishap.

Half-way to Rylcombe three persons were sighted, sitting in a row on a stile. They were Gordon Gay, Frank Monk, and Wootton major, of the Fourth Form at Rylcombe Grammar School, and at the sight of Arthur Augustus driving the trap they exchanged a merry grin.

Gordon Gay jumped down from the stile, and held up his hand in the road to make Arthur Augustus halt, and at the same time Wootton major and Frank Monk slipped down on the other side of the stile, where the snow lay thick behind the hedge.

Arthur Augustus had to pull in the horse, for Gay was in the middle of the road in front of him.

"Halt!" said Gordon Gay cheerfully. "Fancy meeting you, Gussy! What have you been scratching the match to-day for—what?"

"Most of the fellahs laid up with influenza, deah boy. Pway don't delay me, as I am wathah in a huwwy——"

"No larks, Gay," said Talbot. "We're going to the station."

"Larks!" said Gay solemnly. "Do I look as if I were larking? I want to inquire after the health of the poor little invalids. How are they getting on with their gruel, Gussy?"

"Weally, Gay——"

Whiz! Whiz!

From behind the hedge came two squashy and muddy snowballs, with deadly aim.

Arthur Augustus gave a yell.

One of them caught his silk hat, and sent it flying towards the road, and the other landed in his neck, with ruinous results to his beautiful collar.

"Ow! Ow! You awful wottahs! Ow!"

Whiz! Squash! Squash! Squash!

Wootton Major and Monk were going strong.

The sight of Arthur Augustus, with all his warpaint on, was irresistible. They didn't snowball Talbot; he did not look so tempting. But muddy, watery snowballs squashed all over Arthur Augustus.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Gordon Gay. "Gussy, you look wet! You look muddy!"

Arthur Augustus dropped the reins and dabbed at his face, which was streaming with half-melted snow. Talbot caught the reins and drove on, to get out of the line of fire. Gay jumped out of the way, and the trap went bowling on down the lane. Snowballs whizzed after it in vain as it rushed along at top speed.

"My hat!" yelled Arthur Augustus.

"We're out of fire now!" gasped Talbot.

"But my hat——"

"Your hat?"

"Yaas, it's left behind. Pway halt!"

Talbot drew in the horse. Arthur Augustus looked back along the lane. Three festive Grammarians were playing football with his silk topper in the distance. Arthur Augustus shook an infuriated fist at them.

"Oh, the wottahs! The uttah beasts! Oh, crumbs!"

"Never mind; we've got through," said Talbot consolingly.

And he drove on at a more moderate speed.

"Yaas; but look at me!" gasped D'Arcy.

Talbot looked at him, and he could not help smiling. Hatless, Arthur Augustus was simply smothered with snow and mud. The half-melted snow that had been kneaded into snowballs had contained a good proportion of mud. The state of the Swell of St. Jim's was deplorable.

"It's howwid!" groaned Arthur Augustus. "I don't see anythin' at all to gwin at, Talbot. I can't possibly meet Miss March in this shockin' state. How can I present myself befoah a lady without a hat, and smothered with howwid mud?"

"Oh, I dare say she won't mind!" said Talbot, laughing. "I don't see how it's to be helped now, anyway!"

"Wats! You must dwop me in the village, and go on alone," said Arthur Augustus. "I suppose I can twust you to meet the lady, Talbot?"

"Yes, if you like."

"I will dwop in at Mr. Bunn's, and get myself cleaned," said Arthur Augustus, with a shudder. "I am in a most disgustin' state. He may be able to lend me a hat—or a cap, at any rate, I twust you will be able to meet Miss March without makin' any blundah, deah boy!"

"Well, I'll try," said Talbot good-humouredly. "It won't really be a very hard bizney."

"Yaas; but a certain amount of tact is required in intwoducin' oneself to a young lady—a charming young lady," said Arthur Augustus doubtfully.

"Perhaps she isn't charming," suggested Talbot.

"All ladies are charmin', deah boy, to a pwopahly constituted mind," said Arthur Augustus severely.

"I stand corrected," smiled Talbot. "However, I'll do my best. I'll keep in mind exactly what you would do, and do it!"

"Yaas, that's the best thing you can do," agreed Arthur Augustus unsuspectingly. "Pway stop at Mr. Bunn's as you come back, and if I look all wight by that time, I will join you again—see?"

"Right-ho!"

And Arthur Augustus descended from the trap at the shop of the village tailor; and Talbot, smiling, drove on to the station alone.

## THE FIFTH CHAPTER

### Old Pals!

"MARIE!"

Talbot panted out the name.

He had left the trap outside the station, and gone upon the platform. The train was in, and the passengers were coming towards the exit. Talbot was there to meet Miss March, the nurse. But all thought of Miss March, the nurse, was suddenly driven from his mind at the sight of a face he knew well—a face he had not seen for a very long time, but which he was never likely to forget.

A girl of about his own age, with a charming, candid face and clear blue eyes. She wore a long raincoat and carried a bag in her hand. Talbot met her face to face as she came down the platform.

He stopped dead.

"Marie! What are you doing here?"

The girl stopped too.

Talbot did not even raise his hat. He stood dumbfounded. His face had turned white, his hands clenched hard, till the nails dug into his palms. The cool, iron-nerved Toff seemed to be completely "knocked over" by the sight of that fresh, pretty face with the clear blue eyes that had a mocking light in their depths.

"The Toff!" murmured the girl,

"Marie!"

The girl nodded, showing a glimpse of white, even teeth.

"You came to meet me?" she said.

"N-no! I—I did not know you were coming here. I came to meet somebody else!" stammered Talbot.

"But you are glad to see me?" smiled Marie.

Talbot did not reply. He looked round among the passengers for the nurse he had come there to meet. But there was no sign of her. All the other passengers, besides Marie Rivers, were men. The nurse had evidently not come by that train.

Talbot was glad of it.

"Well?" said Marie, gazing at him with her mocking eyes. "Well, Toff! You look as if you were in a dream."

"It seems like a dream to see you again, Marie," said Talbot in a low voice. "What are you doing here?"

"Cannot you see? I have come by the train."

"And the Professor?" panted Talbot. "Is he here?"

Marie laughed.

"You did not see him?"

Talbot started violently, and looked round. But the passengers were gone from the station now; the two were left alone on the platform.

"He was there—among them?" asked Talbot.

"You did not see him?"

"No."

"Good!" said Marie calmly. "He has more luck this time than when he came to St. Jim's as Mr. Packington—and you betrayed him."

Talbot winced.

"Marie, what does this mean? What are you doing here? What is your father doing here? Tell me, Marie!"

"I will tell you, if you like. Let us sit down—the porter is already staring at us," said Marie lightly.

They went into a deserted waiting-room. Talbot seemed to be dazed. The blow he had feared, as he had told Tom Merry, had fallen. The Professor had come back! What did it mean—for him? Wherever John Rivers went, evil dogged his steps. He had come back, as he had threatened that he would! Why? And why was Marie here? Talbot smiled bitterly. He thought he knew. Marie was her father's defence. While she was there, at least, Talbot could not raise a hand against his old associate. He must stand idly by while the Professor carried out his nefarious work—whatever it was. A look of deep gloom settled over the Shell fellow's handsome face.

Marie's mocking face softened, and she touched the Toff lightly on the arm.

"What is it?" she said softly. "Are you so sorry to see me again, Toff? And we used to be such pals, you and I!"

"Marie! You know I'm glad to see you," said Talbot desperately. "Even though it means harm to me, your coming here, I'm glad to see you. But—but what is the game? What is your father here for? He means harm to me; I know that."

Marie shook her head.

"It is you who have done the harm, Toff. You have forgotten your old friends; you have betrayed an old pal. What change has come over you? In the old days you were the most reckless and daring of all; and now—now you have changed—now you are not even true to your old friends. You betrayed my father—"

"I did not!" said Talbot. "You don't understand, Marie. I tell you I've given it up! I've done with the past; I've thrown it all behind! The Professor came to St. Jim's in disguise, with forged papers to show the Head. When I knew at last who he was I gave him a chance to go. I would have begged him on my knees to go, rather than give up your father to the police. But he would not. He trapped me, and remained to carry out his scheme of

robbing the Head. You don't know how much Dr. Holmes has done for me, Marie. He has been like a father to me. If I had stood aside then, I should have been an ungrateful villain. I could not. I gave the Professor a chance, and he would not take it. Then I did what I had to do, my duty. And I am not sorry. Though, for your sake, I was glad to learn afterwards that he was free again. I knew what a blow it would be to you."

"You cared for that?"

"I did care for that, Marie."

"Yet you gave him away?"

"I had no choice, I tell you," said Talbot, huskily. "I could not let my benefactor be robbed. What sort of fellow do you think I am?"

"I think you are a fool, Toff," said Marie, the mocking light in her eyes again. "What are you wasting your life at the school for? You who might be rich as you could desire, working as a schoolboy on a poor scholarship, in want of money! Bah, what life is that compared with the old life, Toff?" Marie's voice became very earnest: "You are playing a fool's game here; it cannot last. Sooner or later you will grow sick of the dullness of it; you will grow tired of poverty and hard work. Why not throw it up and come back to your friends?"

Talbot shook his head without speaking.

"They would all welcome you!" said the girl eagerly. "They miss you—they resent your deserting them. But they'd forgive it all if you'd come back. Think of the life—danger, excitement, wealth—compare it with what you lead now. What does your present life offer in comparison?"

"Honour," said Talbot.

Marie laughed.

"Honesty," said the Toff steadily. "A clear conscience, Marie. Better poverty—yes, even hunger—and honesty with it, than wealth that is not mine, Marie. When I came to St. Jim's it was like the scales falling from my eyes. I had never seen things in their true light before. I was what I had been taught to be. If you knew the fellows—Tom Merry and the rest—you'd understand. They've been so decent. They know what I have been, and it makes no difference to them, because they

# The Time all over the World.

Greenwich



Mid-day

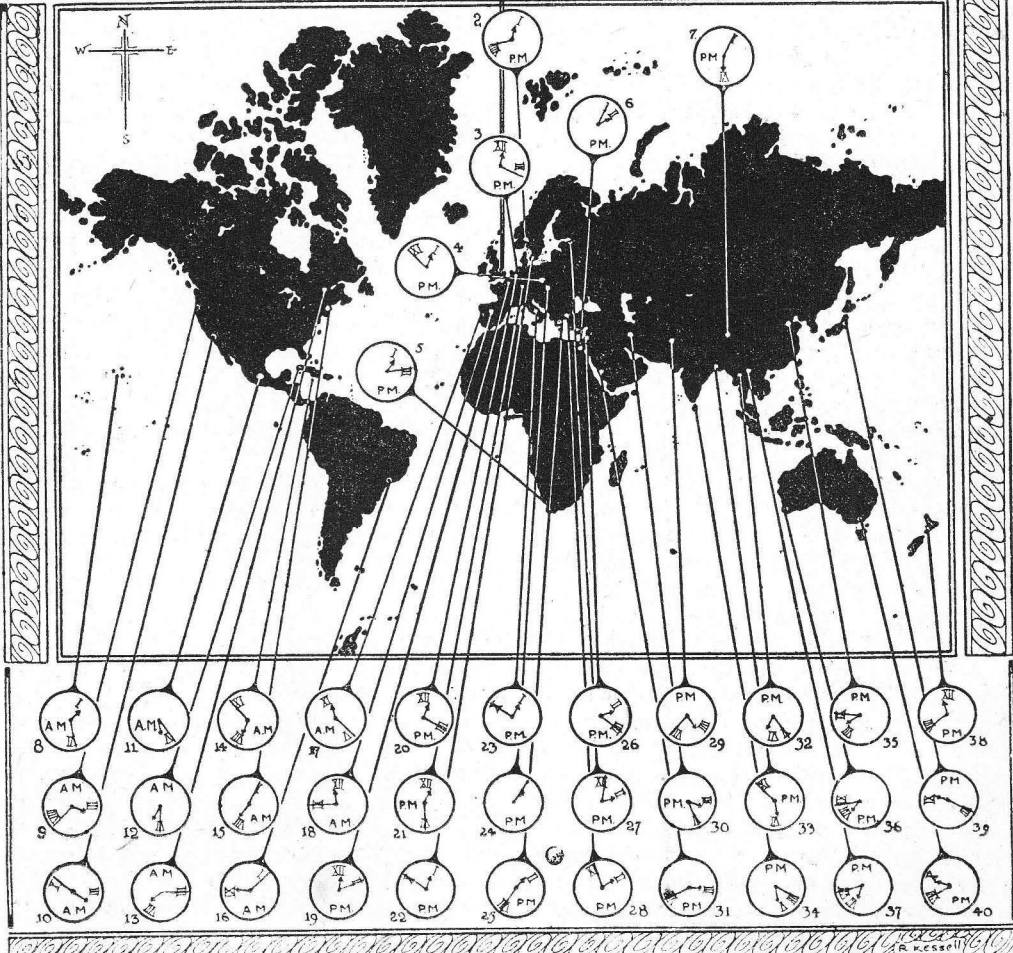
## HOW TO READ THE DIAGRAM

"I wonder what time it is in China now?" How often has this question been asked? This page is designed to show the time at a glance anywhere in the world. To find this, look up the town you wish in the key. Let us take Jerusalem. In front of the name is the number 26. Now look for a small clock with the same number, and you will have the time in Jerusalem. By following the line from the clock to the map, you will see just where Jerusalem is.

These times are based on mid-day at Greenwich, but you can find out the time at any moment. Say it is now 7.30 p.m. by your watch. Jerusalem is 2 hours and twenty minutes faster than Greenwich, therefore the time in Jerusalem will be 7.30 p.m. plus 2.20 p.m., which is 9.50 p.m. When it is noon at Greenwich, all places East in the map are p.m., and all those West a.m.

## Key to Cities and Towns

- |                  |                   |                   |                |
|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| 1 London.        | 11 Mexico         | 21 Berne.         | 31 Mecca.      |
| 2 Christiania.   | 12 Havana.        | 22 Copenhagen     | 32 Mandalay.   |
| 3 Brussels.      | 13 Quebec.        | 23 Rome.          | 33 Calcutta.   |
| 4 Berlin.        | 14 Kingston (J)   | 24 Vienna.        | 34 Colombo.    |
| 5 Cape town.     | 15 New York.      | 25 Athens.        | 35 Peking.     |
| 6 Cairo.         | 16 Rio de Janeiro | 26 Jerusalem.     | 36 Perth.      |
| 7 Lhasa.         | 17 Lisbon.        | 27 Petrograd.     | 37 Bangkok.    |
| 8 Honolulu.      | 18 Madrid.        | 28 Constantinople | 38 Wellington. |
| 9 Vancouver.     | 19 Paris.         | 29 Kabul.         | 39 Tokyo.      |
| 10 San Francisco | 20 Amsterdam      | 30 Teheran.       | 40 Melbourne.  |





have confidence in me. They know I am straight now. I would die rather than betray their confidence—a thousand deaths.”

“And you are satisfied?”

Talbot sighed.

“It isn’t so easy to forget,” he said. “I don’t keep any secret from you, Marie; I do miss the old life sometimes—the danger and the excitement, but—but I’ve made a right choice, and I mean to stand by it.”

Marie’s lip curled.

“Then we are enemies?” she said.

“Never that!” said Talbot.

“My father’s enemies are mine!” said Marie proudly.

“I am not your father’s enemy. I only ask him to let me alone!” exclaimed Talbot passionately. “Why cannot he leave me in peace?”

“You are too valuable, Toff! We’ve fallen on bad days since you left us. You must come back.”

“I cannot come back!”

“Not even for my sake?” said the girl softly.

Talbot’s lips twitched.

“Not that; even for your sake, Marie! I—I hoped—I thought that I might have a chance of seeing you, to—to bring you to my way of thinking, Marie. It has haunted me—the thought of you among those rascals; and the future, too. Marie, it can only end one way—prison, disgrace, lower and lower depths of crime! Marie, think of it! Throw it behind—you can do it—and——”

“And desert my father?” said the girl contemptuously.

“Your father has no claim on you if he persists in following a life of crime. He is clever enough to make his way in the world honestly—there is no excuse for him. And he has no right to drag you down with him!” said Talbot, fiercely. “Give him his choice of throwing up his way of life or parting with you!”

“Never! He is my father.”

“But—but for that, Marie, you would——”

Marie gave a shrug of her pretty shoulders. “Perhaps. Who knows? But he is my father, and his wish is law to me. I will never desert him, and I will never disobey him.

He has enough enemies and false friends without his own child turning against him.”

Talbot gave a groan. What was he to say before that blind devotion, a devotion noble in itself, though felt towards a worthless and unscrupulous criminal? He knew that nothing he could say would turn the girl from her purpose. For good or ill, she was devoted to her father.

There was a long silence. The girl watched curiously the working of the handsome face of the St. Jim’s fellow. Talbot broke the silence at last.

“Why is he here?” he asked hoarsely.

“He has come—for me?”

Marie nodded.

“He hopes to induce me to return, or to force me——”

“We miss you so much, Toff.”

“It will never be. You can remember, in the old days, Marie, that I was always a fellow of my word.”

“Then”—the blue eyes gleamed—“then you are my father’s enemy, Toff?”

“Not his enemy, for your sake, Marie. But I will not serve his purpose. I will have nothing to do with him. Let him go, the world is wide, and he need not cross my path. But if he attempts to renew his game at St. Jim’s, then I will denounce him, come what may.”

“If he goes to prison, Toff, I go with him.”

“Marie!” groaned Talbot.

“Betray him and betray me!” said the girl disdainfully. “Well, I am here, at your mercy. You have only to call the police now, they will be glad of the chance. I am in your hands.”

Talbot’s face was deadly white.

“You know I shall not do that, Marie. What are you torturing me for?” he muttered. Marie rose to her feet.

“Bah! It is useless to talk, you have lost your senses.” She paused, a slight smile breaking out on her face. “What did you come to the station for, Toff? You came to meet someone?”

“Yes. A nurse,” said Talbot, rising heavily. “It does not matter, she has not come——”

“One of the Little Sisters of the Poor?”

"Yes," said Talbot, in surprise. "How did you know?"

Marie laughed, a clear silvery laugh.

"How good! Then you can take me to St. Jim's."

"To St. Jim's!" said Talbot.

"Yes, as that is what you have come here for."

Talbot looked at her blankly. Marie laughed again.

"I am Miss March," she said. "I am the Little Sister!"

## THE SIXTH CHAPTER

### The New Nurse

TALBOT staggered back.

"Marie!" he exclaimed hoarsely.

He had not dreamed of that. Miss March, the Little Sister of the Poor, the nurse who was coming to St. Jim's—it was Marie, the cracksman's daughter! It was a stunning blow to the unhappy boy. That was the Professor's game, then. Marie was to be placed in the school—for what, he could guess only too easily. The Professor, lurking in the village in his cunning disguise, would always be at hand to help her, to counsel her. That was the game.

Talbot could not speak. He could only gaze at the girl in anguish. That was the game, he knew it now, and there was only one way of baffling it—to denounce the girl who had been his best chum, to hand over Marie to the police—and that, he knew, he could never do. Never that!

His brain was in a whirl. What was he to do? That was the question that hammered in his mind. To stand aside while the Professor's work was done and his benefactor blundered—it was impossible! To denounce Marie—that was still more impossible! To endeavour to persuade her to abandon her worthless father—he knew that was hopeless!

"Bai Jove! Heah you are!"

An elegant figure loomed up in the doorway of the waiting-room.

It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, resplendent as ever, with a brand-new silk topper—a thing of beauty and a joy for ever, from the crown of his shining hat to the tips of his

elegant boots.—Arthur Augustus raised his shining silk topper to Miss March with the elegance that was all his own.

"I've been waiting for you, Talbot, deah boy, and I came on to the station," he said cheerily. "So Miss March has awwived!"

"Yes," stammered Talbot—"yes! This—this is——"

The words died on his tongue. The crisis had come unexpectedly soon.

He had to present Marie Rivers to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy as Miss March, the new nurse, or he had to betray her as the cracksman's daughter. That was his choice, and he had only an instant in which to make it.

Marie was smiling. She knew the struggle that was going on in the Toff's mind; she knew her danger. But not a sign of it appeared in her smiling face.

Arthur Augustus looked a little surprised. He could not help seeing that something was "on" though he was not particularly observant.

"Miss March," stammered Talbot at last, "this—this is Gussy—this is D'Arcy, one of my pals at St. Jim's. We—we've come to take you to the school, if you will allow us."

The die was cast!

"You are very kind," said Marie sweetly. "I thank you very much. It is really kind of you."

"Not at all, my deah young lady," said Arthur Augustus. "It is an honah and a pleasuah. The trap is waitin' outside. Is there anythin' I can do——"

"I think my trunk is on the platform," said Marie.

"Wighto! I'll look aftah it at once."

Arthur Augustus, glad to be useful, hurried out on to the platform. Marie looked at Talbot with her insouciant, mocking smile.

"Well done, Toff! You have answered for me now—I enter St. Jim's on your responsibility."

"Marie! It's not too late—have mercy on me! You—you can't go to the school——"

"But I am going."

"Marie——"

Marie walked to the door. Talbot followed her with heavy, stumbling footsteps. All the light was gone out of his handsome face.

"You will go, Marie—you will go there as a nurse?"

"I am a nurse," said Marie calmly. "I am a member of the Little Sisters of the Poor. They do not know my name, but they know that I am a good nurse. You should know that, too, Toff; but you have a bad memory."

"I remember it, Marie, and I have never ceased to be grateful. But——"

"There was a time when you told me that you would do anything for me!" said Marie mockingly. "You told me I had saved your life, and that your life belonged to me. You told me that, Toff. You do not choose to remember it now!"

"I remember it only too well, Marie, and you have just had proof of it," said Talbot huskily. "But tell me, Marie, you will go to St. Jim's simply as a nurse? You will not—you will not——"

He broke off.

"I shall do as my father directs me."

"Then—then I, also, must think what I must do!" Talbot said desperately. "Come what may, my benefactor shall not suffer!"

"Why did you not take your chance a few minutes ago, then?" asked Marie mockingly. "You had only to tell this boy D'Arcy my name, and the rest——"

"Marie!"

"It isn't too late. Tell him now."

"You know why I am silent!" groaned Talbot.

Marie came back towards him, put her little hands on his shoulders, and looked him in the face.

"Toff," she whispered, "you can't help it now. I am here, and you must help me. You can't betray me, and if I come to the school we must sink or swim together. Make up your mind to it, and stand by your old friends, for my sake, Toff!"

It was hard to resist the sweet, earnest face, the winning voice. For a moment, perhaps, Talbot's resolution wavered. What was the use of the struggle? After all his efforts to free himself from the past, the toils were closing round him again. He was in a net from which there was no escape. What was the use of the struggle? Marie saw the signs of weakness in his troubled face.

"For my sake, Toff!" she repeated.

Talbot pulled himself together.

"No!"

"Not for my sake?"

"Not even for your sake!" said Talbot steadily. "Not for the sake of life itself!"

The girl drew back, offended, cold, disdainful.

"As you choose, then!"

She walked out of the waiting-room. Talbot followed her slowly, miserably. The problem was hammering in the unhappy boy's brain. What was he to do? To denounce Marie, or to allow her to carry out the Professor's orders unhindered? The choice was terrible, yet it had to be made, and delay only made matters worse. Yet delay was his only resource; he must have time to think.

The little leather trunk had been placed in the trap, and Arthur Augustus was waiting for them. The swell of St. Jim's helped Marie into the trap with his inimitable grace. He did not notice Talbot's harassed looks; Arthur was a ladies' man, and all his attention was bestowed upon Miss March. Talbot stumbled into the trap, and sat silent and troubled. D'Arcy gathered up the reins, and they bowled away down the village street.

In the lane, Gordon Gay and Co. spotted them again, but there were no snowballs this time. At that charming vision beside the swell of St. Jim's the Grammarian juniors raised their caps with great respect and admiration. The trap bowled on towards the school, Arthur Augustus driving elegantly and chatting with his fair companion. Talbot sat behind in grim silence.

A man passed them in the lane, sauntering along carelessly—a man with a dark brown beard and moustache and an eyeglass, well-dressed, debonair. He paused to look at them, and Talbot's eyes fell upon him, and he started. The man smiled a little. Talbot turned his eyes to stare at him as the trap bowled on.

It was the Professor. No one recognised him now, but Talbot's eyes had penetrated the disguise. The man with the eyeglass sauntered on towards the village, humming a tune. He knew that Talbot recognised him,

but felt certain he would not say anything. Marie was the security for that.

They arrived at the school, the trap was handed over to Taggles, and the two juniors conducted Miss March to the Head's house. Tom Merry and Lowther had come off the football field, and they spotted them in the quad and raised their caps. Monty Lowther expressed the opinion to his chum that the new nurse was "stunning." Indeed, he said that he envied Manners now.

"Talbot seems to look down in the mouth," said Tom Merry.

"Catching the 'flu, perhaps," said Lowther carelessly. "By Jove, I've a jolly good mind to catch it, too! Not half a bad idea!"

Miss March disappeared into the Head's house. Talbot and D'Arcy came back to the School House, the latter smiling with great satisfaction, the former moody and silent.

"Did you see her, deah boys?"

"Yes," said Tom Merry. "Sorry we didn't come."

"Serve you wight!" said Arthur Augustus severely. "Though, of course, I should have gone just the same even if she had been a little bit leathewy, like the others. Quite a wippin' young lady! I've been thinkin'——"

"Go hon!" murmured Lowther.

"I've been thinkin'," repeated Arthur Augustus firmly, "that nurses have wathah a bore of a bizney, you know, lookin' aftah beastly invalids. They wequire a little change and excitement. All work and no play, you know, makes Jack a dull boy. I've been thinkin' that it's up to us, you know, to see that Miss March has a little amusement while she is heah—what?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I fail to see any weason for wibald laughtah!" said the swell of St. Jim's freezingly. "I wegard it fwom a point of view of dutay!"

"What about the other nurses?" grinned Lowther. "You haven't bothered your mighty brain about them, so far."

"Ahem! They are oldah, you know—fwightfully old, some of them, and—and, of course, they don't need amusin'. But Miss March isn't much oldah than I am, and it

stands to weason that she will be bored to death with beastlay sneezin', coughin' invalids in the beastlay sanatorium. It's up to us to see that she has a pleasant time, if poss., while she is at the school. Besides, the Little Sistahs of the Poor do this kind of thing for nothin', you know; they don't have any fees. I wegard that as vewy wippin' of them, considewin' that invalids are such beastly bothahs. I twust we shall be allowed to make things a little bwightah for Miss March. What do you think, Talbot?"

"Eh?" said Talbot confusedly. "Yes, certainly. Tea ready, you fellows?"

"Tea!" said Arthur Augustus scornfully. "Bai Jove, you're thinkin' about tea! I wegard you as an insensible ass, Talbot!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He was sittin' in the twap without speakin' a word all the way back," said Arthur Augustus. "Lookin' like a boiled owl, bai Jove! Anybody would think that Miss March was a Gorgon, instead of bein' vewy neahly as nice as my Cousin Ethel. I am surprised at you, Talbot!"

Talbot smiled faintly and went into the School House.

The four juniors were soon gathered at tea in Tom Merry's study; but, in spite of Talbot's inquiry after that meal, it was noticeable that he ate hardly anything, and he spoke scarcely a word. The Toff had one of his "black moods" on again evidently.

## THE SEVENTH CHAPTER

### Frayne's Trouble

MANNERS blinked at Tom Merry with watery eyes.

It was the day after Miss March's arrival at St. Jim's, and Tom Merry had obtained permission to visit his old chum in the sanatorium, with Lowther, for a few minutes.

Nearly all the beds in the school hospital were occupied, and the nurses had plenty to do. Manners was glad to see his chums again.

"How are you getting on, old man?" asked Tom Merry sympathetically, keeping well away from the bed, as he had been instructed by the head nurse.

"Rotten!" said Manners.



"Poor old chap!"

"It's beastly. But I'm on the mend. I'm going to massacre Figgins when I get well. All that fathead's fault! My head's buzzing like a beehive. Ow!"

"Hard cheese!" said Lowther.

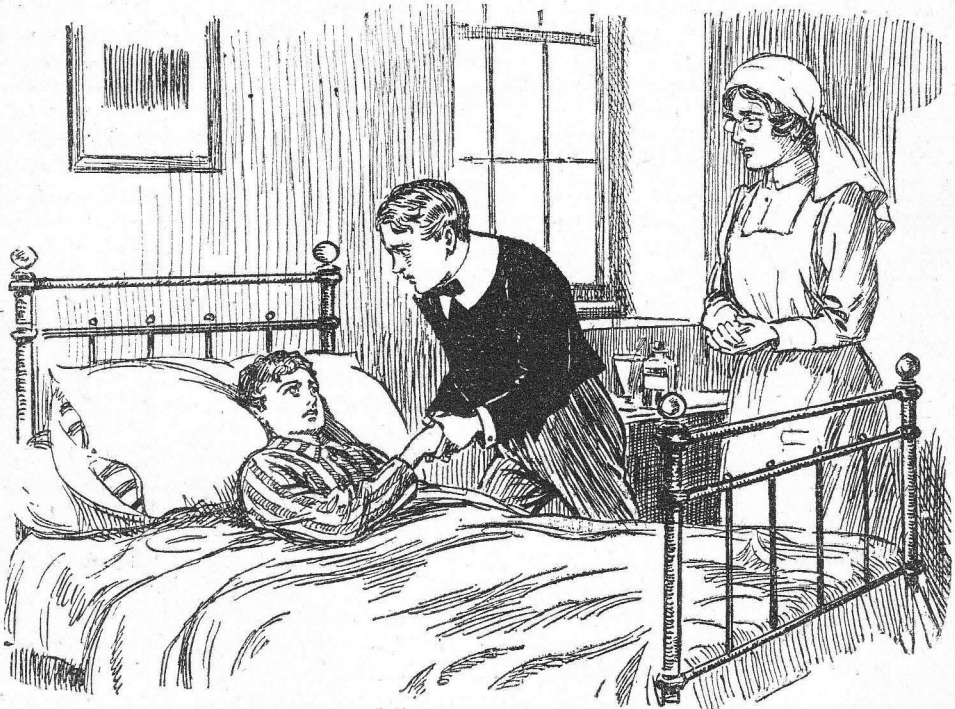
"Why the deuce couldn't you catch it instead of me, Monty?" groaned Manners. "Ow! I'm fed-up with it! I say, have you seen the new nurse?"

"Next week!" groaned Manners.

The nurse made a sign to the juniors, and they nodded to poor old Manners, and passed on, to exchange a word or two with the other invalids. They came to Frayne's bed, and found the Third-Former looking decidedly bad. The head nurse signed to them not to stop there.

"Is he very bad?" whispered Tom Merry.

"He was best of all at first," said Miss



"I promise you, Joe, that until Miss Marie goes, the Professor shall not carry out his plans," said Talbot. "Good enough, Toff!" said Frayne as Talbot pressed his hand. (See page 272.)

"Miss March? Yes."

"She's a giddy angel," said Manners. "Makes it much nicer for a chap when a nice girl comes and has a jaw with him for a few minutes. I hope you haven't mucked up the films I left in the study."

Tom Merry smiled.

"They're all right, old son. I hope you'll soon be back. Talbot and Gussy are digging in the study at present."

Pinch, the head nurse; "but to-day he seems to be worse, for some reason I cannot understand. He seems to be troubled in his mind."

"Troubled in his mind?" repeated Tom.

"Yes. He is rather an odd boy," said Miss Pinch. "He speaks very differently from the others—quite an odd boy."

"He's a splendid little chap," said Tom Merry. "He had hard luck before he came here, nurse. He was a waif in a London slum

and had an awfully bad time, and my uncle sent him to St. Jim's. He's as good as gold."

Miss Pinch nodded.

"He has been asking to see somebody named Talbot to-day," she said. "Is that a great friend of his?"

Tom Merry started.

"Talbot! That's a fellow in the Shell—my form. He knew Frayne in his bad days, a good time ago. They don't see much of each other here. Talbot would come like a shot if he knew that Joe wanted to see him."

"He is in too feverish a state for seeing anybody," said Miss Pinch. "He has been mumbling most strangely about someone he speaks of as the Toff."

"That's a—a nickname for Talbot," said Tom Merry, colouring. He did not feel inclined to explain further on that subject.

"Oh, I see. He has been repeating another name, too—a girl's name," said Miss Pinch. "Has he a friend at the school, or near by, named Marie?"

"Marie?" said Tom. "Not that I know of. There's nobody about St. Jim's with that name that I've ever heard of." Then Tom gave a start, remembering Talbot's confidences. "Yes, now I think of it, he knew somebody of that name, long ago, when he was a kid in Angel Alley."

"He has repeated the name many times," said Miss Pinch, "quite feverishly. Indeed, he called one of the nurses Marie when she came to the bed to give him his medicine."

"Poor little kid!"

"But what the deuce can be worrying him like that?" said Monty Lowther, in wonder. "If you think he might see Talbot, nurse, Talbot would come at once."

"The doctor's instructions were that he was to see no one," said Miss Pinch. "But when Dr. Short comes again, I will speak to him about it. I suppose Master Talbot could come at any time?"

"Any minute," said Tom. "I'll tell him to be ready."

"Thank you!"

The two Shell fellows left the ward a little worried in their minds. They were concerned about poor little Joe. He was such a happy-go-lucky, careless little scamp,

as a rule, that it seemed extraordinary that he should have any trouble on his mind in addition to his illness.

They found Talbot in the study when they came back. He noticed their expression at once.

"None of the fellows worse, I hope?" he exclaimed quickly.

"Only Frayne," said Tom Merry.

"Frayne of the Third. Poor kid!" said Talbot, with feeling. "I hope it's not going to be serious. I suppose his constitution isn't quite so fit as the others; he must have had a lot of under-feeding in the old days. That sort of thing tells when you have to go through an illness."

"I don't know if it's that," said Tom Merry thoughtfully. "Miss Pinch, the head nurse, says he got worse to-day; either he's feverish, or there's something on his mind. He wants to see you."

Talbot did not seem surprised.

"I'm ready to go to him," he said.

"They're going to let you know if you can go when the doctor comes. He'll be here again this afternoon. You remember you mentioned a name to me the other day—a girl's name——"

Talbot turned pale.

"I—I remember," he said in a low voice. "Marie! It doesn't matter if you speak before Lowther, Tom."

"Well, that kid knew Miss Marie, I suppose, as well as you?" said Tom.

Talbot nodded.

"Yes. She did a lot for the poor—a lot more than people who would be horrified at a cracksman's daughter," said Talbot, with a slight curl of the lip. "She was like an angel. She looked after Frayne when he was knocked down by a cab and laid up. Goodness knows how he'd have lived if she hadn't taken care of him."

"He seems to have got her name on his mind now, the nurse says," said Tom Merry. "I dare say it's being ill makes him think of her, if she nursed him when he was ill before. Miss Pinch says that he called one of the nurses 'Marie' when she came to do something for him."

Talbot started.

"Which nurse?" he exclaimed.

"Blessed if I know—I didn't ask—one of them," said Tom. "It shows the poor kid is feverish."

"I—I think I ought to see him," said Talbot uneasily. "You know, I've got a lot of influence over him. He used to like me when I was the Toff, and he hasn't forgotten a few trifling things I did for him then. I'd like to see him."

"It depends on the doctor."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came into the study with a smiling face.

"Tea weady?" he asked. "I say, you chaps, she is weally wippin'!"

"Who is?" asked Talbot.

"Miss March. She has just been takin' her constitutional in the quad," Arthur Augustus explained. "I took the liberty of joinin' her. I apologised for my cheek, but I explained that I thought she might like to be shown wound St. Jim's. She looks a beautiful picture in her uniform, don't you think so?"

"Oh, yes," said Talbot absently.

"You haven't an eye for beautay, you boundah. But she is weally wippin'—awf'ly intelligent for a gal, too!" said Arthur Augustus. "I have had quite a cheewy talk, and I hope I have cheered her up a bit. She has been lookin' aftah young Fwayne, my minah's chum, you know—lucky little beggah! She's awf'ly intewested in the school—asked all sorts of questions about the place, you know. She laughed like anythin' when I told her about the way we get out of the box-woom window sometimes aftah lights-out, and made me take her wound the School House and point out the window, and how we climbed up to it ovah the outhouse. Bai Jove, what's the mattah with you, Talbot?"

"N-n-nothing!"

"You had quite a queeah expression on your face, old scout. I twust you are not sickenin' for the flu!"

"Fit as a fiddle," said Talbot.

"Well, you don't look vevy fit. Keep your peckah up, deah boy, or you'll be in the sanatowium befoah you can say 'Jack Wobinson!' Not that it would be so vevy wuff to be in the sanatowium just now, with that weally wippin' Miss March to look aftah

you!" added Arthur Augustus thoughtfully "I should not have a vevy stwong objection to having flu in a vevy mild form at pwsent."

And Arthur Augustus sat down cheerfully to tea. He kept up a cheery chat all the time, without noticing Talbot's silence.

But Tom Merry noticed it, and wondered. It was not like Talbot to be silent and down-cast. Did it mean that his anticipations had been realised, and that his old enemy had come back? Was the Professor still lurking in the neighbourhood? Had the Toff seen him? Tom Merry would not attempt to force his chum's confidence, but he felt very troubled.

There was a tap at the door as they finished tea, and Toby, the page, looked in.

"Master Talbot!" he said.

Talbot rose from the table at once.

"Dr. Short says that you can see Master Frayne now, sir."

"Thank you," said Talbot.

He left the study at once. Arthur Augustus accompanied him as far as the school hospital, in the hope of catching another glimpse of the charming Miss March. Tom Merry and Monty Lowther were left alone in the study.

"Something's up with Talbot?" said Lowther.

Tom nodded.

"It isn't a secret from you, Monty, though it's not to be jawed about, of course. Talbot thinks that scoundrel, the Professor—you remember the man who came here calling himself Mr. Packington?—Talbot thinks he's coming back to make some attempt to get him back into his old life."

Monty Lowther gave a low whistle.

"Talbot's only got to dot him in the eye, or hand him over to Inspector Skeat," he said. "Old Skeat would be glad to bag him a second time!"

"His daughter—the girl we were speaking of—is Talbot's old chum. He can't hurt her father without hurting her. He won't do anything against the rotter. Look here, Monty, Talbot's our pal, and it's up to us!"

"Any old thing!" said Lowther. "If I come across the villain, I'll jolly soon put the bobbies on him, I know that. His daughter isn't my chum!"

"Nor mine!" said Tom. "I'm sorry for the

poor girl! She seems to be a good sort, by Talbot's description, but under the thumb of her rascally father. It's hard to blame a young girl for being led where her own father leads her. But what an utter villain he must be!"

"Awful rotter!" agreed Lowther.

"Talbot's hands are tied, but ours are free," said Tom Merry quietly. "Look here, Monty, if the fellow is hanging about here, we ought to be able to spot him. Strangers are pretty quickly noticed in a quiet, country place like this. We'll find out if there's a stranger staying in Rylcombe, and if there is—"

"Bump him on suspicion!" grinned Lowther.

"No, ass; find out if he's the man. And if he is, we'll put Inspector Skeat on him without saying a word to Talbot."

Monty Lowther regarded his chum admiringly.

"Tommy, old man, you're a giddy genius. I'm with you. Let's get a pass out of gates from Kildare, and take our bikes down to Rylcombe now. If there's a stranger in the village, we shall find him out at the bunshop, and then we can investigate."

"Good egg!" said Tom.

"And not a word to Talbot about it!"

"Not a syllable!"

Ten minutes later the chums of the Shell were riding down to the village. The Professor had other foes to deal with beside the junior who, for Marie's sake, he held in the hollow of his hand.

## THE EIGHTH CHAPTER

### Honest Injun!

"TOFF, you've come at last!"

It was a faint voice from Joe Frayne's bed as Talbot of the Shell halted by his side.

The waif of the Third was very pale, save for a bright spot that burned in either cheek, and his eyes were feverishly bright.

Talbot's face was very kind as he bent beside him. He knew what was in the mind of the one-time outcast of Angel Alley.

"I came as soon as the doctor would let me, Joe," he said.

"You've seen Marie?"

"Hush!"

"That is the name he has been muttering and repeating, Master Talbot," whispered Miss Pinch. "Calm him if you can."

"I will try," said Talbot.

Joe's eyes wandered to the nurse.

"Lemme alone with Master Talbot," he said. "I wanter speak to the Toff, and I don't want nobody else to 'ear."

"Joe, old chap!" murmured Talbot.

But Miss Pinch nodded and smiled, and left them to themselves. Marie was not visible in the ward.

"She's gone," muttered Joe.

"Yes, kid."

"Nobody can 'ear me?"

"Only myself," said Talbot.

"That's orl right, then. You know as Marie's 'ere, Toff?"

"Yes," said Talbot.

"You've seen 'er, then?"

"Yes, old chap. Don't you worry about that. There's nothing to worry about," said Talbot, with an effort. "You'll make yourself worse if you worry, kid."

"I ain't got nothing ag'in Miss Marie—Miss March they call her 'ere," whispered Joe. "Which she was like an angel when I knowed her in Angel Alley. You remember the time, p'r'aps, when that bloke who called 'isself my father—which he was never my father at all—you remember 'im bein' drunk in the garret, and me lyin' with my legs 'urt owin' to the keb knockin' me over? Miss Marie, she looked arter me like an angel. And you remember you used to come in and give me money for the things I needed, Toff. Which I know 'ow you got the oof in them days. But I was grateful all the same. And Marie was an angel, Toff. But—"

"She was always good, Joe."

"So you understand I ain't got nothin' ag'in her," said Joe. "But—but wot's she doin' 'ere, Toff? You remember when you first came, I told you if you was up to the old game, I wouldn't stand it 'ere—not even arter all you'd done for me. It's the same now with Miss Marie. Wot's she doin' 'ere, Toff?"

"She has come to help nurse," said Talbot. Joe smiled.



"Yes, I know, and I know that in them days she went to 'elp nurse in other places, and I know wot 'appened in them places, Toff. You know, too. You was in the thick of it in them days."

Talbot shuddered. "Them days," as poor Joe expressed it, were not so very far behind him, but whole oceans of time seemed to have flown between his old life and his new.

But what he had been Marie still was, and the evident suspicion of the little waif was well founded, and not all his gratitude for old kindnesses would keep Joe Frayne silent if he found that the "old game" was afoot at St. Jim's.

The Professor, with all his cunning, had not counted upon that. In the few days he had been at St. Jim's in the character of Mr. Packington, the science master had not come into contact with Frayne of the Third; he had never noticed the little fag among a hundred others. Joe had known nothing of him till the day he went away in charge of the police.

But he knew Marie, and he suspected the truth. Where Marie was her father would not be far distant, and it meant that little Joe's benefactors were to be deceived and robbed. No wonder the poor little chap had taken a change for the worse since he had seen the new nurse in the school sanatorium.

The feverishly bright eyes were watching Talbot's face. Joe seemed to be seeking to read his thoughts.

"Toff," he went on, "you wouldn't let them go for to do it, you wouldn't, arter all that's been done for you 'ere. I know as Marie was your pal, but you couldn't do it, Toff; you couldn't let the Professor carry out his game 'ere. You couldn't!"

"You can rely on that," said Talbot quietly. "Never!"

"He won't be fur off—the Professor," said Joe. "I know wot Miss Marie is 'ere for. I ain't a fool. All ready for the Professor to get his whack in, Toff. They'll get you into their 'ands if they can; but, anyway, the Head's safe is their game. And it ain't goin' to 'appen, Toff, not even if I 'ave to give Miss Marie away."

Talbot drew a quick, almost sobbing breath.

"Don't do that, Joe."

"Which I don't want to," groaned Joe. "But that game ain't goin' to be played 'ere, Toff, not while I'm alive!"

"You can rely on me, Joe," said Talbot, sinking his voice. "I know it all, and I am on guard. I promise you that what you're afraid of shall not happen. You know I am a fellow of my word. I'll stop it, even if it means ruin to me—as it may. On my word, Joe, there's nothing to be feared."

"Honest Injun, Toff?"

"Honest Injun," said Talbot.

Joe stretched a feeble hand over the coverlet, and Talbot took it in his own strong palm.

"Honest Injun," he repeated. "I know what I've got to do, Joe. You can trust me. Don't think anything more about it. Don't worry, you'll only make yourself ill. Leave it in my hands."

Joe's feverish face was already calmer.

"That's all I wanted to know, Toff. I know I can trust you. But—but Miss Marie, I don't want her to be 'urt, neither."

"When she is no longer needed here, Joe, she will go. And I promise you that until then I shall see that the Professor does not carry out his plans."

"Good enough, Toff."

Joe Frayne sank back on his pillow. The nurse approached.

Talbot pressed Joe's hand and left him. He left him reassured. The faith of the little waif in Talbot was complete.

Talbot left the ward. Marie was arranging a pillow for Blake as he passed out. She came away from Blake's bed and gave Talbot a smile and a nod. He whispered a word in passing.

"I must speak to you."

"I leave at eight," she whispered in reply, and passed on.

Talbot left the building.

It was dark in the quadrangle, and Talbot did not return to the School House. He paced to and fro under the old elms, thinking.

The interview with Joe Frayne had introduced a fresh factor into the problem—a new complication. It was not all in the Toff's hands now. If there were a robbery at the school there was another tongue to speak—



and that would speak. Did Marie know her danger? If she did not know, he would tell her; and the Professor, at least, would understand that it would not do.

The intervention of the little waif might, indeed, solve the problem—cut the Gordian knot that had baffled Talbot.

He paced to and fro in the dark quad till eight o'clock rang out from the tower. Then he hurried away to meet Marie.

The girl came away from the sanatorium with her coat on, glad to breathe the fresh air of the quadrangle after the warmth of the wards. Without a word she followed Talbot towards the Head's garden, where it was quiet and secluded, and their interview was not likely to be seen.

"I have only a quarter of an hour, Toff," murmured Marie. "Have you decided?"

"I decided long ago; I have not changed my mind."

Marie smiled.

"Then why have you asked me to come here?"

"I have just seen Frayne."

"Yes, he has been asking for you. He knew me."

"He knew you at once, Marie; and if there is anything here—you understand—he will speak. Even if I keep silent, he will speak."

"It is a new complication," smiled the girl. "But Joe is a good boy; he likes me. He will not hurt me if he can help it. And if anything happens here he will not know until too late. No one is allowed to carry disturbing or exciting news into the wards. You are aware of that. And if he speaks afterwards—after I am gone—it will not matter, will it, Toff?"

"Marie!" muttered Talbot wretchedly.

The new hope that had risen in his breast died away again.

"Joe will know nothing until it is too late," smiled Marie.

"I have given him my word that I will see to it," said Talbot, in a choking voice. "I've given him my word of honour that he may be easy in his mind—that I will see that the Professor does no harm here."

"Keep it, then!" said Marie scornfully.

"I am here at your mercy. You have only to go to Dr. Holmes and speak a word." She held up her pretty wrists. "You can place the handcuffs here with one word, Toff."

"Don't, Marie!"

"You will not do it?"

"You know I cannot!" groaned Talbot.

"But—but I swear that—that I will keep my word to Joe at any cost. I know you have begun already—you have been gaining information for the Professor—"

"As I used to gain it for you, Toff."

"I know it. No need to rub that in. But it won't do, Marie—it won't do. Promise me this, at least—see your father and try to make him give up his design. You might do that, at least, for me."

"On one condition, Toff."

"And that?"

"That you come with us."

"Impossible!"

"Then there is nothing more to be said," said the girl coldly. She looked at her companion. A ray of starlight fell upon his face and showed it white and strained with misery. "Toff, don't look like that!" There was a quiver in her voice. "I don't mean to hurt you. But—"

"There's nothing more to be said," muttered Talbot drearily. "There's only one thing for me to do—to go. But if I go I shall not go back to the old life. I will break stones on the road for my bread before I do that."

"You must, Toff! If you leave here you must come to us. You must live."

"The world is wide," said Talbot bitterly. "Wide enough to let me keep at a distance from the Thieves' Club. There is always work for honest hands to do."

"Honest?"

"Mine are honest now, and will always remain so. Do your worst, Marie. You will see that I can keep my word."

"I—I want to do my best for you," faltered Marie. "I—I will see my father, Toff. I will go to him. On my word, if I can make him give up this scheme I will do so. I promise you; and I, too, can keep my word."

Before Talbot could reply the girl turned and left him.

“ Marie ! ”

But she was gone.

The Toff drove his hands deep in his pockets and strode away towards the School House.

Marie would keep her word. But what influence would she have upon the cold, hard, unscrupulous cracksman ?

Talbot had little hope. Before him was a dark and dreary prospect ; whichever way he looked there was no light.

## THE NINTH CHAPTER

### Marie's Father

**T**OM MERRY and Monty Lowther wheeled their bicycles up to the Rylcombe Arms, and leaned them against a tree and walked to the inn. The chums of the Shell had been busy ; they had been investigating, and they had learned, at least, a little.

In a village like Rylcombe a stranger who stayed more than a day was certain to be remarked and commented upon. If the Professor was there, whatever his disguise might be, his presence, at all events, would be a subject for discussion among the villagers, and the two juniors had set themselves to discover whether there was a stranger staying in the village. They had dropped in at several places—Mrs. Murphy's tuckshop, and Mr. Bunn's, and the confectioner's, and the bunshop. But it was from their old acquaintance Grimes, the grocer's boy, that they had learned that there was a gentleman staying at the Rylcombe Arms, who had arrived the previous day. A regular nob, according to Grimes, with no end of beard and whiskers and a heyeglass. His name was Judd, and he was a very generous gent with his money, as the boots of the Rylcombe Arms, who was a special friend of Grimes', had testified.

As Mr. Judd, at the Rylcombe Arms, was the only stranger in the village that the two juniors could hear of, they had resolved to have a look at Mr. Judd. Beard and whiskers suggested disguise, at all events. They remembered that Mr. Packington had been so adorned, and he had worn spectacles. A different colour in hirsute adornments, and an eyeglass instead of spectacles, would make a very effective change of appearance. It was

more than probable, of course, that Mr. Judd was quite a harmless person—a commercial traveller was what Grimes supposed him to be. But as the only discoverable stranger in the village, he was the only possible object of the juniors' investigations, and they were there to investigate !

So they proceeded to the Rylcombe Arms finally, though it was getting towards the time when their leave would be up. They did not want the expedition to be wholly in vain.

They entered the old-fashioned inn, where they knew the proprietor. That plump and rubicund gentleman told them that Mr. Judd was in the reading-room.

To the reading-room the two juniors immediately proceeded.

Mr. Judd was alone there. He was seated in an armchair, reading the latest paper obtainable at Rylcombe. He glanced up carelessly as the juniors came in, and then resumed reading his paper.

Monty Lowther eyed his companion humorously. Mr. Judd looked a perfectly ordinary, respectable gentleman of about forty. He bore not the slightest resemblance to Mr. Packington, who had posed as a science master at St. Jim's. He looked a bigger man—though that might have been due to the cut of his clothes. Certainly he looked at least twenty years younger. It was even difficult to know if his eyes were of the same colour ; for at St. Jim's Mr. Packington's eyes had always been covered by his glasses, and the juniors had never noted their colour.

The only thing against Mr. Judd was the fact that he was a stranger in Rylcombe, and, of course, that was nothing at all. The juniors were at liberty to observe him as much as they liked, but all they could observe was that he did not look in the least like a suspicious person.

Tom Merry sat down at the table opposite Mr. Judd, and while affecting to look over an illustrated paper he eyed the man.

Mr. Judd did not appear to observe it. He read his paper calmly and in the most commonplace manner. The two juniors strolled away to the deep bay-window, and stood looking out into the lighted street. Monty Lowther nudged his companion.



"Well?" he whispered.

"Looks all serene!" admitted Tom Merry.

"Can't very well ask him if he's a giddy cracksman in disguise," murmured Lowther, "and I suppose you can't pluck a perfect stranger by the beard to see if it's genuine—what?"

"Fathead!"

"Hallo!" murmured Lowther, with a nod towards the street. "There's Miss March."

Tom Merry looked down from the window. Miss March had just appeared in sight, coming down the old High Street with her light, graceful walk. To the astonishment of the juniors, she turned into the porch of the Rylcombe Arms, and disappeared into the inn. It was no business of theirs, of course, but the juniors could not help wondering what the Little Sister would have to do in the village inn at that hour in the evening.

They looked round as the door of the room opened.

Miss March came in, and, without noticing the two juniors in the deep window, crossed at once to the man seated by the table.

"I am sorry I am late," she said in her clear, sweet voice.

Mr. Judd rose to his feet. He made a gesture, and the girl turned towards the juniors. Tom Merry and Lowther advanced at once.

"Top of the evening, Miss March!" said Monty Lowther cheerfully.

"You are late out of gates," said the Little Sister, in surprise. "I thought juniors had to be indoors by locking-up!"

"We've got a pass out," explained Tom Merry. "We've got to be in by half-past eight, though, and it's close on that now. If you are going back to the school——"

"Hardly safe in the lane at night, you know, Miss March," said Lowther. "It would be a real pleasure to see you back."

Miss March smiled.

"My uncle will see me as far as the school," she said.

"Your—your uncle?"

The juniors felt inclined to kick one another. This brown-bearded gentleman, with the eyeglasses, whom they had suspected of being a possible criminal, was the uncle of Miss

March, the Little Sister of the Poor. His business in Rylcombe was explained; he had come there to see his niece!

"Yes." The girl turned to Mr. Judd. "These two young gentlemen belong to the school, uncle."

Mr. Judd bestowed a nod on the juniors. Tom Merry and Lowther beat a rapid retreat from the reading-room.

Outside the inn they looked at one another grimly before they mounted their bicycles. Tom Merry was frowning, but a grin lurked about Lowther's face. He could see the humorous side of the matter.

"What a disgusting sell!" growled Tom.

"Horrid!" said Lowther. "We've spotted the only stranger in the village, and he turns out to be nursey-nursey's tame uncle."

"Then the Professor can't be in Rylcombe, at all events," said Tom.

"If he's come here, he may have put up in Wayland," remarked Lowther. "It's farther off, but—— Ahem! Rather a big order to spot and examine all the strangers in Wayland—a market town. And we've only five minutes left."

"Oh, don't be an ass!" growled Tom Merry. "Let's get back!"

And the chums of the Shell rode back to St. Jim's.

In the room they had left, Miss March was in conversation with the man she had called her uncle. Marie's quick wit had not failed her, unexpected as the meeting with the juniors was to her.

Mr. Judd scowled as the door closed behind the boys.

"What were they doing here, father?" asked Marie.

Mr. Judd, alias the Professor, shrugged his shoulders.

"Staring at me, chiefly," he replied. "Only interested in me because I am a stranger here, I suppose—they cannot suspect anything. I don't look much like Mr. Packington now, Marie—do I?"

Marie laughed.

"No, dad. But—but it's odd that they should be here, all the same." Her pretty brows wrinkled for a moment. "The Toff cannot have told them anything."

The Professor made an impatient gesture. "Never mind them. Have you any news for me?"

"Yes," said Marie.

"The Toff—what has he said?"

"That he will never come back under any circumstances. And he means it, father—he means every word of it. He is in earnest."

The man with the eyeglass sneered.

"He will change his mind; I shall see to that."

"It is useless, father," answered Marie.

"Nonsense!

Don't argue with me," said the Professor harshly. "Why has he not already given me up, then? He knows I am here. It is for your sake, Marie. And for your sake, too, he will come back. If he does not, there are ways and means—ways and means." The Professor smiled cruelly.

"We shall see."

"Father, there is more news than that.

Do you remember a little fellow in Angel Alley—a boy with a drunken father, named Frayne?"

"What of him?"

"He is at the school."

The Professor started, knitted his brows.

"I remember. Hookey Walker told me something of that. I had forgotten. I did not notice the boy when I was there; he had changed, probably. Certainly he did not know me. I had forgotten. What of him?"

"He is there—he has recognised you!"

The Professor gritted his teeth.

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

"He has spoken?" exclaimed the Professor.

"No. He is ill. I nurse the poor little fellow. You know he used to be devoted to me—and he has not forgotten. He has spoken to the Toff, and to calm him Talbot has promised him to see that—that—you understand. Joe knows why I am there, you bet."

"If he is ill, then he need not be reckoned with," said the Professor coolly, "and if he has left it all in the Toff's hands it will be safer still. The Toff will not speak."

"But——"

"You are seeking trouble!" exclaimed the Professor, with a sharp look at the clouded face of the girl. "Come! What is in your mind? Tell me!"

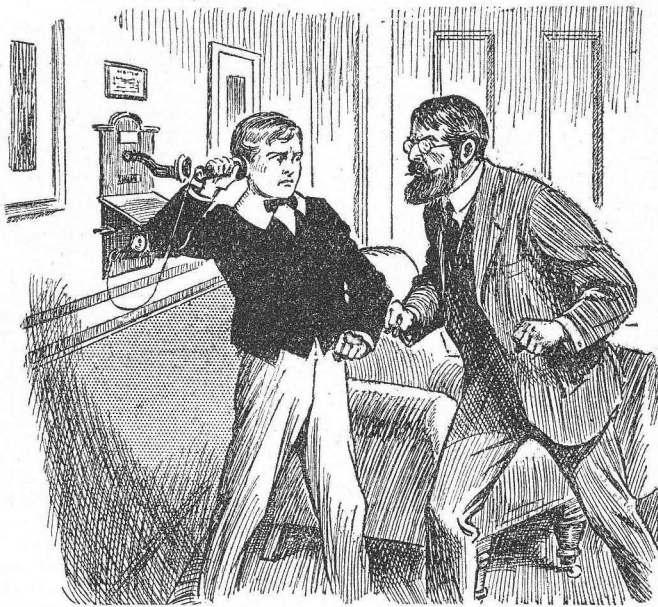
Marie's lips

quivered, as she answered, sadly:

"Father, I—I can't bear this!" The tears rose to her eyes. "If you saw the Toff now, you would pity him—you would have mercy on him. If he wishes to leave our ways, father, why not let him go? Let us leave him in peace. Let us——"

The girl paused as she saw the bitter sneer on the hard face before her.

"I expected something of the sort!" said the Professor grimly. "First the Toff, and



"Will you go?" demanded Talbot. "Or shall I give information to the police?" The cracksman clenched his fists in his fury. "I will go!" he hissed. "I'll make you repent—you shall suffer!" (See page 285.)

then you, Marie. He has deserted his old friends, and he is inducing you to desert your father."

"I will never desert you, father," said Marie firmly. "Whatever your fate may be, I shall always share it. But—but I beg you to give up this scheme—leave the school in peace—there is plunder elsewhere. Leave the Toff to lead his new life. If he chooses to come back to us, let him come; if he does not, leave him alone. Father!"

"Is that all you have to say?"

"That is all," said Marie, with a sinking heart.

"Very well; now I will give you your instructions," said the Professor coolly. "As for Frayne, since he is ill and in your charge, there is no danger in that quarter. And since you are his nurse, you can take care that he does not get well in time to interfere with our plans!"

"Father!" It was a cry of horror from the unhappy girl. "What are you saying? Do you think I could—that I would—?"

"Bah! Leave him out of the discussion," said the Professor contemptuously. "I tell you there is no danger in that quarter. As for the Toff, we shall see." The Professor set his teeth for a moment. "It is between him and me—man and boy—and we shall see. But you have your work to do, Marie. I must have money!"

"Money?" faltered Marie.

"Money!" said the Professor sarcastically. "Does that astonish you? What else am I in my profession for? I am in need of it. Have they taken any special precautions at the school since I was there? It is likely enough."

"I—I do not know—"

"You do not know!" exclaimed the Professor fiercely. "You have been in the school twenty-four hours, and you do not know! Take care, Marie! Has the Toff persuaded you to follow his new path, to the extent of allowing your father to fall into a trap?"

"Father!"

"I do not think so, Marie. But until you can give me information I cannot get to work at the school. But you can, Marie; you are free to act, and every little helps." The

hardened rascal grinned. "I tell you I am in need of money. Owing to the Toff, I have spent, and have gained nothing in return. My stay at St. Jim's was a dead loss to me. At this moment I have not five pounds in my pocket."

"What do you want me to do, father?" said the girl dully.

"I want you to do what you are there to do," said the Professor savagely. "There are rich boys there—there is money to be had—plenty of it. You know what you are to do. Enough of this! Before you were five years old I had taught you your business, and you could pick a pocket with any professional in London. You know what you are to do. I order you to do it!"

Marie stood silent.

"What does this mean?" said the Professor harshly. "Why do you not answer me? Has the Toff influenced you so much then in one day? At his word you will abandon your father—"

"Never!" said Marie; but her voice had lost all its sweetness, and sounded dull, lifeless. "I will do as you tell me."

"I have told you what to do. Now do not stay longer; you do not wish to cause remark and suspicion, I suppose?" grunted the Professor.

Marie shivered, and drew her coat more closely about her. Without another word she quitted her father.

The Professor threw himself into his chair again, and lighted a cigar. Through the darkness the girl was hurrying back to St. Jim's—alone.

## THE TENTH CHAPTER

### Not the Toff!

"**B**AI JOVE! This is vewy wemarkable!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's expression, also, was remarkable as he made that statement.

"What's the trouble?" yawned Levison of the Fourth.

It was Monday, and lessons were over. The rain was falling in the quadrangle, and most of the School House juniors were in their studies or the common-room—those who were

not "down" with influenza. It was in the common-room that Arthur Augustus stated that it was very remarkable. Two or three fellows turned their heads to look.

The swell of St. Jim's was examining the pockets of his beautiful waistcoat. He seemed to expect to find something there which was missing.

"Lost something?" asked Smith minor.

"Yaas."

Arthur Augustus went through his waistcoat pockets again.

"Anybody seen a watch?" he asked.

"Yes," said Monty Lowther.

"Oh, good! Pway hand it over!" said Arthur Augustus, with great relief. "I was afraid it was lost."

"Hand it over?" asked Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"But why should I hand you my watch?" queried the humorist of the Shell in surprise.

"You uttah ass! You said——"

"I said I'd seen a watch—so I have. Mine."

"I wegard you as a fathead, Lowthah. Has anybody seen my watch? Some silly ass has taken my watch off me, and I want it."

"Ask Talbot if he's seen it," suggested Crooke of the Shell, with an ill-natured grin.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy strode towards the cad of the Shell, his eye gleaming behind his monocle.

"Are you makin' a beastly, cowardly insinuation against my fwiend Talbot?" he asked, in measured tones.

Crooke backed away a little.

"Oh, I didn't mean—I only said——"

"You said a wotten, beastly, cowardly thing, Cwooke!" said Arthur Augustus disdainfully. "You know that old Talbot is as stwaight as a die!"

"Well, we all know what he was!" sneered Crooke. "And if your watch is really missing, what's become of it? It hasn't walked!"

"Oh, wats!"

And Arthur Augustus walked away with a frowning brow. The loss of his watch, which had been a present from his noble pater, worried him; and the possibility that, if it were not found, suspicion might fall upon Talbot, worried him still more.

Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, looked

into the junior common-room a little later. There was a frown upon his usually good-natured face.

"Which of you young rascals has been larking in my study?" he demanded, addressing the remark to everybody present.

"Larking!" said Monty Lowther, in a shocked tone. "Us! Oh, Kildare!"

"None of your cheek," said Kildare, who was evidently not in a humour for Monty Lowther's little jokes. "Some young ass has been larking in my study—in a specially silly way, too! Who was it?"

"Not guilty, my lord!" said Lowther.

"But what's happened?" asked Buck Finn.

"Somebody has taken the silver Challenge Cup," said Kildare. "I suppose it is an idiotic lark, and I'm going to warm the larky person when I find him!"

"What an inducement for him to own up!" murmured Lowther.

"I say, that cup's worth ten guineas," said Kerruish. "Somebody has pinched it, Kildare!"

"Nonsense!" said the captain of St. Jim's sharply. "It's a silly joke, of course!"

"Gussy's lost his watch, too," said Crooke.

"D'Arcy! His watch!" exclaimed Kildare.

"Yes."

Kildare started.

"That's very odd. I suppose there's some precious practical joker at work. I'll jolly well find out who it is, too, and stop his joking!" said the captain of St. Jim's angrily; and he strode out of the room.

The juniors looked at one another curiously. The loss of the silver cup—a very valuable trophy, won by St. Jim's first eleven—following upon the loss of Arthur Augustus's famous gold "ticker," which was well known to have cost twenty-five guineas, impressed the juniors strangely. If it was the work of a practical joker, he was a fellow who dealt in valuables, evidently.

Kildare strode away to Mr. Railton's study. He found the Housemaster with an unusually serious expression on his face. Kildare did not notice it for a moment.

"What is the matter, Kildare?"



"Somebody has taken the silver trophy from my study, sir," said Kildare. "I can't get at who has done it. If you would order an inquiry, sir——"

The Housemaster started.

"Do you mean that it has been stolen, Kildare?"

"Oh, no, sir! It might be a lark, of course. But the young rascal who has done it ought to be caned. He might damage it or lose it!"

"I hope it is a lark, as you say, Kildare. But it is very odd. Have you heard of anything else being missed in the house?"

Kildare looked surprised.

"Yes; Crooke of the Shell mentioned to me that D'Arcy has lost his watch. I suppose it is the work of the same practical joker."

"The fact is, Kildare, I also have missed something from my study," said Mr. Railton gravely. "I had only just made the discovery when you entered."

"By Jove, sir!" said Kildare, startled. "Anything serious?"

"A number of currency notes, amounting to ten pounds," said the Housemaster quietly. "Phew!"

Kildare could not help looking surprised. It was not like Mr. Railton's usually careful habits to leave money where it could be handled. The Housemaster understood his look.

"I am not usually careless with money, Kildare, as you are aware. I was doing the House accounts, and had taken the money from my desk, where I keep it locked, when I was called away to see the Head, who wished to speak to me. I put the notes, with my papers, in the table-drawer. When I came back, a few minutes ago, they were gone. The papers are just where I left them, but the notes have been taken!"

Kildare knitted his brows.

"That doesn't look like a practical joke, sir. It must have been a theft."

"I fear so."

"I—I say, sir! That's rotten—a thief in the house!" said Kildare with a worried look.

"It is very serious. I am afraid it may cause some of the boys to think unpleasant things on the subject of poor Talbot! In a

matter like this, he is certain to be thought of in connection with it. I am perfectly convinced of his honesty, of course. The poor boy will always have that difficulty in connection with his past. However, in this case, probably the matter may be cleared up as far as he is concerned. I was not absent from my study more than a quarter of an hour—from seven to a quarter past. I shall ascertain at once where Talbot was at the time. Do you know where he is now?"

Kildare shook his head.

"I understand that he shares Tom Merry's study while his study-mates are in the sanatorium," he said. "He is not in the common-room; I have just come from there. He may be in Merry's study."

"I will go there at once."

Mr. Railton proceeded at once to the Shell passage. He tapped on the door of Tom Merry's study.

"Come in!" sang out Tom's cheery voice.

The Housemaster entered and Talbot and Tom Merry, who were there, rose to their feet at once.

The Housemaster's expression showed them at once that he had come on a very unusual errand, and they waited uneasily for him to speak.

"I wish to speak to you, Talbot," said Mr. Railton quietly. "There has been a very unpleasant happening—some Treasury notes have been taken from my study!"

Talbot turned white.

"Oh, sir!"

"Don't imagine that I suspect you, for one moment, Talbot," said Mr. Railton kindly. "My object is to ascertain at once where you were at the time, so that your name cannot be dragged into the matter."

"You are very kind, sir," stammered Talbot.

"I find you in this study," pursued the Housemaster. "How long have you been here, in company with Merry?"

"I don't know, sir—about half an hour."

"About that, sir," said Tom Merry.

"Whoever went into my study must have done so between seven and a quarter past," said Mr. Railton. "During my absence, you understand. You see the importance of the





ARTHUR  
JONES

NECK AND NECK!

A breathless moment in a thrilling speed-contest between racing cars and motor-cycles



matter, Merry. Can you assure me that Talbot was with you here before seven o'clock?"

"Yes, rather," said Tom Merry promptly. "I heard seven o'clock strike while I was talking to Talbot, sir."

"Very good! I heard seven o'clock strike before I left my study," said Mr. Railton. "Talbot has been here ever since?"

"Yes, sir."

"He has not left the study?"

Tom paused.

"He went out to get a map, sir—only into his study. It's next door, sir. But he only popped in and out again—two minutes at the most."

"You are quite sure of that, Merry? He could not have descended to my study and returned in less than five minutes."

"Two minutes at the most, sir. I just stirred the fire while he was gone, and then he was back again."

Mr. Railton nodded.

"That settles that point, then. I am very glad of this. You must not suppose, Talbot, that suspicion regarding you entered my mind for a moment. My desire simply was to prevent suspicion entering other minds, and that is accomplished now. Merry's evidence is quite sufficient."

"Thank you, sir."

Mr. Railton gave the juniors a kind nod and left the study.

Tom Merry drew a deep breath.

"Jolly lucky you were with me, Talbot, old man!" he said. "Not that any of the decent chaps would have said a word about you; but there are some of them—Crooke and his set—who might have tried to make capital out of it. It's lucky, isn't it?"

Talbot did not reply. He had sunk into his chair. His face was white as death and his eyes had a hunted look.

"Talbot, old man, what's the matter? You can't think that anybody would suspect you now?" exclaimed Tom Merry.

Talbot shook his head.

"It's not that!"

"Then what's the matter?"

"Heaven help me!" groaned Talbot. "It's come at last!"

Tom Merry regarded him in amazement and alarm.

"Talbot, what's come at last? What do you mean?"

Talbot did not reply.

Tom Merry put his hand on his shoulder.

"Talbot, I say! What's the matter with you? It's a beastly unpleasant thing to happen, but it needn't worry you. It's nothing to do with you. Where are you going?"

Talbot had risen to his feet.

"Don't talk to me now, Tom," he muttered. "I—I—I want to think this over."

He quitted the study without another word.

Tom Merry did not follow him. He stood rooted to the floor. It was impossible that the Toff could have done that—impossible! But what was the cause of his strange emotion—of the horror that Tom had read in his stricken face?

The captain of the Shell felt a chill at his heart. His faith in his chum did not waver. But—but what was the matter with Talbot?

## THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER

### The Toff's Resolve

"MARIE!"

The girl started.

Marie had come out of the school hospital, looking a little pale and tired. The rain had ceased, and the stars glimmered in the dark sky. As the girl came down the path towards the quadrangle, a dark figure detached itself from the blackness of the trees and stood before her.

"You startled me, Toff," said Marie, with a catch in her breath.

"I have been waiting an hour for you," said Talbot.

"You want to see me?"

"Yes. You know why?"

Marie peered at him in the dark. She could see that Talbot's face was deadly white. Her own look was uneasy.

"Why, Toff?" she asked in a low voice.

"I know what you have done, Marie."

"What have I done?"

Talbot made a weary gesture.

"It has come at last, Marie. You have

done what the Professor ordered you to do. I am not condemning you. Heaven knows that six months ago I should have acted as you have acted. I have no right to judge you, to condemn you. But I know what I must do, Marie, and I am going to do it."

Her face hardened as she asked quietly :

"What are you going to do?"

"I am going to keep my word to Joe Frayne," said Talbot steadily. "I am going to do my duty by the Head."

"You are going to betray me?"

Talbot shivered.

"No. Never that! I am going to see the Professor, and unless he goes I am going to denounce him to the police."

"You will never——"

"I shall!"

There was a short silence. Talbot's tone rang with grim determination.

"He has left me no other resource," he said. "Even for your sake, Marie, I cannot keep silence now. And—and what has been stolen must be returned, Marie. And you must leave the school."

"You are too late."

"Too late?" said Talbot with a start. "How too late?"

Marie gave a little mocking shrug.

"Did you think that I should carry the loot about with me or place it in my room? It is already in the Professor's hands."

"But—but—— So soon? How—how——"

"Oh, you are dull!" said the girl. "The Professor has been here——"

"Within the gates? Impossible! The gates are locked at dark, and the thefts were not committed till after dark."

"Not within the walls," said Marie.

"You mean that——"

"I mean that I have done what I was commanded to do—as you would have done before you deserted us," said Marie scornfully. "The Professor was in waiting outside the walls after dark—waiting for my signal. An hour ago I gave the signal, and he answered it, and a bag was tossed over the wall. Do you understand now?"

"Then—then the plunder—what you have taken—is no longer in the school?" said Talbot, drawing a long breath.

"No."

"I—I did not expect that." Talbot knitted his brows gloomily. "But it is all one. He shall return it."

"He will not!"

"Then he shall take his choice between that and arrest!" said Talbot between his teeth.

"And I?" said Marie bitterly. "Is that your friendship, Toff? Where my father goes, I go. You know that!"

"You can leave in safety."

"I cannot. When he is arrested, it will be known that I am his daughter. Two of your friends have already seen me with him, and I called him my uncle, to deceive them. Even if I keep silent, it will be known. And the stolen things—it will be known that they were stolen by someone inside the school. You will send me to prison, Toff, as well as my father."

Talbot gave a groan.

"I cannot do that, Marie."

"You must, unless you keep silent."

"Marie!"

"I—I could not face that, Toff," whispered the girl. "I—I could not! Toff, you won't bring that on me?"

"I must keep my word to Frayne. I must do my duty here or feel myself an ungrateful villain!" said Talbot dully.

Marie's eyes flashed.

"You will send me to prison?"

"No, no, no!" gasped Talbot. "Never that! There is some way—there must be some way—— I will think——"

"There is no way. What I have taken—I make no secret of it to you—let it be found upon my father, and my guilt is proved. Even you could not save me then from disgrace, ruin, prison!"

"Marie!" groaned Talbot.

"What is the use of fighting against your fate?" said the girl softly. "Break with it all, Toff, and come back to us!"

"Never!"

"Then do your worst!"

"My worst, Marie—to you!" said Talbot bitterly. He pressed his hand to his throbbing brow. "There must be some way to save my honour and yet to save you—there must!"



"There is no way but silence."

"Marie, you don't understand—you can't understand! The House is full of it now—the thefts! Someone may be suspected—someone who is innocent! I cannot keep silent—I cannot!"

"Then betray me!" said the girl.

"And that I cannot do."

Marie laughed softly.

"But one or the other you must do, Toff—and you must not betray me. That I know!"

"You know it only too well, Marie!" said Talbot wretchedly. "You know I would die to save you, if need were. I must save you—and I must do my duty. Ah!"

Marie look at him curiously, peering at the white face in the dark. A sudden light had come into Talbot's eyes.

"What are you thinking of, Toff?" muttered the girl, vaguely uneasy.

"There is one way—the only way."

"And that?"

"I am going to the village now. Unless the Professor returns the stolen things to me, and leaves by the evening train, I shall denounce him. That I have resolved upon. Nothing shall alter that. But as for what has been stolen, it shall never be known that it was by your hand."

"It must be known——"

"No! The innocent will suffer for the guilty," said Talbot quietly. "It will not be difficult to make them believe that the Toff has broken out again and resumed his old ways—that it was I who conveyed the plunder to the Professor. It is ruin for me; but I shall save you."

"You!"

"Enough said, Marie. Good-bye! You will not see me again!"

The girl caught him by the arm as he was turning away.

"Toff! You don't mean that! You—you will confess——"

"I shall confess."

"It will be ruin!"

"I know it."

"They will send you to prison——"

"Better send me than you, Marie."

Her grasp upon his arm tightened. Her eyes looked into his—wet now with tears.

"Toff! You would do that? You care so much as that?"

"You shall see."

"But—but it is madness!" panted Marie. "Toff! They will send you to prison! What of your new life—your good name? Have you forgotten all that?"

"I have not forgotten," said Talbot dully. "Better keep my honour than my good name, if I cannot keep both. Let me go, Marie."

"But—but——"

"There's nothing more to be said. You shall not suffer; that I promise you. After all, perhaps the end was bound to come—the fight's been too hard for me. You shall be safe, Marie. Your father will be silent—he will be glad enough to see me suffer in your place," said Talbot with a bitter smile. "Let me go!"

"But—but——" moaned Marie.

Talbot drew himself away. Marie stood unsteadily, looking after him in the darkness, panting. She reeled against a tree, wet with rain, her brain in a whirl. Her father would never yield—she felt sure of that. And—and Talbot was to suffer in her place—to save her. That was his return for her share in the plot against him. The girl's heart ached with misery.

"Toff!" she called out. "Toff!"

But there came no reply. The Toff, the sport of the strange fate, whose struggle for right and honour had come to a tragic end at last, was gone. The black night had swallowed up the hurrying figure, and Marie was alone—alone in the darkness, weeping.

## THE TWELFTH CHAPTER

### Beaten at the Finish!

"WELCOME!"

Mr. Judd, alias John Rivers, alias the Professor, spoke the word with a sarcastic smile. Mr. Judd, the only guest in the Rylcombe Arms, had the reading-room to himself that evening. He had been using the telephone in the corner, and as he laid down the receiver the door opened, and Talbot strode in.

The Shell fellow of St. Jim's closed the door behind him, and came directly towards the Professor.

"They told me you were in here," he said.  
"Yes—and glad to see you, Toff," said the Professor. "Welcome! You have decided at last?"

The Professor rubbed his hands.

"Good!" he said. "Good, my boy! I knew how it must end—you were bound to come back, Toff! You'll get a warm welcome, all bygones will be forgotten—what? They won't bear any malice for your desertion, Toff—they will be too glad to have you back. But I'm glad you've decided."

Talbot laughed harshly.

"I have decided," he said, "but I have not yet told you my decision."

John Rivers looked at him sharply.

"What do you mean? You are coming back?"

"No!"

"Then why are you here?" demanded the Professor, savagely. "Has anything gone wrong at the school? Has Marie—"

"Marie is safe—and will remain safe. She has carried out your orders, and you have the stolen property. That is what I have come for."

The Professor laughed.

"You are joking, of course."

"You will find that I am not joking." Talbot looked at his watch. "I have broken bounds to come here. It is a quarter to nine. There is a train that leaves Rylcombe at nine-five. You are going to take that train, and I am going to see you take it."

"Really?"

"And before you go you are going to hand me the things that Marie took from the school, at your orders."

"You are quite amusing," yawned the Professor.

"Or else," said Talbot, his voice deepening, his eyes gleaming—"or else you will be handed over to the police now—at once."

The Professor yawned.

"I am in earnest!" said Talbot.

"And Marie?" said the Professor, watching him narrowly, in spite of his assumption of indifference. "You seem to have overlooked, my friend, that it was Marie who handed to me these trifles—now in my possession. Are you prepared to send Marie to prison?"

"Marie need not suffer, unless you choose to betray her," said Talbot, with white lips. "Villain as you are, you will not do that!"

"It will not rest with me. It will be known that those articles were stolen inside the school, and that I cannot have done it. It will be known that the thief was in St. Jim's."

"That is true."

"Yet you say that Marie will not suffer."

"She will not suffer—for I shall confess to the theft," said Talbot huskily. "Now do you understand?"

"You?" gasped the Professor. "You are fooling me!"

"I am in earnest."

"You lie!" said the Professor fiercely. "You think you can deceive me—an old hand. You will go to prison—you will lose your liberty—lose everything—for the sake of restoring those wretched trifles, worth fifty pounds at the most—"

"I shall suffer to save Marie. That is, unless you come to my terms. Will you go?"

"I will not go!"

"You do not believe that I am in earnest?"

"Hardly."

"Very well," said Talbot, with a deep breath. "You refuse?"

"I refuse."

"Then all is said."

Talbot crossed the room and took up the telephone-receiver. The Professor watched him with burning eyes. Was it possible that the boy was in earnest, after all, he wondered savagely. Talbot spoke into the receiver.

"Number-one-nought-one, please!"

"What number is that?" asked the Professor with a mocking smile, as Talbot stood like a statue, receiver in hand, waiting for his number.

"The police-station," said Talbot quietly.

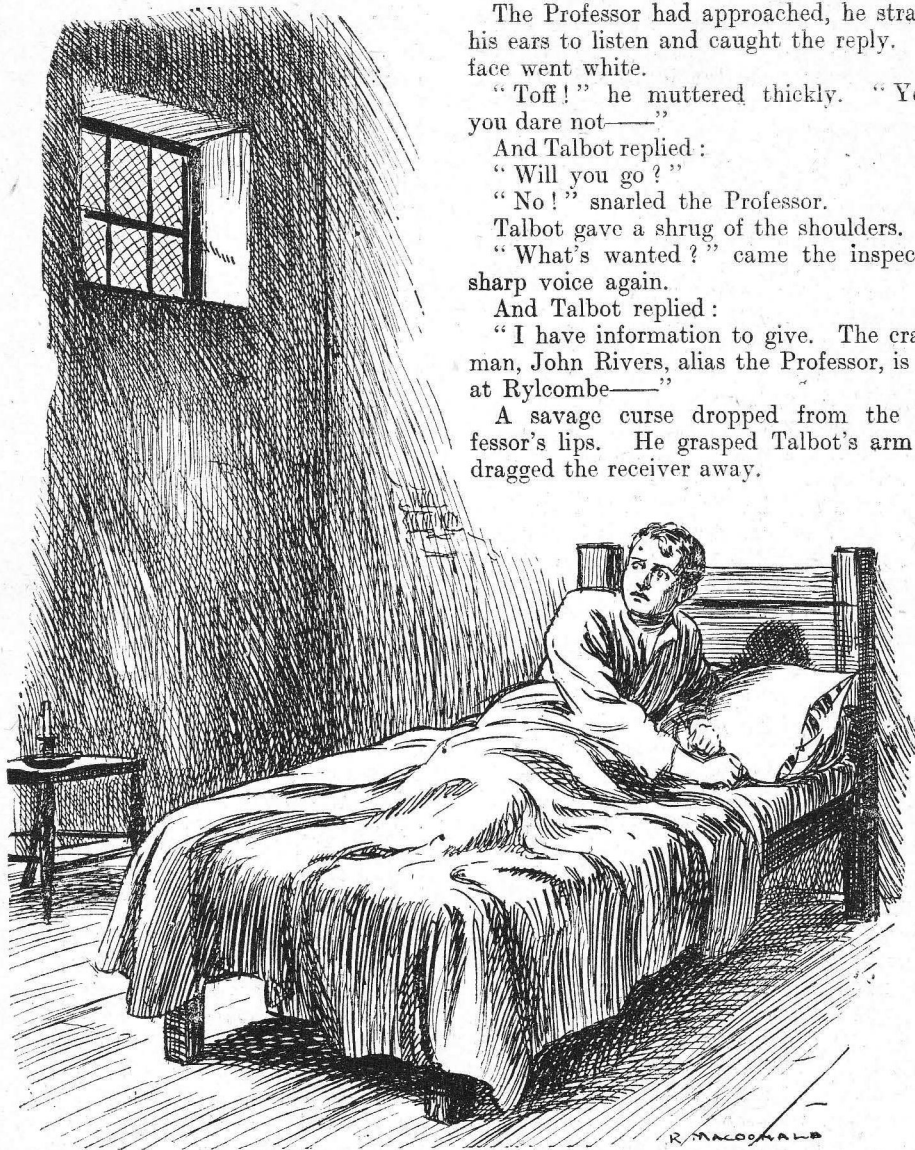
John Rivers clenched his hands.

"You are bluffing me," he said, between his teeth. "You dare not call up the police!"

Talbot did not answer. His resolve was taken, and he was past argument now. He waited in grim silence.

The bell rung.

Talbot spoke again, clearly and calmly, the Professor watching him with clenched hands and burning eyes.



The Professor had approached, he strained his ears to listen and caught the reply. His face went white.

"Toff!" he muttered thickly. "You—you dare not——"

And Talbot replied:

"Will you go?"

"No!" snarled the Professor.

Talbot gave a shrug of the shoulders.

"What's wanted?" came the inspector's sharp voice again.

And Talbot replied:

"I have information to give. The cracksmen, John Rivers, alias the Professor, is now at Rylcombe——"

A savage curse dropped from the Professor's lips. He grasped Talbot's arm and dragged the receiver away.

Talbot propped himself up in bed. He knew where he was—a garret in the old building where the Thieves' Club held their meetings. He was a prisoner. (See page 308.)

"Is that Rylcombe Police Station?" asked Talbot clearly.

"Yes."

"I wish to speak to Inspector Skeat."

"I am Inspector Skeat. What is wanted?"

"Enough! A thousand curses! I will go!"

"You have decided only just in time," said Talbot grimly.

"I will make you repent this!" hissed the

cracksman. "You shall suffer for it, you shall suffer——"

"You have none too much time to catch the train, and Inspector Skeat knows now that you are in Rylcombe," said Talbot quietly. "You have no time to lose."

The Professor realised that. He made a movement towards the door.

"Where is what I have come for?" asked Talbot calmly.

"In my room, curse you, Toff!"

"I will come with you."

Ten minutes later the Professor stepped into the train in Rylcombe Station, and Talbot, with a bag in his hand, stood on the platform and watched him go. The baffled plotter shook a savage fist at him from the train window.

"I go now," he muttered. "I go, Toff; but I shall return, don't doubt that. You have not heard the last of me. You shall remember——"

The shriek of the whistle drowned his voice. The train glided out of the station, and the Professor disappeared from Talbot's sight. Quietly the junior turned and left the station.

"Toff!" The whispered voice in the dark quadrangle made Talbot start. He had climbed in over a school wall. Marie, her white face wet with rain, caught him by the arm.

"Marie, you here!"

"I have been waiting—waiting and watching for you!" panted the girl breathlessly. "Toff, you have seen him? I know he will not go. Toff, I shall confess everything. You shall not suffer for me. If he will not go, Toff, you shall not suffer."

Talbot smiled gently.

"It is finished, Marie. He is gone."

"Gone!" murmured Marie. She reeled; the reaction was too much for her. Talbot caught her in his strong arm.

"Yes, Marie, he has gone, and in this bag I have all that was—was taken. I shall leave it where it can be found in the morning. It will be supposed that it was taken for a joke, and it will be forgotten. There is nothing to fear, Marie. Dear Marie, calm yourself. The danger is now over."

A long shudder ran through the girl.

"I—I have been waiting—so long—for you to come back," she whispered. "I would not have let you suffer, Toff. And—and he is really gone?"

"I watched him into the train."

Marie gave a sob.

"And you are saved, Toff, and I am safe—safe. But they will miss me in the ward. I must go back. But before I go, Toff, you have my word, so long as I am here, there shall be nothing more—nothing more of that. You understand?"

Talbot drew a deep breath, and his face grew very bright.

"Thank you, Marie. Heaven bless you!"

"Whatever my father says, there shall be nothing more of it here—nothing. I—I am ashamed, Toff, and yet that has never come to me before. I have never cared. It is you who have made the difference, Toff."

Talbot pressed her hand silently.

Marie flitted away into the darkness. A quarter of an hour later Talbot entered his study in the School House. Tom Merry and D'Arcy were there finishing their preparation, and Monty Lowther was busy upon his Comic Column for the "Weekly." They all looked inquiringly at Talbot.

"Where have you been, you boundah?" asked Arthur Augustus. "You haven't done your prep. You will get into a wov in the mornin'."

Talbot smiled. He could smile now.

"What about supper?" he said cheerily. "I've had a walk, and I'm hungry. Never mind prep. for once. I'll chance it with Linton."

Tom Merry gave him a curious look. The Toff met his eyes with a smile. And Tom Merry understood that the trouble, whatever it was, that had weighed like a black cloud upon his chum, was lifted. He asked no questions; he was only too glad to see Talbot his old self again. And supper in Tom Merry's study was a merry meal that evening.

## THE THIRTEENTH CHAPTER

### The Toff's Secret

IT was several days after the discovery of the missing articles, which had been restored by Talbot, that Gore of the Shell came into the study with an unusually good-



tempered expression on his face. Talbot and Skimpole were there, having their tea. The three somewhat ill-assorted juniors shared that study.

Gore and Skimpole had had their share of the "flu," and Skimpole was still looking a little pale. But George Gore was quite recovered. He was in boisterous spirits.

"Hallo! Tea ready?" said Gore, pulling a chair up to the table. "That's right! Pass the sardines, Skimmy. I'm hungry. Been at practice!"

"You look very chippy," said Talbot, a little surprised. Gore was not always so good-tempered.

"I'm playing in the match to-morrow," said Gore. "I'm going in as goalkeeper. I can keep goal. No chance for me if that New House bouncer Wynn was up. Luckily, he's still in the sanatorium; and so is Herries. So this is where I come in. It's a jolly good chance for me."

"Good luck!" said Talbot.

"Oh, I shall do all right," said Gore confidently. "Tom Merry wouldn't have put me in if he could have helped it!" Gore sniffed. "But I'll jolly well show them that I can keep goal. It will be rather a tag, rag, and bob-tail team. More'n half the fellows in the sanatorium. I dare say I should still be there myself, but for that new nurse—Miss March. Jolly good sort!"

"Jolly good!" said Talbot.

"She seems to get on awfully well with you, Talbot," said Gore. "Anybody would hardly think that you'd never met her till last week, the way you get on."

Talbot coloured.

"I suppose you never met her before she came here?" said Gore curiously.

Skimpole chimed in before Talbot could reply.

"My dear Gore, I am glad to see that you appreciate the kindness of Miss March. You are not generally grateful, my dear Gore."

"Oh, rats!" snapped Gore.

"You are quite right about that young lady," went on Skimpole, blinking at Gore through his spectacles. "She is intelligent—very intelligent. While I was getting well I had quite long talks with her. I explained

to her about my new invention—my system of a self-acting propeller—and she listened without any of the idiotic interruptions I am accustomed to from you, Gore——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Talbot rose to his feet.

"Hallo! You haven't finished tea?" said Gore.

"Yes, I've finished," said Talbot, taking up his cap.

"My dear Talbot," murmured Skimpole. "I was going to explain my propeller to you after tea."

"Later on, old chap," said Talbot. "I'm going to take a turn in the quad."

"Oh, that's all right," said Skimpole. "I'll take a turn with you, my dear Talbot. I can talk while I walk."

"You can talk while you sleep, I think!" growled Gore. "For goodness' sake pass the jam, and shut up!"

Talbot hesitated. Skimpole had taken up his cap to accompany him in that little walk in the quad. The colour deepened in the handsome face of the Shell fellow. He had reasons for not wanting Skimmy's company just then, and equally good reasons for not wishing it to appear that he wanted to go out alone.

But Skimmy took his arm affectionately, and walked him out of the study. They descended the stairs together, and strolled out into the dusky quad. Skimpole was going at full tide, but Talbot heard hardly a word he said. They strolled under the old elms, swept clear of leaves by the keen winter wind.

"What is your opinion, my dear Talbot?" asked Skimpole.

"Eh?" ejaculated Talbot, coming out of a brown study, and realising that he had not heard a word that Skimpole had been saying.

"Would you place the crank as I have described, Talbot?"

"Oh—er—yes, certainly!"

"And where would you put the fly-wheel?" asked Skimpole.

That was a poser.

Eight o'clock rang out from the old clock-tower, and Talbot started.

"I am glad to see you so thoughtful, my

dear Talbot," went on Skimpole. "It shows that you take an intelligent interest in these scientific matters. But you have not yet told me where you would put the fly-wheel. What do you think?"

"I think it's time for prep," said Talbot. "Come on, Skimmy!"

He started for the School House at a run.

"My dear Talbot! I say, Talbot——"

But Talbot had already disappeared into the darkness.

Skimpole blinked after him in vain. In some annoyance, the genius of the Shell started for the School House to look for Talbot, and extract his unprejudiced opinion on the subject of that fly-wheel.

But Talbot was not in the School House.

As soon as he was out of sight of Skimpole, he had dodged round the elms, and from a safe distance he watched Skimpole enter the House. Then he turned away in the direction of the Head's garden.

He reached the little gate, and vaulted over it, and proceeded up the garden-path, thickly populated with fallen leaves, to a little summer-house, dank and dark in the evening.

He entered it quietly, and whispered:

"Marie! Are you here?"

There was no reply.

Talbot drew a deep breath, and waited.

He was not feeling comfortable. Anything of a surreptitious kind was foreign to his frank and candid nature. He had dodged the unsuspecting Skimpole, and had entered the Head's garden, which was out of bounds for juniors, to keep an appointment with Miss March, and it worried him a little.

There had been a good many smiles among the juniors about the great friendship between Talbot of the Shell and Miss March, the "Little Sister." When Talbot was free from lessons, and Miss March was free from her duties in the sanatorium, they were often seen speaking together. They had grown "chummy" quite quickly, and St. Jim's did not suspect that they were old acquaintances.

It worried Talbot.

He sat down on a seat in the dusky summer-house while he waited, his hands thrust into his pockets and a gloomy frown on his brow.

Was there never to be an end of deception?

he asked himself, miserably. Was he always to have a secret to keep?

He smiled bitterly as he thought of the change that had come over him. There had been a time, and not so very long ago, when a secret to keep—many secrets—had not troubled his mind. He had had dark secrets to keep in the days when he had been known as the Toff, when he was a member of the gang of cracksmen of which the Professor was now the chief.

It was not so very long ago, but sometimes it seemed to Talbot that centuries had passed since, so greatly was he changed.

He had won his pardon, he had faced a new life, he had won his way to honour and respect, and his black past was forgiven, if not forgotten—and, indeed, Talbot was so popular at St. Jim's that most of the fellows had already forgotten that he had ever been anything but what he now was—a frank and cheery schoolboy. In his early life everything had been against him. He had changed as soon as he had a chance. The past was dead and done with.

And so Tom Merry and Co., his chums, believed.

And so it was. But the grip of the past was not easily thrown off, and Talbot wondered bitterly what his loyal chums would think if they could have known, as he knew, that Miss March, the "Little Sister," the devoted nurse, was Marie Rivers, the daughter of the Professor, the cracksmen who had sought to rob the school.

He could not betray Marie—his childhood's chum.

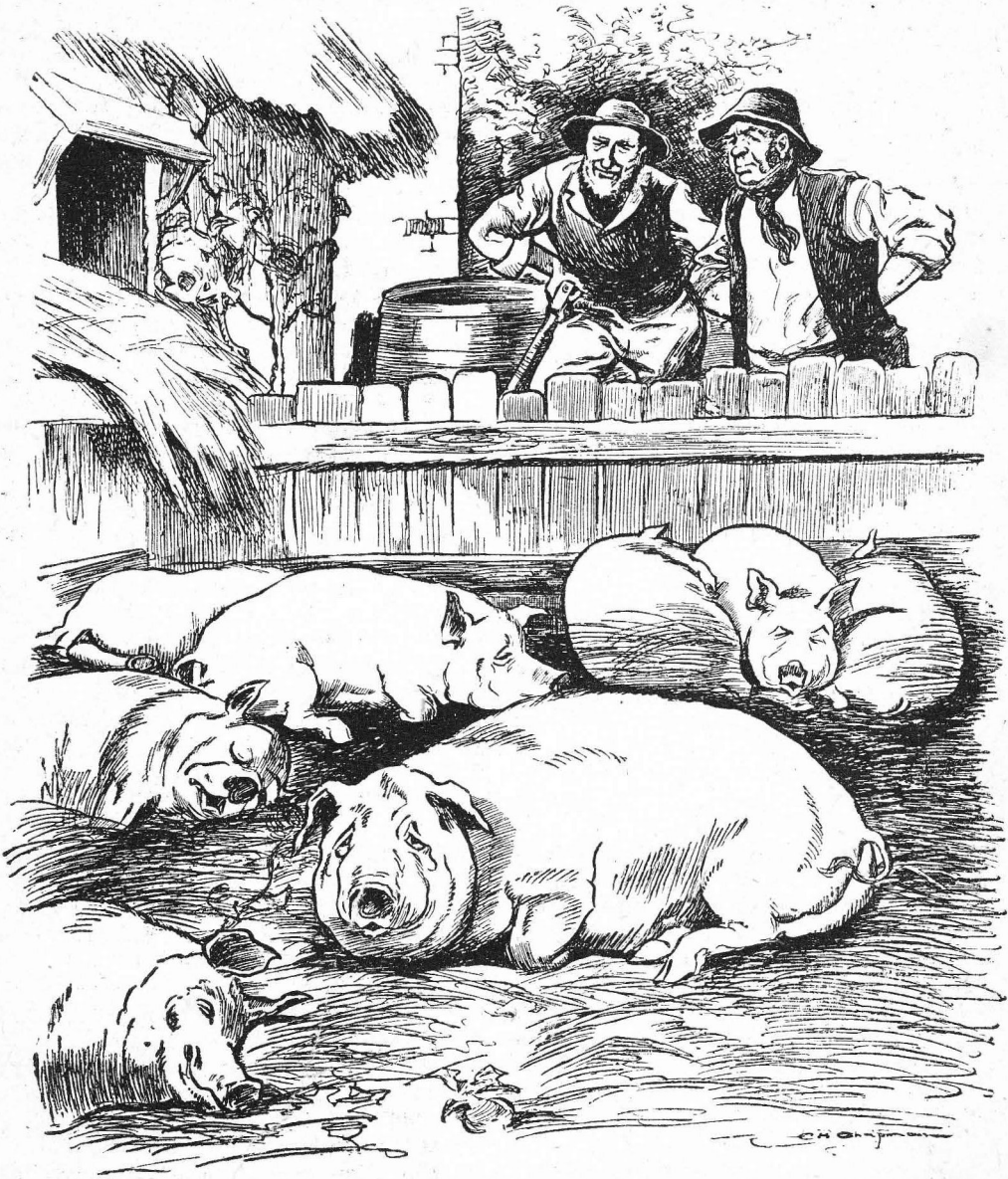
Did he wish her to leave St. Jim's, to leave him free from that constant reminding of his shadowed past?

He hardly knew.

He knew that it would be a blow to him if she went. But while she remained he was kept incessantly in mind that he was the Toff, the one-time cracksmen; and behind Marie, too, loomed the shadow of her father, the unscrupulous, scheming Professor, determined by hook or by crook to get Talbot back into the ranks of crime—a figure distant, unseen, but ever threatening.

How was it to end?

# A PIG PUZZLE!



CAN YOU FIND TWELVE PIGS IN THIS PICTURE?



There was a light step on the garden-path, and Talbot sprang to his feet.

"Toff!"

It was a soft whisper. Marie, in her nurse's dress with a silk muffler drawn about her graceful neck, stood before him.

## THE FOURTEENTH CHAPTER

### Marie's Warning

"MARIE!" said Talbot quietly.

The girl was breathless.

"I am sorry I am late, Toff. I was kept in the ward. But—but what is the matter?" She peered at the handsome, clouded face in the deep dusk. "You did not want to come?"

"I always want to see you, Marie," said Talbot quietly. "You know that, Marie. But why now—why here—why a secret meeting like this, my dear?"

"I had to see you, Toff. It is important, and I could not speak to you in the ward."

"But to-morrow——"

"To-morrow will be too late!"

Talbot looked at her anxiously. He had been deep in thought ever since he had visited the sanatorium that afternoon to see little Joe Frayne of the Third Form. Marie had whispered to him in passing that she must see him; she had told him to come to the summer-house at eight, when she would be free for a time. Talbot had been unable to reply.

He had come.

The secrecy of the meeting troubled his mind; but it was not only that. Marie had her reasons; it was not merely to speak to him on casual matters that she had told him to come. Every day, after morning lessons, they met in the quadrangle, and could speak freely. She had her reasons; and Talbot, with a heavy heart, thought of the Professor, that threatening, unseen figure he had striven to banish from his mind.

"I had to see you to-night, Toff."

"But why, Marie?"

"It was important——"

"You have heard from—him?"

"From my father—yes."

Talbot drew a deep breath, and his eyes gleamed in the dusk.

"Marie, I know you are loyal to your father, little as he deserves it. I don't ask you to be otherwise. But you have promised me, Marie, that never again will you allow his orders make you break the law. You have promised me that while you stay at this school, at least, you will not obey his wicked orders. You are going to keep that promise, Marie?"

The girl lifted her head proudly.

The cracksman's daughter, trained from childhood to assist in her father's lawless career, had come to St. Jim's with the full intention of helping John Rivers to carry out his plans—to tempt Talbot back to the old life that he had left, and the cunning Professor had counted upon her influence as upon a certainty. But in his cunning he had overreached himself. Talbot had not been tempted back to dishonesty; but his influence had implanted in the girl's mind a growing horror of her father's way of life. The result had been the reverse of what the Professor had calculated.

"You'll keep that promise, Marie?"

"I shall keep it, Toff. You know that."

"Yes, I know it, Marie. But—but, then, what is the trouble?"

"I had a letter from my father this afternoon." The girl's voice was unsteady. "He is angry—angry with me, because I—because I have kept my promise to you, Toff. I have not done what he has ordered. I will never desert him—that I have told him; but such orders as that I will never carry out again. But—but he is my father, Toff, and in his way he is fond of me."

Talbot sighed. Truly the position of the girl was as difficult as his own. Between her longing for the path of honour and honesty and her devotion to her worthless and unscrupulous father she was torn and troubled—and the end was still doubtful.

"But—but that isn't all, Toff. The Professor has come back."

Talbot started.

"He is not here?"

"Not here—no. The letter came from Abbotsford."

Talbot drew a breath of relief.

"That is a long way from here, Marie."

"But—but I am sure that it means harm to you," said Marie in a low voice. "The Professor has never given up the idea of getting you back, Toff. They have had evil days since you left them, and he will stop at nothing. They know now that you will not go willingly; they know I cannot and will not persuade you, and—and I fear——"

She broke off.

"What do you fear, Marie?"

"They will use force, Toff."

Talbot smiled slightly.

"How can they use force, Marie? They cannot kidnap me."

"But that is what I fear."

"Marie!"

"He is at Abbotsford," she whispered.

"You are going there to-morrow, Toff. He knows that, and I am convinced that that is why he is there. You must not go."

"But there is no danger; I shall be with the football team, Marie. There will be eleven of us," said Talbot reassuringly.

"You do not know how cunning he is. You must not go. He will have some trick of separating you from the others. Toff"—the girl's voice was agitated and broken—"you must not go! I shall be in fear for you all the time! Promise me you will not go!"

Talbot's face became very grave.

"But I must go, Marie. It is a special match. Tom Merry is hard put to it to make up a team at all, owing to so many fellows being in the sanatorium, and he would never forgive me if I failed him—for nothing, too! I could not explain it to him."

"You must not go!"

Woman-like, Marie came back to the point, oblivious to argument.

"But I must, Marie. What could I say to Tom Merry?"

"Anything! You must not go!"

"There will be no danger. Besides, I am not afraid."

"I am afraid," said the girl. "I am afraid, Toff. You will not make me miserable? You will not go?"

Talbot's handsome face clouded. It was difficult to refuse, and he knew how deep was the girl's concern for him. But to abandon

Tom Merry in a difficulty, without a reason to give for his conduct——

"Marie dear, I—I must go! There is no danger. I could not desert the fellows; they depend on me. And I cannot even tell Tom Merry about your father. I must go, dear!"

Marie's little hand closed on his arm with an almost convulsive grasp.

"You will not go?" Her voice was broken by a sob. "Toff, tell me that you will not go!"

"Marie," said Talbot wretchedly—"Marie, I——"

"Promise me!"

Dark as it was, he could see the tears that glistened on the soft, rounded cheeks. For a moment more he hesitated.

"Toff, I—I haven't asked anything else of you! Promise me that you will not go to Abbotsford to-morrow!"

"Very well, Marie, I—I will do the best I can," said Talbot heavily. "I cannot promise not to go; that's out of my hands. But—but I will resign my place in the eleven to-morrow and get Tom Merry to put another fellow in. If he does that, it won't be necessary for me to go."

"You will do that, Toff?" said Marie, with a breath of relief. "You will resign your place in the eleven? That's all I ask!"

"I will do that, Marie!"

"Thank you, Toff; my mind will be easy now! Thank you, and good-night!"

She pressed his hand and was gone.

Talbot, with knitted brows, made his way out of the Head's garden and returned to the School House. He had a difficult task before him.

## THE FIFTEENTH CHAPTER

### High Words!

"THAT'S settled!" said Tom Merry.

The Terrible Three had finished tea, and Tom Merry had been at work again on his troublesome task of finally settling the football eleven.

He had done it at last. With more than half the best junior players laid up, and most of the reserve players too, it had not been an

easy task. But the captain of the Shell had done the best he could.

Monty Lowther and Manners read over the list and nodded approval. It was the best that could be done. The list read :

Gore ; Lumley-Lumley, Reilly ; Kerruish, Thompson, Lowther ; Hammond, Talbot, Tom Merry, Blake, D'Arcy.

"I don't know what Gore will be like in goal," said Manners dubiously. "But as Wynn and Herries and Kangaroo and Dane and Glyn are all laid up, there doesn't seem to be much choice. The front line's good, anyway. Hammond will play up pretty well at outside-right."

"Have to keep on attacking," said Lowther. "The forwards are good."

"Yes, thank goodness, we're strong somewhere!" said Tom Merry. "Talbot will be a giddy tower of strength. We're jolly lucky to have him."

"Yes, that is a little bit of luck," agreed Lowther.

"And, luckily, he's at the top of his form, too," said Tom Merry. "Hallo! Come in!"

There was a tap at the door, and Talbot came in. The Terrible Three greeted him with genial looks.

"Just talking about you," said Manners.

Talbot laughed constrainedly.

"Something to my credit, I hope?"

"You bet!" said Tom Merry cheerily. "Congratulating ourselves on having you in the team to-morrow. Look at the list. What do you think of it?"

Talbot coloured painfully, and he hardly saw the list as he looked over it. He had come there to break it to Tom Merry that he could not play for St. Jim's on the morrow, and his greeting made it very difficult for him to begin.

"If you can suggest any improvements, out with it!" said Tom Merry. "Always open to suggestions, you know. I've had a valuable suggestion from Gussy. He thinks it would be a ripping idea to get Miss March to come over and see the match—just the idea that would flash into his mighty brain at a time like this! But what do you think?"

"The—the list seems all right," stammered

Talbot. "There's Levison of the Fourth, you know; he's been hard at practice, and he is coming on."

Tom Merry nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes, I must say that Levison is showing up unexpectedly well lately," he admitted. "He will be a good forward if he sticks to it. But you never know with a chap like Levison; he's too jolly uncertain, and, anyway, he hasn't been at the game long enough to be reliable. To give him what credit's due, though, I must say he is turning out very well lately. I hear he's even given up smoking. It's jolly queer that your influence should have all that effect on him!"

"My influence?" said Talbot, with a smile.

"Yes, yours! He was an arrant blackguard until you took him in hand, and you remember how he was up against you at first. Now he would back you up through thick and thin, I verily believe," said Tom Merry. "If he keeps on like this, I shall give him a chance in the team later on, certainly. Not in this match, though."

"The—the fact is——" said Talbot, and halted.

"Yes?" Tom Merry looked curiously at his flushed face. "What's the matter?"

"The fact is, I was going to recommend Levison to you," stammered Talbot.

"In whose place?" asked Tom Merry, taking the list again and looking at it. "Nothing to blush about, my son! I know you know the game from A to Z, and I'm jolly glad to have your advice. He wouldn't be any good in goal."

"No, not in goal."

"He's best in the forward line," said Tom. "But we've got a very good forward line. Hammond is all right on the wing—better than Levison, anyway. Which place were you thinking of for Levison, Talbot?"

"Mine," said Talbot, with an effort.

It was out at last. The three Shell fellows stared at him.

"Joking?" asked Monty Lowther.

"No; I mean——"

"Blessed if I know what you mean," said Tom Merry wonderingly. "Do you mean we could take him along as a reserve? No harm in that."



“No; I—I don’t mean as a reserve. The—the fact is, I—I want you to excuse me to-morrow,” said Talbot haltingly.

“Bow-wow!” said Monty Lowther.

“Oh, don’t be funny!” urged Manners. “What should you want to stand out of the match to-morrow for?”

“You’re jolly well not going to, whether you want to or not, Talbot,” said Tom Merry decisively. “We can’t possibly do without you. The team’s weak enough as it is. I was just congratulating myself on having you. Of course, you’ve got to play!”

“I can’t!” said Talbot.

Tom Merry knitted his brows. He had a great regard for Talbot—they were close chums; but this was a little too unreasonable. After all the trouble he had had in getting together an eleven that could uphold the colours of St. Jim’s it was a little too much for his best player to ask to stand out, for no apparent reason.

“Why can’t you?” Tom demanded.

“I—I want to stand out, if you don’t mind.”

“But I do mind!” exclaimed Tom Merry warmly. “What the dickens, Talbot! You can’t leave us in the lurch like that! What do you want to stand out for?”

Talbot’s colour deepened. Certainly he could not mention Marie Rivers, whom the juniors knew as Miss March, and still more certainly he could not mention the Professor, for if the Terrible Three had known that the cracksman was in Abbotsford, they would have taken instant measures to inform the police. It was not for Talbot to give Marie’s father into the clutches of the law.

The chums of the Shell regarded Talbot in amazement. They could see that he was distressed and agitated, but they could not imagine the reason.

Talbot did not speak. What was he to say? He had no explanation to give. There was a painful silence in the study.

Tom Merry broke it at last. His voice was not quite so good-tempered as usual.

“Will you tell us why you want to stand out of the team? If you’ve got any good reason, of course, that makes a difference!”

“I’d rather not play.”

“Rather not play!” said Monty Lowther hotly. “Is that a reason for leaving the team in the lurch, when we’ve got trouble enough on our hands already?”

“I—I’m sorry.”

“I should jolly well think you are sorry!” grunted Lowther. “If I were skipper of the team, and a player served me such a trick——”

Monty Lowther paused, remembering that he was talking to a chum; but he didn’t feel very chummy at that moment.

“Hold on, Monty,” said Tom Merry. “Talbot must have some reason. Get it out, Talbot—there’s nothing to be bashful about. Why don’t you want to go to Abbotsford? Don’t you feel fit?”

“It isn’t exactly that,” said Talbot.

“Then what is it? I suppose I’ve a right to know, as your footer captain?” exclaimed Tom Merry testily. “You said nothing about it before. I’ve consulted you a dozen times about making up the team. You leave it till nearly the last minute to spring it on me, and I’ve a right to know your reason!”

Tom Merry’s voice was rising a little, unconsciously, though he was doing his best to keep his temper.

“I—I don’t want you to misunderstand me,” said Talbot wretchedly. “I—I don’t want to come to Abbotsford to-morrow, that’s all.”

“Do you mean you won’t come?” demanded Tom Merry.

“No. I—I—I want to resign my place in the team, that’s all. But—but if you don’t consent, I—I must come!”

Tom Merry shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

“I don’t understand you,” he said. “Will you tell me why you don’t want to come, or won’t you?”

Talbot was silent.

“You know how we stand,” said Tom Merry angrily. “You know what sort of a team I’ve been able to get together, with half the fellows in the sanatorium. Do you think it’s acting like a sportsman to leave us in the lurch like this?”

“Talbot must have some reason,” said Manners quietly. “Don’t you feel up to it,

old man? You're not catching the flu, are you?"

Talbot shook his head.

"Well, why don't you speak?" said Tom. "You're going to play us this trick without giving a shadow of a reason. Why don't you answer?"

"I've got nothing to say," said Talbot. "I—I've said all I had to say. I'd rather you left me out to-morrow. But—but I'll come if you insist upon it!"

Tom Merry made an angry gesture.

"Oh, I don't insist upon it! You're not a slave, I suppose; and that's not the humour for a fellow to play in, anyway. If you don't want to come, don't. But I think it's rotten, and I say so plainly!"

Talbot nodded, and turned to the door.

The Terrible Three watched him grimly as he went out. They were in a bad humour, and they did not take the trouble to conceal it. The door closed behind Talbot.

"Well, my hat!" said Monty Lowther, with a low whistle. "That beats the band! What's come over old Talbot? This isn't like him at all!"

Tom Merry frowned angrily.

"I don't understand him!" he snapped. "I know that this is a beastly thing to do. I shall have to put in Levison, and the result

will very likely be a licking. To leave us in the lurch like this, when the fellows are all crooked! I never expected that of Talbot!"

"I—I suppose——" began Lowther slowly.

"You suppose what?" said Tom crossly.

"I suppose there's nothing"—Lowther hesitated—"nothing in it about—about Talbot's old connections? He hasn't been seeing any of his old friends—the Professor, or Hookey Walker, or the rest?"

"Not that I'm aware of. Hookey Walker's in prison, and the Professor is skulking some-

where, with the police after him. Besides, even if he'd heard from them, that could not have anything to do with a footer-match! You don't suggest that he's throwing us over to meet any of those rotters to-morrow?"

"Oh, no! He's given us his word

of honour about that kind of thing."

"They can't influence him. What would they care about a footer-match?" growled Tom Merry. "It can't be anything of that sort. He's got some idea in his head—perhaps some lot about giving Levison a chance. Blessed if I know what he's got in his head! He must have some reason, I should think, for playing us this trick. But I must say I don't like it. If it were any other fellow, I'd take jolly good care that he never played in the team again, after deserting us like this!



"What is this?" demanded Mr. Railton. "Merry! Gore! Cease this instantly! How dare you! What is all this about?" (See page 317.)

And even with Talbot——” Tom Merry paused. “Dash it all, let’s get on with the prep! I shall lose my temper if I talk about it any more!”

Monty Lowther grinned. He thought his chum was perilously near having lost his temper already. But he made no remark, and the chums of the Shell went on with their preparation glumly.

## THE SIXTEENTH CHAPTER

### Crocked !

ELEVEN juniors wheeled their bicycles out of the gates of St. Jim’s after dinner the next day. They had a good long ride before them; and it was a splendid afternoon, dry and sunny, and cold. A crowd of fellows came down to the gates to give them a send-off, but Talbot was not among them. Talbot was avoiding his comrades, to escape their comments and questions upon his inexplicable conduct.

Tom Merry and Co. rode away in cheerful spirits. Levison of the Fourth looked the most cheerful. He was unaffectedly glad of the chance that had come into his way; though he, too, was thinking a good deal about Talbot’s curious action.

The eleven had a long ride before them and there were no followers on this occasion. The eleven had gone off by themselves. The miles glided under the swift wheels, and Abbotsford drew near at last. The road was muddy, and the mud was cut up by frequent motor-cars, and the juniors were pretty well splashed by the time Abbotsford came in sight in the distance.

Zip, zip, zip!

It was another motor-car, which had been following the juniors at a moderate pace for some distance now. Now it had bucked up, and Tom Merry and Co. drew to the side of the road to let it pass. It was a small car, with a chauffeur completely unrecognisable in a cap with flaps and huge goggles. The hood of the car was down, but a glimpse could be had of a heavily bearded man sitting inside as it passed on in the direction of Abbotsford. The passenger looked out, scanning the juniors as he passed them, and Tom Merry glanced

carelessly at a thickly bearded face with a pair of large, gold-rimmed spectacles.

The car, which was painted grey, glided on ahead of the juniors. The road was narrow at this point, and at the sides it was thick with ridges of mud. Jack Blake, who was sprung out ahead of the party as they got out of the way, skidded upon a muddy rut, and just dragged his machine out of the way in time as the grey car buzzed on past him. There was a crash, and Blake and his machine were deposited by the roadside in a heap.

The grey car shot ahead, and then stopped. The cyclists halted, jumping off their machines, and Tom Merry and D’Arcy ran towards Blake. The Fourth-Former was sitting up beside his machine, his face very pale and contracted with pain.

“Hurt, old chap?” exclaimed Tom, anxiously.

Blake grunted.

“My beastly ankle! I caught it on the pedal! Ow!”

“Oh, what rotten luck! Let’s look at it.”

Blake pulled back his trouser-leg and pulled down his sock. The skin was growing blue, and he gave a yelp as Tom Merry touched his ankle.

“Yow!”

“It’s a sprain,” said Tom Merry, with knitted brow. “How utterly rotten!”

“Oh, I’m not really hurt!” growled Blake. “I sha’n’t be able to play, though—— Ow! Hang that rotten car!”

“Well, it wasn’t his fault,” said Tom. “You skidded.”

“I know that.”

Blake rose to his feet with difficulty. His ankle was hurt, and though the injury was not serious in itself, it was painful, and it made it quite out of the question for him to play in the football match.

Tom Merry set his lips. It was the last straw. The team had had a series of strokes of ill-luck already, and now one of the best of the eleven was disabled. It was the last straw, and the match was as good as gone.

The car had halted at a little distance, and the passenger inside alighted and came back towards the juniors. He wore a big fur overcoat, buttoned up, and a silk hat, and



his gold-rimmed glasses gleamed in the sunlight.

"Nothing serious, I hope?" he exclaimed.

"No," said Blake, a little snappishly.

"I am sorry you had a fall," said the old gentleman kindly. "Can I give you a lift into the town?"

"Thank you, sir!" said Blake, a little more graciously. "I can't ride that's a cert! One of you fellows can wheel my bike!"

"And what about the match?" muttered Lowther. "Are we going to play Abbotsford a man short? That will be the giddy finish!"

Tom Merry made an impatient gesture.

"Talbot will have to come, after all," he said.

"Talbot! But——"

"Too late!" said Thompson.

"It isn't too late. We can ask the Abbotsford chaps to leave kick-off a little later, and get Talbot here."

"But how?"

"A wire from the post-office in Abbotsford," said Tom Merry curtly. "He will get it almost at once, and he will come. I won't give him any choice about the matter. I'll simply wire that he's to come."

"Oh, that's all wight," said Arthur Augustus. "He's bound to come. Talbot won't leave us in the lurch, even if he has to put off takin' a little walk with a weally charmin' young lady."

"If that's his reason for keeping out, serve him right if he's disappointed!" growled Blake. "It's a good idea, Tommy, and it's the only thing to be done. Help me into the car. My ankle won't stand the strain."

"Heah you are, deah boy."

Blake was helped into the grey car, and the bearded motorist followed him in. The grey car glided on towards Abbotsford, and the ten cyclists remounted their machines and followed it. Tom Merry rode with a grim brow. There was no real reason, so far as he could see, why Talbot shouldn't play; and if there was a reason, Talbot should have explained it. As he had given no reason, his captain was fully entitled to call upon his services, especially as it was now the only possible alternative to defeat.

The grey car stopped outside the big post-office in Abbotsford High Street, and the team dismounted there from their bikes. Blake was helped out of the car. But the chauffeur did not drive on. The bearded, spectacled old gentleman apparently had business in the post-office as well as Tom Merry. He followed the St. Jim's junior in, and as Tom Merry stopped at the telegraph-desk the spectacled gentleman stopped at the next desk, and also took a slip of paper and a pen.

Tom Merry wrote out his telegram to Talbot. He made no effort to conceal what he was writing. It did not occur to him to do so. There was no reason why he should suppose that the obliging motorist at the next desk was interested in his telegram.

"Talbot, School House, St. Jim's.—Blake crooked. Man short. Come at once. Waiting for kick-off till you arrive Abbotsford."

"TOM MERRY."

And that peremptory message was promptly ticked off.

## THE SEVENTEENTH CHAPTER

### Man Short!

TOM MERRY came out of the post-office and rejoined his chums. The juniors were standing in a group, with their bicycles, near the grey car.

Jack Blake was standing on one leg, leaning on the shoulder of his sympathetic chum, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. He was suffering a good deal of pain, though he was bearing it quietly. He was not a fellow to make a fuss.

"Sent the telegwam, deah boy?"

"Yes," said Tom.

"It's all wight; he'll come."

"He's a good cyclist. He'll scorch for all he's worth, and he won't keep us waiting long," said Levison. "We're early, anyway."

Tom Merry nodded.

"Yes, we're early," he agreed. "What are you going to do, Blake? You can't stay and watch the match, I suppose? You'd better get home."

Blake made a grimace.

"I'd better get back, I suppose," he said. "Though I'm blessed if I know how."

"You can get taxi-cabs heah, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "That will be all wight. You can have your jiggah put on top."

"Frightful big bill, here to St. Jim's."

"Oh, wats! I've got plenty of tin. You can't go by twain with that foot!"

"Well, I suppose it will have to be a taxi," groaned Blake. "The blessed thing hurts like anything. If I pass Talbot on the road I'll hurry him up."

"He'll take the short cuts," said Tom Merry. "Let's find a taxi first, and then get on to the school."

Jack Blake was soon bestowed in a taxi-car, his machine being mounted on top. He started off on the return journey, and Tom Merry and Co. remounted their machines and rode on towards Abbotsford School. The grey car was still outside the post-office, the chauffeur sitting idle in his seat.

But when the juniors were out of sight, the long-bearded, spectacled old gentleman came out, spoke a few words to the chauffeur, and stepped into the car, and it swung round in the road. Apparently the old gentleman's business in Abbotsford was finished, for the grey car hummed off back the way it had come—and once out of the town the chauffeur "let her go" at a tearing speed in the direction of St. Jim's.

Thinking of anything but the grey car, Tom Merry and Co. arrived at Abbotsford School, which was on the outskirts of the town.

Yorke, the junior captain of Abbotsford, gave them a warm greeting, but he looked rather surprised at finding only ten of them.

"Man short?" he asked, as he shook hands with Tom Merry.

"Accident on the road," Tom explained. "We've wired for another man. If he's a bit late——"

"Oh, we'll wait!" said Yorke cheerily. "You're early, anyway. And we can put off the kick-off for a bit. Anything you like, so long as we have time to finish before dark."

"Thanks!" said Tom.

The St. Jim's juniors changed in the Abbotsford dressing-room, and then waited, lounging about, or punting a ball to pass the time.

What ever haste Talbot made on receipt of

the telegram, it would be some time before he could reach Abbotsford, and his comrades had to wait with what patience they could muster.

It had been arranged that Levison was to take Blake's place, and Talbot would have his old place of inside-right. If he came in time to play, the St. Jim's team would not be the worse off for Blake's accident. And surely he would come in time. What ever might be his motive for cutting the match, he could not possibly disregard that urgent telegram from his captain.

"Cheero!" said Monty Lowther, as he noted the cloud on Tom Merry's brow. "Talbot will come all right."

"He couldn't be here yet," said Levison, looking at his watch. "Give him a chance, you know. You don't think it's possible he won't come, surely?"

"Oh, I suppose he's bound to come!" said Tom uneasily.

"Yaas wathah! Quite certain, deah boy!"

"And he knows all the short cuts, and he's a ripping cyclist!" said Lumley-Lumley. "I guess he'll turn up pretty soon."

Yorke came over towards the St. Jim's fellows.

"Your man coming along?" he remarked.

Tom Merry looked at his watch.

"Well, I suppose it's pretty nearly time he was here," he remarked.

"I don't want to hurry you, of course, but it gets dark pretty early at this time of the year, you know. We want to finish."

"Make it another quarter of an hour, and if he's not here we'll begin, anyway."

"Right-ho!"

"That'll be the limit," said Lowther. "We can't play after dark. I suppose Talbot wouldn't be ass enough to come by the road. He knows the short cuts."

"Oh, he'll turn up in a few minutes!" said Reilly.

A few minutes passed, but Talbot did not turn up. More minutes ticked away, and the quarter of an hour was up. Talbot had not appeared.

Tom Merry's brow grew very dark.

Even had Talbot gone by the high road, and had not taken advantage of the short

cuts, he should have been at Abbotsford by this time.

What was delaying him ?

He must have received the telegram, and he must know how urgent it was. Yet he had not come.

"Accident on the road perhaps," hazarded Lumley-Lumley. "Those short cuts are a bit thick just now, I guess."

"Oh, rot! Two accidents don't happen in the same afternoon!" said Tom Merry irritably. "He hasn't had any accident!"

"Then why don't he come?"

"Might have been some delay getting the telegram, or—or—I don't know. Anyway, we've got to play; we can't keep those chaps waiting any longer. There isn't too much time to finish before dark, as it is."

"Play a man short then," said Kerruish.

"No choice about it."

Yorke and his men were showing some signs of impatience, in spite of their politeness.

Tom Merry hurried over to the Abbotsford captain, who was idly punting a ball.

"We're ready!" he called out.

"Wait a bit longer, if you like," said Yorke.

"No good; it'll be too dark to finish if we do. When my man comes, he can come straight on the field."

"Right you are!"

The teams went into the field and lined up. The kick-off fell to the visitors, and the game was soon going fast and furious. With a man short in their ranks the St. Jim's fellows devoted themselves to defence. They missed Talbot sorely, and they missed Jack Blake, Levison was doing unexpectedly well in the front line, but he did not make up for what was missing.

Tom Merry did not give up hope, however.

When Talbot arrived he would come into the game, and that would make all the difference in the world. If he did not come, of course the match was lost. With a full team, such as it was, the Saints would not have very brilliant prospects. With a man short, they were booked for a thorough licking.

"But he was bound to come," Tom Merry told himself almost savagely. Never had he felt so angry with his chum. It was really

too bad of Talbot, and Tom Merry could find no excuse for him.

With the odds against them, as they were, the Saints would not have done so badly if Fatty Wynn had been in his old place at goal. Gore was doing his best there, but he was not a patch on the Welsh junior. The Abbotsford fellows attacked hotly, too, and when they got through Gore was not quite equal to the demands made upon him. The ball went into the net—and went in again!

Still Talbot did not appear.

Tom Merry packed his goal, and the Saints defended hard, and till the whistle went for half-time no more goals were taken. But at the interval Abbotsford were two up, and the Saints had nothing to show. They came off the field for a rest, looking far from cheerful. If Talbot did not come, the second half was pretty certain to be a repetition of the first, and St. Jim's would go home with a record licking—without even breaking their duck.

Why had Talbot not come?

He had had ample time now, if he had taken the longest route, and if he had had even a puncture. There was no reason to be imagined why he should not have come.

Tom Merry looked anxiously towards the gates for a sign of him as the teams went into the field for the second half, but he was not to be seen, and Tom had to resign himself to the certainty that he would not come. And the ten St. Jim's players lined up once more, determined to do their best, but with the certain prospect of a licking before them, and their feelings towards Talbot were not pleasant.

## THE EIGHTEENTH CHAPTER

### Taken by Force!

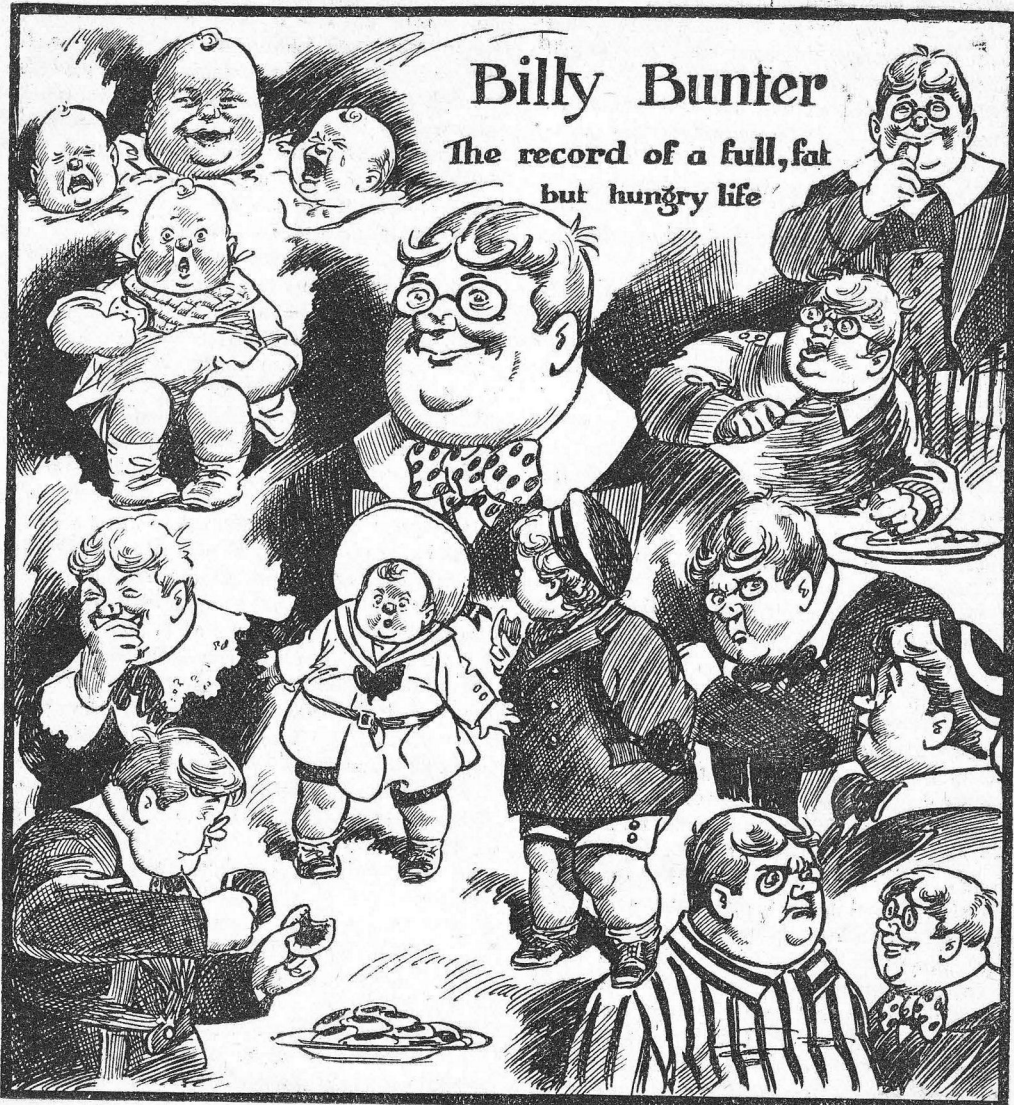
"TELEGRAM for you, Master Talbot!"

Toby, the page of the School-house, brought it into Talbot's study.

Talbot was alone there. He had done as Marie asked him—he had given up the match. He was disappointed, but his own disappointment did not trouble him so much as that of his chums. He could not help feeling that he had fallen in their opinion by his unexplained desertion.



# A FAMOUS FAT FELLOW IN FIFTEEN PHASES!



Our friend William George Bunter, commonly known as "the Owl" in the Remove Form at Greyfriars, is here depicted by Mr. C. H. Chapman in various stages of podginess. Judging by these pictures, Billy Bunter has never suffered from under-feeding!

He had resolved to pass the afternoon in studying hard ; it was the best way to keep depressing thoughts out of his mind.

After the departure of the team he had seen Marie for a few minutes in the Head's garden, and the girl had been much relieved to be assured that he had not gone to Abbotsford. Marie was on duty again now in the sanatorium, and Talbot was "swotting" at Latin when Toby brought in the telegram.

"Thank you, Toby !"

Talbot opened the telegram in some wonder. There was nobody, as far as he knew, that was likely to send him a wire, unless it was some new attempt of the Professor to trouble him.

He started as he read Tom Merry's message.

"Tom Merry, by Jove !"

"Any answer, sir ?" asked Toby.

"No, Talbot."

The page departed, and Talbot stood for some moments in thought, with the telegram in his hand.

He had to go, of course.

He had told Marie that he would resign his place in the team and stay behind, but that he must go if Tom Merry insisted.

The telegram from Tom Merry was insistent enough.

He had to go. He wondered for a moment whether he should tell Marie. But the girl was on duty in the ward ; it would not be easy to see her. And Talbot, remembering her agitation the previous evening, decided very quickly that it was better not to tell her. He had to go ; and it was useless to cause the girl worry and alarm, unfounded as her apprehensions were. She need know nothing of it till he came back with the St. Jim's team.

A minute was enough for Talbot to think that out. Then he rushed away to the bike-shed to get out his machine. To fasten his football things into a bag and on his machine was the work of a few moments.

He wheeled the machine out of the school gates, and mounted and started off in high spirits.

He had to go, and Marie could hardly blame him afterwards for having obeyed the direct order of his captain. And he was glad to go. A football match was better than grinding

Latin in his study. And it would make matters right with the fellows who were hurt and offended by his unaccountable refusal to play. Once he was at Abbotsford he would pile in and play the game of his life, and everything would be ripping. Talbot's heart was light as he pedalled away.

He simply flew along the road. He passed Rylcombe, and sped on along the high road, and then turned into a short cut that saved him a couple of miles. He came out on the high road again, and a few minutes later drew aside to let a taxi-cab pass. A hand was waved to him from the window of the cab.

"Put it on, old son !"

Talbot recognised Jack Blake.

There was no time to stop, but Talbot smiled and waved his hand. The cyclist shot on past the taxicab, and Blake proceeded on his way to St. Jim's much comforted in mind.

Talbot rode hard.

He had to follow the winding high-road for a couple of miles, and then there was another short cut that lessened the wide loop of the road. But before he reached the turning a grey car came into view.

The motor-car had been proceeding at a snail's pace. Talbot did not know it, of course, but the car had been crawling up and down that section of the road for a considerable time that afternoon. The spectacled motorist might have been supposed to have plenty of time on his hands, from the conduct of his chauffeur.

At the sight of Talbot scorching on his machine the chauffeur "bucked up," and came rushing along directly in the cyclist's path.

Talbot swerved to avoid the car, but the car swerved, too, looping across the road as if the driver were intoxicated and reckless.

Talbot slacked down and jumped off his machine. He was exasperated at wasting a minute, but concluding that the motor-driver was drunk, it was the only way of avoiding a collision.

The chauffeur jammed on his brakes, and the car halted within a few yards of the cyclist.

Talbot wheeled his machine out into the

road angrily, to re-mount and ride on past the halted car.

But as he did so the door of the car opened, and the bearded, spectacled motorist jumped out, and at the same moment the chauffeur left his seat.

Talbot had to stop, as both of them had jumped directly in his way.

"What the dickens——" began Talbot.

Then he almost staggered.

In spite of the beard, in spite of the big glasses, he knew the face of the motorist, even if his actions had not betrayed him.

The Professor!

"Well met!" said John Rivers, with a chuckle.

"Don't try to stop me," said Talbot, between his teeth. "I have nothing to say to you, John Rivers, and I have not a moment to spare. Get out of the way!"

"Not a moment?" asked the disguised cracksman sarcastically.

"Not an instant!" exclaimed Talbot angrily. "Let me pass!"

The Professor cast a quick glance up and down the road. He had chosen that spot because it was lonely, and because he knew that a cyclist coming from St. Jim's could not avoid passing there. Talbot jerked his machine aside to pass, and as he did so the two men rushed at him.

Then the junior understood.

It was not an appeal from his old confederate that he had to listen to this time; it was not the Professor's intention to urge him to return to his old haunts. John Rivers had learned that that was useless. Marie's misgivings had not been unfounded, after all; the rascals meant violence. But Talbot was not an easy fellow to handle.

He let the machine slide, and put up his hands instantly as the two scoundrels closed upon him. The chauffeur, powerful man as he was, reeled back from the heavy drive on the chest, and pitched against the car. But even as he reeled away the Professor was upon the boy. He had torn away his glasses, and it was well for him, for Talbot's left crashed full in his face. Heedless of the blow, the cracksman grasped the junior in a savage grip.

"Quick, Nobbler!" he panted.

Talbot struggled fiercely with the Professor.

He was a boy against a man, but he would have freed himself in a few moments had he had only the cracksman to deal with.

But the chauffeur was quick to recover himself, and he rushed at the schoolboy again and grasped him savagely.

Talbot fought hard in the grasp of the rascals. He was strong, he was active, and he had unbounded pluck and determination. And as he fought for his liberty he shouted for help.

"Hold him!" panted the Professor.

The cracksman dragged a leather bag from his pocket as Talbot struggled with the chauffeur. He opened the bag, and a strange, sickly scent came to Talbot's nostrils. Before he could release himself from the chauffeur the Professor was upon him again, and a cloth saturated with chloroform was pressed over his face.

The boy still struggled feebly, but he was firmly held, and the cloth was kept tight on his face. In a minute more he lay helpless in the grasp of the kidnappers.

"Hang him! He gave us enough trouble!" snarled the Professor. "Into the car with him, quick! There's a waggon on the road."

The insensible junior was lifted quickly into the car. Down the road a farm waggon had appeared in sight, jogging on towards the scene of the kidnapping, with the driver half asleep.

Talbot was lifted into the car, and a big coat wrapped round him. Nobbler lifted the bicycle to the roof of the car.

The waggoner came along and glanced at them carelessly. He noted nothing but a boy huddled up, apparently fast asleep in a corner of the car. The waggon passed.

"Close shave!" said the Professor, clicking his teeth. "But a miss is as good as a mile. We've got him at last. Get off, sharp!"

The Professor stepped into the car. Nobbler gave a doubtful look at the junior.

"He won't come to!" he muttered.

The Professor laughed savagely.



"If he does, I shall give him a second dose. Get off!"

"Home?" asked the chauffeur.

"Yes; London, and let her go!"

"Right!"

The chauffeur took the wheel again, and the car started. Talbot, overcome by the drug, scarcely breathing, motionless and inert, lay huddled in the car, as it hummed and roared along the roads. The Professor's eyes gleamed with triumph. The Toff was in the hands of his old confederates at last. Talbot, of St. Jim's, had disappeared, and the Toff had come to life again.

## THE NINETEENTH CHAPTER

### A Surprise!

"BEATEN to the wide!"

"Rotten!"

"Hard cheese, deah boys!"

Tom Merry and Co. came off the football field at Abbotsford in black humour.

The match had ended, as it could only possibly have ended, with a scratch team and a man short, against keen and determined opponents.

Talbot had not come. If he had arrived even in the second half, the fortune of war might have changed. But he had not come.

St. Jim's had been beaten to the wide. They had played up gallantly, and done their best. Tom Merry had succeeded in putting the ball in, in spite of the odds. St. Jim's had scored a single goal. But Abbotsford had taken three in the second half, in spite of the Saint's efforts.

Five goals to one!

It was a crushing defeat. Seldom or never, had five goals been scored against Tom Merry's eleven in a footer match.

They put the best face on they could before the Abbotsford fellows. It was no good looking glum after a licking. If it had been a fair licking after a fair fight they would not have minded. But they had lost because their man hadn't come, because their player had left them in the lurch. That was where the bitterness came in. They changed, and mounted their bikes in the winter dusk for the ride home to St. Jim's.

Tom Merry was silent. He was feeling morose enough; he could imagine no reason why Talbot had failed him in this way. But the other fellows made remarks pretty freely. Talbot had left them in the lurch—it was a rotten trick—and they had plenty of things to say to Talbot when they got back to St. Jim's. They said some of them en route by way of relieving their feelings.

At any other time nothing was more certain to rouse Tom Merry's ire than a slighting remark concerning Talbot. In the Toff's earlier days at the school his chums had come down very heavily on mean fellows who had been inclined to bring up Talbot's past against him. Tom Merry and Co. had ragged Cutts of the Fifth for that offence. They had given Levison a very rough time for the same reason. But now, Tom Merry had not a word to say in defence of his chum. There was nothing to be said. Talbot, knowing how they were placed, had chosen to leave them in the lurch.

"Oh, I'll talk to him when we get in," said Thompson of the Shell savagely. "A New House chap wouldn't have left us in the lurch like this."

Thompson belonged to the New House.

"Oh, rats!" said Lowther crossly.

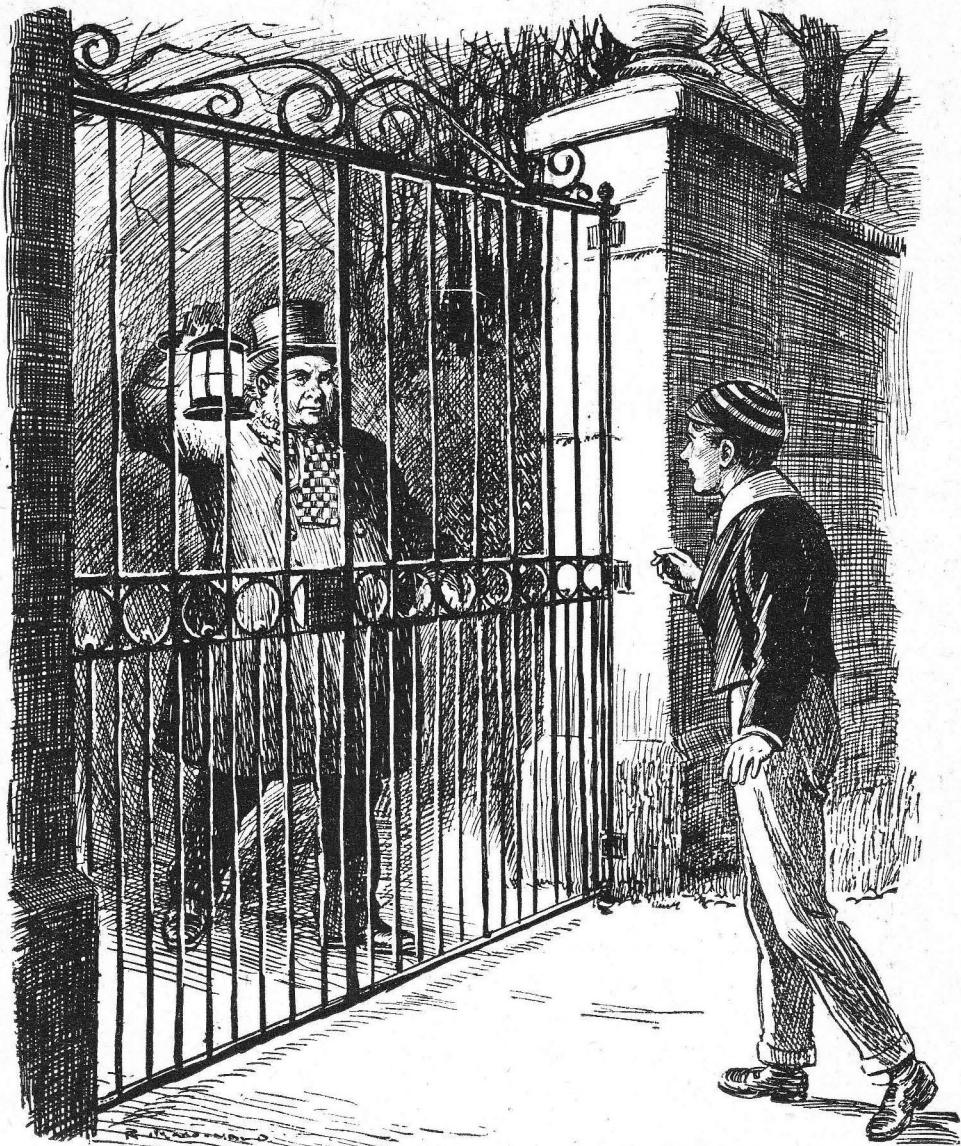
"There were New House chaps who would have played, too!" growled Thompson. "But, of course, you had to pick a School House fellow, who goes and leaves you in the lurch! Poof!"

"Weally, Thompson——"

"It's no good talking," said Tom Merry savagely. "Talbot must be able to give some explanation of this. If he can't, he's out of the team for good—both for School and House matches. I'll never play him again unless he gives some jolly good explanation."

"What explanation can he give?" snorted Gore. "I suppose the telegraph hasn't broken down, has it? And you don't suggest that he broke his neck riding over? Rot! He didn't come because he wouldn't come. Five goals to one! My hat! Why, the blessed fags in the Second Form will be grinning at us! I've hardly got the cheek to show my face at St. Jim's at all."

"It's pretty rotten," said Levison. "But don't be down on a fellow till you know how



Taggles came down to the gates, lantern in hand. He almost dropped the lantern as he peered through the bars of the gate and made out Talbot's face. (See page 320.)

matters stand. Give him a chance, anyway."

Gore gave another emphatic snort.

"Rot! What are you backing up the fellow for? You used to be more down on him than anybody else. I never believed in

being down on him because of his past. Nobody can say I've ever chucked that up against him. But I'm down on him now. I think he's acted like a cad!"

"Rotten cad!" said Thompson.

"I guess it does look rotten!" said Lumley-Lumley. "Still, as Levison says, give him a chance to explain."

"Br-r-r-r!" said Gore. "After all, you can't expect much from a fellow who's been a cracksman and a blessed thief, when you come to think of it."

"Let that drop, Gore," said Tom Merry sharply. "That's got nothing to do with this, anyway."

"How do you know?" snarled Gore. Gore was excited and very bad-tempered just now. There had been some unpleasant remarks on the subject of his goal-keeping, which certainly had not been very successful. That match had been a great chance for Gore, but he had not shone. "How do you know, I say? Why didn't he come in the first place? And why didn't he come when you wired? What reason has he got for wanting to keep by himself all the afternoon? Look's to me as if there's something on. Looks to me jolly suspicious."

"Oh, draw it mild!" murmured Reilly.

"Well, that's what I think, and I say what I think!" growled Gore.

"And now you've said what you think, shut up, or I'll have you off that bike and mop up the road with you!" said Tom Merry savagely.

Gore grunted and let the subject drop. In far from a cheerful humour the juniors finished the ride home, and arrived at St. Jim's tired and dispirited and out of humour. They put up their bicycles, and hurried into the School House to look for Talbot. Jack Blake, limping a little, met them as they came in.

"Hallo! How did it go?" he asked eagerly.

"Wotten, deah boy!"

"Licked?" asked Blake, his face falling.

"Licked to the wide—five goals to one!" growled Gore. "Pretty record for St. Jim's junior eleven—what!"

"My only hat!" said Blake, in dismay. "Five goals to one! Don't tell everybody, for goodness' sake! What was the matter with you?"

"Scratch team, and man short!" growled Lowther. "What could you expect?"

"Man short?"

"Yes, ass!"

"But—but why?" exclaimed Blake. "Where's Talbot? Hasn't he come back with you?"

"Talbot! He didn't come!"

"Didn't come!" howled Blake with a jump. And then he howled again as he got a twinge in his damaged ankle. "Didn't come! Talbot didn't come! Ow! Why?"

"That's what we're going to find out," said Tom Merry grimly. "Where is he? Have you seen him?"

"Yaas, where is the boundah, deah boy?"

"Seen him?" said Blake dazedly. "Yes, I've seen him. I passed him on the road as I came home in the taxi. Why didn't he come?"

"You passed him on the road?" yelled Lowther.

"Yes."

"Going to Abbotsford?"

"Of course. Where the deuce would he be going?" demanded Blake. "It was about five miles out of Abbotsford, and he was scorching like thunder. I gave him a yell, and he didn't stop to answer, but he saw me. Do you mean to say that he didn't arrive at Abbotsford?"

"Wathah not!"

"Well, my hat!"

The footballers stood dumbfounded. This was an unexpected light on the matter. They had come in prepared to rag Talbot bald-headed for having failed to respond to the telegram. But it was evident that he had responded if Blake had passed him on the road to Abbotsford. What did it mean?

"You're—you're sure it was Talbot you passed, Blake?" exclaimed Tom Merry, bewildered.

Blake sniffed.

"Don't I know him, fathead? Of course it was Talbot! I yelled to him, and he waved his hand and he kept on without stopping, going like old billyho—ahem—like thunder!"

"Going towards Abbotsford?"

"Yes, I keep telling you!"

"B-b-but he didn't arrive there!"

"But he must have arrived!" exclaimed



Blake. "Why shouldn't he arrive? What was there to stop him?"

"Bai Jove! There's been some feaful accident!" said Arthur Augustus soberly. "I was suah all the time that Talbot would not leave us in the lurch. You fellahs will wemembah I said so all along."

"I don't remember!" snapped Gore.  
"Weally, Goah!"

Tom Merry knitted his brows in troubled thought. All his resentment had vanished now. What ever had been Talbot's reason for standing out of the match in the first place, he had loyally come to his comrades' help when he received Tom's urgent message. That was clear now. But what had become of him? He had passed Blake on the Abbotsford road, and then he had vanished seemingly into thin air. Certainly he had never arrived at Abbotsford.

"An accident, of course," said Lowther uneasily. "I was afraid there might have been an accident all the time. Poor old Talbot! I say, Tom, we'd better go and tell Railton at once."

Tom Merry had turned his steps in the direction of the House master's study.

## THE TWENTIETH CHAPTER

### Dark Suspicions

MR. RAILTON received the captain of the Shell with a genial smile.

"How did the match go, my boy?" he asked pleasantly. The School House master always took a keen interest in the junior matches.

"We were beaten, sir," said Tom. "But that doesn't matter. I'm afraid something has happened to Talbot."

Mr. Railton looked grave at once.

"Talbot! Was he not with you?"

"No, sir," Tom Merry explained.

The House master listened to him in surprise. He did not speak a word, however, until the junior had finished.

"That is very extraordinary!" he exclaimed at last. "If there has been a serious accident, surely word would have reached us by this time? However seriously injured, Talbot would have told where he lived, and we should have been communicated with."

Tom Merry faltered.

"I know, sir. That makes me think— makes me fear——"

"Don't think of such a thing, Merry. A fatal accident is extremely unlikely to have occurred. Of course, a road frequented by motor-cars——" said Mr. Railton slowly.

"But even so, word would have reached us before this. Talbot would have had something on him to show his identity. His cap would be known by its badge. Then there is the telephone. Certainly, who ever found him would have telephoned at once. It is extraordinary. However, inquiry must be made, of course. I will see the Head at once."

Mr. Railton hurried away to the Head without losing a moment.

Tom Merry rejoined his chums.

The juniors had come home hungry, but the Terrible Three, at least, had little appetite for tea. Manners had tea ready in the study, and they sat down to it in a lugubrious mood.

Where was Talbot? He had not arrived at Abbotsford, and he had not come back to St. Jim's. What had happened to him?

An accident was the only possible theory; yet how was it that the news of the accident had not reached the school? Hours had passed since it must have happened, if it had happened at all; and Talbot, even if, in the worst possible case, he had been killed outright, would be known at once as a St. Jim's fellow. Word would be sent to the school as soon as possible—and hours had passed.

Blake and Digby and D'Arcy came into the study after tea. They were all looking very glum.

"No news yet?" said Blake. "I say, you chaps, this is beastly! I'm worried about poor old Talbot!"

"Same here!" said Manners.

"Yaas, I wathah think we're all wowwied," said Arthur Augustus. "It is weally a most extwaordinawy happenin'. I have just been talkin' to Toby. He says he took the telegwam to Talbot, and he left at once. Some of the wottahs are sayin' that pewwaps he has gone off on his own; but, you see, it's quite cleah that he went as soon as he weceived the telegwam, and not befoah. And the books

are in his study just as he left them; the Latin gwammah open."

"And I passed him on the road," said Blake for the twentieth time. "He must have been going to Abbotsford. He was going in that direction, top speed."

"There's no doubt that he was going to Abbotsford," said Tom Merry miserably. "But he never got there. A motor-car, perhaps——"

He stopped.

"But then they would have 'phoned up," said Blake, "or sent a messenger, or something. Even if a motor knocked him down, and didn't stop, somebody would have found him on the road."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I simply can't make it out," said Tom. "It beats me. I only hope that he comes back safe and sound, that's all."

All the fellows waited anxiously for news that evening. Gore and some of the others muttered a suspicion that he hadn't had an accident, but had gone off "on his own." If there had been an accident somebody would have heard of it.

Crooke of the Shell remarked that he had suspected something of the sort all along. Mellish of the Fourth fully agreed with him. But as yet the possibility of a tragic accident kept those remarks to furtive muttering. If there was no news later on, they would be heard more openly, and from other fellows besides Gore and Co. There was no doubt about that.

And no news came.

The Head, it was known, had telephoned to Rylcombe and Wayland, asking for news. No news of the accident was known there. Nothing at the police-station. Nothing at the cottage hospital. Nothing at the doctor's. It seemed as if the missing junior had vanished into space.

Bedtime came and the juniors went to their dormitories, most of them in a very hushed and subdued mood.

It was late that night before Tom Merry slept.

He was awake and down before rising-bell in the morning. Mr. Railton was already down, but in response to Tom Merry's anxious

inquiry for news, the Housemaster shook his head.

"Not a word, sir?" asked Tom.

"Nothing."

"But—but there must have been an accident, sir."

"It does not seem possible, Merry," said the Housemaster quietly. "News would have reached us before this. We have been in communication with the police at Rylcombe, Wayland, and Abbotsford, and with the hospitals. Nothing has been heard or seen of Talbot. No accident has been known to have happened, even to an unknown person."

Tom Merry looked and felt utterly wretched. He thought he could read behind the Housemaster's frowning face.

"Merry," went on Mr. Railton very quietly, "you have been, I believe, Talbot's closest friend here?"

"Yes, sir," said Tom.

"Has he ever said anything, or dropped any hint concerning an intention of leaving the school?"

"Never, sir."

"Has he ever said anything to lead you to suppose that he was in communication with his former acquaintances?"

Tom Merry flushed. He had guessed that was what was coming.

"I know that he has not, sir. I know that he has thrown them over. I think that he has proved that when he gave away that rascal who calls himself the Professor, and who came here calling himself Mr. Packington."

"Quite true, Merry," said the Housemaster, with a nod. "Heaven forbid that I should suspect him without proof! Yet it is scarcely possible to believe that an accident has happened. The facts simply are that he left the school of his own accord, and has not returned. Have you any knowledge, any reason to suppose that his former acquaintances were making any effort to cause him to rejoin them?"

Tom Merry's cheeks crimsoned again.

"Come, Merry!" said Mr. Railton sharply. "I see you are aware of something. At this moment it is your duty to tell me anything you know."

"I suppose I ought to, sir. But it's very

little. Talbot told me last week that he was afraid the Professor had not done with him, and he would try to cause him some harm. He said that he feared the villain would come back. But after that he seemed to be as cheerful as ever, so I concluded that it was all right."

"He was afraid the man would come back!" repeated Mr. Railton. "But this man who was known here as Mr. Packington, and whose real name seems to have been Rivers, could not come back here without being arrested, Merry."

"I suppose he would not have come openly, sir," said Tom. "I had an idea that he would skulk about the neighbourhood secretly, and that Talbot was afraid of hearing from him. He thought the man was still making plans to get him back."

Mr. Railton knitted his brows thoughtfully.

"But Talbot had only to refuse to have anything to do with him, and to denounce him to the police, as he did before. He was under no obligation to treat the man with respect or consideration. If he has reappeared, and Talbot has gone with him, it must have been of his own accord."

"I—I've been thinking, sir, that poor old Talbot may have been collared by those rascals," said Tom diffidently.

The Housemaster started.

"Kidnapped, do you mean?"

"Isn't it possible, sir?"

"It is possible, I suppose," said the Housemaster slowly, "but it is far from probable. How was it, Merry, that Talbot came to be going to Abbotsford alone? Was he not a member of the eleven? A regular member?"

"Yes," said Tom reluctantly.

"If he had gone over with the party, this accident—or whatever it was—could not have happened; not in such a mysterious way, at all events. Why did not Talbot go with the rest?"

"He resigned from the team, sir, and I put another chap in. Then Blake was crooked going over, and I had to wire for him."

"That is very odd. If he was able and willing to play, why did he resign from the team in the first place?"

"I don't know, sir."

"You had had no quarrel?"

"Oh, no! Talbot simply said he didn't want to go to Abbotsford."

"He gave no reason?"

"No, sir."

"But surely that was very unusual? Did you not question him as to his motives?"

"Well, yes. But he—well, he didn't explain. I don't know why he didn't want to play," said Tom, with an uncomfortable feeling that he was making things worse for his chum instead of better. "He didn't say why. He simply stood out."

"Then it was due to Talbot's own action that he came to be left behind, and that he came over to Abbotsford alone?"

"I—I suppose so."

"Then how can you suggest that he has been kidnapped, Merry, by his old associates? He could not have been kidnapped if he had been with the rest of the party, certainly. And he deliberately kept away from the rest of the party. If he had fallen in, alone, with his old associates, and has gone with them, willingly or not, is it not due entirely to his own action in keeping out of the eleven?"

"I—I suppose it is, sir."

"I am afraid therefore, that that quite abolishes the idea of a kidnapping," said Mr. Railton drily. "Further, is there any proof that when he left here on his bicycle yesterday he really intended to go to Abbotsford at all?"

"Blake passed him about five minutes out of the place, and he was scorching as fast as he could go, sir."

"That is no proof that he did not intend to stop at some place this side of Abbotsford. You say he gave no reason at all for resigning from the eleven?"

"None, sir."

"He did not say that he had another engagement?"

"No, sir."

"Did not you think this very odd?"

"Well, I did, sir, at the time."

"He must have had some reason, Merry. He was, I understand, very keen on football?"

"Keen as mustard, sir."

"As you lost the match, I suppose Talbot's staying out was bad for your chances?"



"Very bad indeed."

"He knew that, I suppose?"

"Yes, I told him so."

"And yet he persisted in staying behind, although he knew you needed him?"

"Ye-e-es," said Tom Merry reluctantly.

Mr. Railton pursed his lips.

"That will do, Merry. I still hope that it may prove that Talbot has simply met with some accident."

Tom Merry went out into the quadrangle in a state of utter misery and discomfort. He knew very well what was in the Housemaster's mind. Mr. Railton could not help suspecting that Talbot's unaccountable action of the previous day meant that he had some appointment with his old associates. And if he had met them deliberately and of his own accord, the theory of kidnapping was out of the question. If he had gone with them, he must have gone freely, as he was under no compulsion to meet them. He might have gone to Abbotsford with Tom Merry's team, and then all would have been well.

Indeed, into Tom's mind there crept a moment of chilling doubt.

Was it possible that Talbot had yielded to temptation at last—that the persuasion or threats of the Professor had turned him at last back to his old paths?

It was a miserable thought, and Tom drove it angrily from his mind, but, in spite of himself, it would come back to him.

## THE TWENTY-FIRST CHAPTER

### In the Hands of the Tempter!

TALBOT opened his eyes. His head was aching, his pulses throbbing.

Where was he?

He looked dimly, dizzily round him. Back into his aching brain came the remembrance of what had happened to him on the road to Abbotsford, the struggle with the Professor and Nobbler, the chloroform, and then a blank.

He was in the hands of his old friends, now his enemies. Marie's fears had been only too well founded. He had smiled at her uneasiness, but he realised now that she had seen more clearly than he.

He was in a small room, lying upon a miserable bed. There was a little window high up in the wall, covered with a strong wire netting, evidently prepared in advance for a captive. Through the window came a dim light—the light of a foggy city.

He did not need to ask where he was—he knew. He remembered that room—a garret in the old building where the Thieves' Club held their meetings. He remembered the building only too well—one of those old, once stately mansions in what had been a fashionable quarter of London two centuries before, now a rookery of poverty and vice. The ground that had once surrounded the old mansion was thick with alleys and narrow lanes, teeming with the half-starved slum population of a great and ill-governed city—Angel Alley, Murderers' Row, and the like.

Well he knew the place in which his earliest years had been passed. In that big building he had been many a time in his early days, when his father—now dead—was the chief of the dangerous gang of forgers, cracksmen, and thieves.

In the alley outside, little Frayne had played and shivered and starved, before Tom Merry had found him there and rescued him, and taken him away to a new life. In this very garret, Talbot remembered, he had studied with his books while his father was below, carousing with the Professor and Hookey Walker, Nobbler, and the rest. It all came strangely back to his dazed mind as he lay on the wretched pallet and gazed about him.

He was a prisoner.

The Professor's blow had fallen, he was in the hands of the thieves once more. Once their associate and leader, now their prisoner.

He rolled off the bed and tried the handle of the door. It was locked on the outside. He crossed to the window, mounted upon a rickety chair, and looked out through the strong wire-netting that made it impossible to think of escape.

There was fog below, and through the fog he caught a glimpse of uneven roofs, filthy chimneys, broken, patched windows. The sight struck him with a chill. Once it had been familiar enough to his eyes, and he had thought

little of it, but there had been a change in his life since then.

At St. Jim's the wide, green playing-fields, the old quad, shaded by ancient elms, the grey old buildings and airy class-rooms, the dusky library, how different his later surroundings had been.

And now he was in his old haunts, thrown back among the wretches who had never been able to escape from them, among the rascals who did not wish to escape from them.

He sat on the bed, striving to collect his thoughts. His head was still buzzing from the drug.

What was the object of his captors? To imprison him, to threaten him until he agreed to rejoin them—to place his peculiar talents at the service of the gang? He knew that that was what the Professor had planned. He set his teeth grimly at the thought.

The Toff, once the prince of cracksmen, was made of sterner stuff than they deemed. Even for the sake of life itself he would never yield. Life! What would life be worth under the old conditions, with everything that made it worth living taken away? To be a cracksmen, a thief, a hunted felon, a new Ishmael, his hand against every man's, and every man's hand against him!

That should never be.

He went to the door again, and struck upon it with his knuckles. He wished to let the Professor know that he had recovered his senses, that he was ready to "have it out." The sooner that was over the better.

A whistle sounded below, and a few minutes later there was the sound of the key turning in the lock. The door opened.

The Professor stepped into the room.

His disguise was gone now, he had no beard, no glasses. He revealed a hard, cold, clean-shaven face, the face of a man still young.

He gave the Toff a nod as he came in. Behind, in the dirty passage, loomed the athletic figure of Nobbler. There was no chance of escape. The Professor closed the door behind him.

"So you've come to, Toff?"

"Yes."

"Sit down, and we'll talk it over."

Talbot sat on the bed. He was still weak

and dizzy. The Professor seated himself on the rickety chair, and took out a cigarette-case. He extended it to Talbot.

The Shell fellow of St. Jim's shook his head.

John Rivers shrugged his shoulders and lighted a cigarette.

"There is nothing to talk about," said Talbot. "You cannot keep me here. I shall get out of this sooner or later. You may as well make up your mind to it, and let me go at once."

"You will not find it so easy to get away," said the Professor coolly. "And there is much to talk about. You are in our hands. You will remain so until you come to your senses. You chose to desert the gang, and you must come back. You have had your fling, that is all over. Now you are here again in your old quarters. Take a sensible view of it, Toff. Did we treat you badly when you were with us?"

Talbot shook his head.

"In this very room," said the Professor, "you were always keen to study, and you remember that I helped you. Your father was keen to take care of your education, at least, to fit you for the part you had to play—a swell mobsman, in brief. And did I not help you? You owe me something, Toff."

"Very little, considering your motives," said Talbot.

"Did we treat you badly? You were a genius in the profession. Even your father did not possess your skill, though they still remember Captain Crowe at Scotland Yard as one of the best cracksmen of his time. You had the touch of a magician for a safe. You were worth a fortune to us. You had nothing to complain of. You never wanted money; you might have had thousands. You did have thousands, only you were fool enough to part with them when you tried this new game—this fool game!"

"It's useless talking," said Talbot. "Money is nothing unless it is earned by honest work. I've learned that since I left you."

The Professor sneered.

"Honest work! Don't be an idiot, Toff! How many of the millionaires in this very city have earned their money by honest work?"

"That is no business of mine," said Talbot.

"Two wrongs don't make a right. Cut it short, Professor; I will never be a thief."

"You use such hard words," smiled the Professor. "A redistributor of wealth, that is a milder term. You know I have not always been in this line. There was a time when I was entitled to the name that is now only a nickname; you know that. I had money in those days. I worked on the stock market. What is the difference between a Stock Exchange speculator and a cracksmán? I have been both, and for my life I don't see any difference, honestly. You get hold of the other fellow's money without doing any work. The end is the same, the means slightly different. Come to look at it fairly, every man who lives without working is either a beggar or a thief. But there are a good many highly respected gentlemen in this city, Toff, who toil not, neither do they spin, but who live on the fat of the land, all the same. Isn't it so?"

"I suppose so," said Talbot.

"You are dreaming dreams, Toff," went on the Professor persuasively. "What is this honesty you have suddenly grown so particular about? Look from that window, look at the filthy rookeries! The landlords draw rents for those buildings, Toff, from half-starved, wasted wretches—grind out of them all they can pay, Toff, no matter how they slave or steal or starve to get the money; and those landlords are honest and honourable gentlemen. The honourable gentleman who owns the ground this building stands on—he draws thousands, Toff, thousands every year. Does he work for it? Has he, or his father, or his grandfather, ever done a stroke of honest work, ever done anything but waste in extravagance and riotous living the money that other men's hands have earned? Work! You could not insult him more than by suggesting that he or his people have ever worked. Offer him a fair day's wages for a fair day's work, and he would think you were mad. Toff, we've got to take the world as we find it—with thieves in high places, and the whole world run on a system of thievery. We've got to make the best of it. There are two classes in the world, Toff, the looters and looted. I choose to be a looter."

Talbot smiled slightly.

"It's easy enough to talk," he said. "There are lots of rotten things going on, I know that. But a decent fellow's business is to do his little bit to alter it, to make things better. And his business is to begin by being honest himself. That's the first point."

The Professor shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm trying to be patient with you, Toff. I'm pointing out to you that, if you are a cracksmán, you are in the same position as most millionaires, the same thing under a different name. You will be a thief, but you will be in good company, in honourable and distinguished company. That's good enough for you."

"Not quite."

The mocking expression left the Professor's face, his features hardened.

"You have changed, Toff. You used to see all this as clearly as I do."

"I have changed," said Talbot. "I see more clearly now. Honesty comes first, that's the cardinal point. Let every fellow make up his mind to be honest, and all the evils you have talked about will disappear of their own accord. And the wrongdoing of others is no excuse for one's own wrongdoing. If everybody acted on your principles, Professor, we should all be thieves, and there would be nothing to steal."

The Professor laughed.

"You mean that you have made up your mind, and that nothing that I can say will make any difference?" he asked.

Talbot nodded.

"Then the time comes to use something more than persuasion," said the Professor, his face hardening again. "You are determined to live your new life—a struggle for honesty—as long as you can?"

"All my life," said Talbot.

"It may become impossible to you," said the Professor. "What is your prospect now? They have given you a scholarship at St. Jim's. But when you leave? You hope to slip into some comfortable berth, I suppose, and live in idleness or semi-idleness, while the work of the world is done by others less lucky. Is that much better than stealing?"

"I hope to get a chance to work my way," said Talbot. "I will never touch a penny



that is not fairly earned by my hands or my brain."

"But what if you are forced to leave the school, if you are turned out in disgrace, with the reputation of having fallen back into your old ways?" said the Professor menacingly.

"That will not happen."

"There you make your mistake. That is exactly what is going to happen," said John Rivers coolly. "The first step has

been taken. You have disappeared from the school—of your own accord. If you tell a tale afterwards of kidnapping, who is going to believe you?"

Talbot changed colour a little.

"My friends will believe me," he said.

"You will see. You do not know the whole game yet. You played into my hands yesterday, and I shall take full advantage of it. I was there with the car, hoping to get a chance of nailing you while you were in Abbotsford—at any risk. But chance helped me, and you came alone, and there was no witness to the kidnapping. You did not know how much you helped me, Toff, by staying behind and coming on later by yourself."

Talbot was silent. Marie had, in fact, in

her effort to save him, only thrown him all the more helplessly into the hands of his enemies.

"Now they will suppose at the school that you have gone of your own accord. And when the robbery takes place——"

"The robbery!" said Talbot, with a start.

"Exactly. And when some little article belonging to you, and easily recognisable, is picked up on the scene of the robbery——"

"You—you villain!"

"And still you fail to appear to justify yourself—what then?" asked the Professor, with a sneer. "What will your new companions think?"

"That—that is what you intend?" panted Talbot.

"That is it."

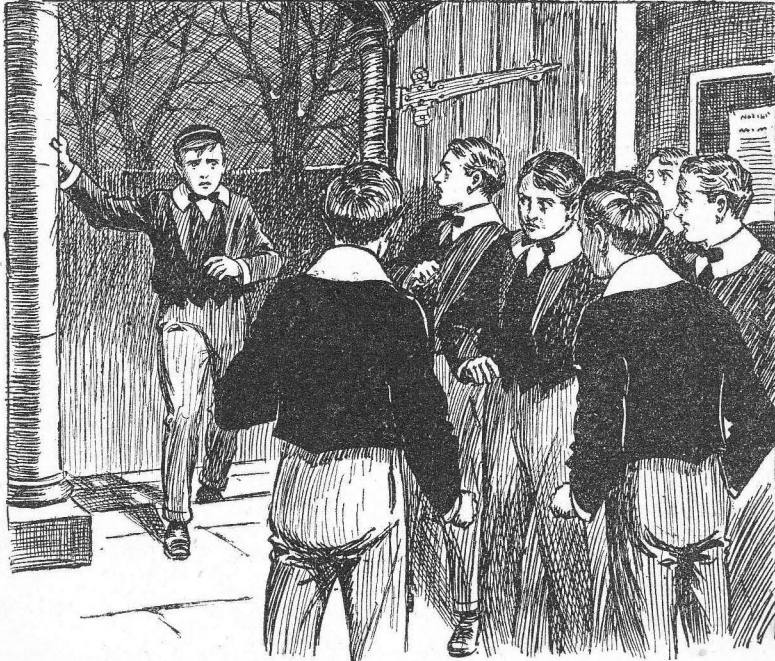
The boy sat silent,

crushed. What could prevent that dastardly scheme from being carried into effect? Only his instant return to St. Jim's, and he was a prisoner.

The Professor watched his working face with grim mockery. He broke the silence at last.

"Make the best of it, Toff. The game's gone against you; you can't play it out. Throw in your lot with us——"

"Never!"



There was a shout as Talbot stepped into the light. "Here he is!" "Talbot!" "The thief!" "He's come back!" There was a rush of feet from all quarters.

(See page 320.)

"But it must come—when you are ruined, disgraced, suspected, hunted by the police—"

"Never!"

"How will you live?"

"I will face whatever comes!" said Talbot fiercely. "Death, if you like! But while I live I will live clean!"

"You will have your choice," said the Professor grimly.

He rose to his feet.

Talbot sprang up.

"Nobbler!" called out the Professor, reading the boy's desperate intention in his face.

The muscular ruffian came into the garret instantly. Talbot made a spring for the door. It was desperate, hopeless, and he knew it; but he would not submit tamely. The two men grasped him, and he was flung back on the bed. As he rolled there, Nobbler and the Professor quitted the room, and the key turned in the lock, on the outside.

Talbot sat up dazedly.

There was no chance. He was a prisoner—a helpless prisoner, while his cunning enemy carried out his plans, while his honour was smirched, his reputation lost for ever, his future blackened past hope!

The struggle was over, and he had been beaten. St. Jim's would be closed to him; his closest chums would never believe in him when the Professor's diabolical plot had been carried into effect. It was all over. The unhappy boy let his face fall into his hands, and a sob shook him from head to foot. For the first time, since he had set his feet upon the new path, the Toff's courage failed him.

## THE TWENTY-SECOND CHAPTER

### Sealed Lips!

"I—I WANT to speak to you!"

Tom Merry stopped, raising his cap, as Marie Rivers came towards him in the quad.

The girl's face was pale, and her eyes had a haunted look. It was easy for Tom to see that "Miss March" had heard of the disappearance of Talbot, and that the news had been a heavy blow to her.

"Yes, Miss March," said Tom. "What is it?"

"Talbot! I have heard! They are saying—what has happened to him?" exclaimed the girl breathlessly.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Nobody knows, Miss March. He has simply disappeared—that's all we know so far."

"But—how—how—when? Tell me!"

Tom Merry explained once more what had happened the previous afternoon. Miss March listened to him, breathing hard.

"Then—then he went to Abbotsford—alone?"

"Yes."

"And—and he did not come back?"

"No."

The Little Sister caught her breath. Her face was so pale that Tom Merry thought she was going to faint, and he made a move forward. But Marie controlled herself.

"Why did he go—why did he go?" she murmured. "I—I thought that you went without him! I thought he would stay! Now he has gone—gone!"

A sob checked her.

Tom looked at her curiously.

"Miss March," he exclaimed, "if you know anything about this it will be best to speak up. Do you know why Talbot gave up the match yesterday?"

The Little Sister did not reply, but her eyes fastened on Tom Merry's face with a startled look.

"You see, it looks bad for Talbot now," said Tom. "My idea was that he had been kidnapped, but it does look as if he gave up the match on purpose, so as to get away from the school by himself. He gave no reason for throwing the match over. If you know why he did it——"

"I can tell you nothing," said the girl heavily.

And she turned at once, and hurried back into the Head's garden, towards the sanatorium.

Tom Merry knitted his brows. It was borne in upon his mind more strongly than ever that Miss March, the Little Sister of the Poor, knew something of the Toff's reason for giving up that match. If that reason could be explained, it meant that a weight of suspicion

would be lifted from Talbot. She had said that she could tell him nothing—not that she had nothing to tell. He noted that. Yet, if she could say a word to help Talbot in this strait, why should she leave it unsaid? Her uncontrollable agitation showed how hard hit she was by the happening.

Marie had hurried back into the garden. There, secure from observation, she stopped, under the leafless trees. Her face was white, and the large tears rolled down her pale cheeks.

“My father!” she moaned. “My father! What can I say? How can I help him? But—but he will not dare to injure him. He will not do that.”

The thought was her only comfort.

That Talbot had fallen into the Professor's hands was certain; she had no doubt upon that point.

And what could she say?

Confess that she was the cracksman's daughter—that her work as a Little Sister of the Poor was a sham, an imposture to cover the miserable truth?

Even that she would have faced for the Toff's sake.

But it was not only that. There was her father.

Villain as John Rivers was, he was her father. A word uttered to help Talbot was a word to help in the condemnation of her father.

She could tell what she knew—that the Professor had been in Abbotsford the previous day—that she suspected that he had waylaid Talbot and seized him by force. She could tell, even, whither the kidnapped boy had been taken, she had little doubt. And then?

Talbot's rescue might follow, and the clearing of his name. And inevitably the arrest of her father!

That could not be avoided.

To save Talbot the police must be set on the track of John Rivers. Once in the grip of the law he had escaped, but that would not happen again. Arrested, his fate was certain—long years of crime had to be atoned for. A life sentence of penal servitude would be his lot—a fate worse than death. Every man's hand was against him; was his daughter's hand to be raised against him, too?

She knew that it was impossible. Even for Talbot's sake, for the sake of the innocent, she could not give her father to justice.

To send her father to lifelong prison—her father! He deserved his fate, but did not deserve it at her hands. In his way, he was fond of her, and he was her father.

She knew that she could not speak.

Her lips were sealed.

But Talbot—what was to happen to Talbot? That he would refuse to take up the old life, that he would never yield, she knew. What would they do with him? They must let him go at last. But not till, by the Professor's cunning, his good name had been blackened, his career at St. Jim's ruined forever, his new life made an impossibility. She realised clearly enough that that was the plan. She had her choice to make—to keep silent while the Professor carried out his deadly scheme, or to hand her father over to the law. And that she could never do. The Professor knew that she could never do it, or he would not have run the risk. Her lips were sealed.

But it seemed to Marie that the anguish was greater than she could bear.

And she must bear it in silence. There was no one she could tell; no one who could counsel her.

She tottered rather than walked back to the sanatorium at last. She was late, and Miss Pinch, the head nurse, met her with a severe look, which softened as she saw the girl's white and stricken face.

“You are ill!” she exclaimed. “My dear child, you have been overworking yourself. Go to your room at once.”

Marie went to her room. She was glad to be alone—to think. Yet thinking could show no way out of the terrible tangle. Her father or Talbot—one or the other she must desert.

The poor girl moaned aloud as she tried to think it out.

The day passed wearily and anxiously to her. She did not fear for Talbot's personal safety, as his chums did. The Professor and his confederates would not harm him. The Toff was too valuable for that. But she anticipated what was coming—the blow that was to fall



And she could not raise her hand to avert it—she could not speak a word to save the innocent lad whose honour was to be the sacrifice—not without betraying her father to the law he had outraged and defied.

The hours passed on wings of lead.

Miss March did not appear in the sanatorium again that day. When Frayne of the Third inquired for her, he was told that she was over-tired, and was taking a spell off duty. Truly, the Little Sister was in no state to minister to others!

## THE TWENTY-THIRD CHAPTER

### What Happened in the Night!

WEARILY, too, passed the day to Tom Merry and his friends. There was no news of Talbot.

Lessons were got through somehow. But the thoughts of the chums of St. Jim's were with their missing friend.

Where was Talbot?

That there had been an accident was now known to be impossible. The whole route Talbot had taken to Abbotsford had been carefully searched, and there was no sign of him, or of the bicycle he had taken with him.

He had vanished as completely as though he had melted into thin air.

Was he coming back at all? the juniors wondered. Had he gone freely? Had he been taken by force? Questions there was no answering.

Gore and a good many other fellows were not slow to state their opinions now that the possibility of an accident was definitely cleared away.

The Toff had grown tired of his new life. He was sick of the routine of St. Jim's after the wild excitement of his former life. Sick of the poverty of a scholarship boy, after the wealth and waste he had known as a cracksmán, he had stayed behind from the match on Wednesday afternoon in order to be free to leave the school unhindered, unquestioned. That was how Gore looked at it, and how more and more fellows looked at it as the day wore away and there came no news of the missing junior.

Even Talbot's best friends were staggered.

Tom Merry and Co. remembered his flushed face, his confusion when he had told them that he wanted to be left behind. They remembered that he had not given a shadow of a reason for his wish.

Had he, even then, had this intention in his mind—to leave St. Jim's quietly after they had departed?

It looked only too probable.

But they clung to their faith in him. They clung to the hope that he would return; that he would be able to explain.

Inspector Skeat had called to see the Head on the subject. He looked very grave, and hummed and hawed. To the doctor's anxious question as to whether he thought a kidnapping possible, he had replied with a shake of the head. His opinion was that the boy was "fed-up" with his new, orderly life and had gone back to his old haunts and associates. Which was really only to be expected, the inspector added.

However, he promised that inquiries should be carefully made. And they were duly made. But the result was nothing.

Talbot was gone, and that was all. He had not left a trace behind. His personal belongings remained at the school, but his bicycle had vanished with him. The inspector hinted very plainly that Dr. Holmes had every reason to be thankful that the schoolboy cracksmán had gone empty handed. Probably some latent conscience in him prevented him from robbing his benefactor before he went. Certainly he could easily have done so. To the light fingers of the Toff the Head's safe would have offered no difficulties, and the money and securities would have offered him a very valuable plunder to pay his footing among his old friends. Dr. Holmes shook his head decidedly at that. The boy had gone, apparently on his own accord, but he would never go back to dishonesty. Above all, he would never rob the man who had been kindness in itself to him. The inspector had his own opinion about that. His profession did not make him confident in human nature. He hinted that the Head would do well to take special precaution to guard his valuables, a warning that fell on deaf ears.

Tom Merry and Co. had glum looks that

evening. They missed their chum, and they were worried about him. They clung to the belief that he had been kidnapped.

And a fellow like Talbot, plucky, determined, full of resource, was not the kind of fellow to be kept a prisoner long. Lowther pointed out. He would get away, and he would come back, and then he would be cleared of suspicion. Tom Merry tried to think so.

The chums of the School House did not speak much upon the matter. They took no part in the endless discussion upon Talbot's disappearance. What was there to say, except to reiterate their faith in him?

In a gloomy mood they went to bed that night.

Tom Merry slept badly.

In his dreams he seemed to see his old chum a prisoner in the hands of the Professor—bound, confined in some murky cellar in a London slum, threatened and persecuted, but never yielding to the demands of his old confederates.

Tom Merry was tired and pale when the rising bell clanged out and he rose.

The Shell fellows came down.

They had not been long down when they realised that something unusual was "on" in the School House.

Mr. Railton, with a frowning brow, passed them in the passage without a word. Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, was seen talking in low tones to Darrel. Before breakfast, Inspector Skeat was seen to arrive, and he was immediately shut up with the doctor and Mr. Railton in the Head's study.

"Something's on," said Monty Lowther uneasily. "It must be some news of Talbot."

"Looks like somethin' pwetty sewious," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Let's ask Kildare."

As the juniors came out from breakfast some of them asked Kildare.

"You'll hear all about it pretty soon," said Kildare curtly.

"Is it news of Talbot?" asked Tom Merry. Kildare looked at him queerly.

"I'm afraid it is," he said.

"But—but—what—"

"You'll know soon."

Kildare strode away. The curiosity of the juniors was at burning point. It was only too clear that something had happened in the night. If there were news of Talbot, why could they not be told.

They went into the form-rooms in mystified and worried mood.

After morning lessons they knew.

The news spread through the school, and Tom Merry and Co. were stricken dumb when they heard it. Levison of the Fourth brought them the news. Levison was looking pale and disturbed himself.

"There was a robbery last night," he said. "The Head's safe was broken in. Luckily there wasn't much in it—about fifty pounds, I hear. But it's gone."

So that was the news.

There had been a burglary in the school. That was the cause of the portentous look they had seen on Inspector Skeat's face.

Later in the day details were known, passing from mouth to mouth.

The Head's safe had been opened by a master hand, evidently, for the lock had not been broken. It was the work of a skilled cracksman. The burglar had gained admittance to the house by clambering over an outhouse and unfastening a window in a box-room. The window had been found unfastened in the morning. And there was a clue—a clue in the hands of the police.

What was the clue?

Tom Merry felt his very heart sicken at the news. A burglary—the night after Talbot had gone! And he had not come back! Had he paid a surreptitious visit to his old school for that purpose?

Tom Merry drove the thought fiercely from his mind.

But the other fellows were discussing it; and there was little division of opinion among them. And even those who doubted could doubt no longer, when it leaked out what was the clue in the hands of the police. A knife had been used to open the box-room window, and the blade had broken, and the broken knife had been dropped there in the dark, and it had been found. It was a penknife. And it was marked with Talbot's initials in the silver handle!

Talbot's knife used to effect an entrance into the house! It was scarcely possible to doubt further. And that was not all. From Talbot's study a number of things had been taken—books and small personal belongings—things of no value whatever to a thief, but of value to the junior himself. That an ordinary burglar would have taken them was impossible to suppose. What would a burglar want with Talbot's cheap little camera, with his lesson-books, and his colour-box?

"But—but——" said Tom Merry. "I—I can't believe it! I can't! It wasn't Talbot, you fellows. I know it wasn't Talbot."

Monty Lowther and Manners were grimly silent. They, too, wanted to believe it wasn't Talbot. But their faith was shaken.

Tom Merry strode away towards the Head's study. He would endure the suspense no more—he felt that he must know the worst.

## THE TWENTY-FOURTH CHAPTER

### Condemned!

DR. HOLMES received the junior with a very grave face. Mr. Railton was in the study, and he, too, was looking grave and troubled.

"What is it, Merry?"

The Head would have spoken sharply; he was in no mood to be troubled by juniors then. But the white misery in Tom Merry's face touched him to the heart, and his voice was very kindly.

"About—about Talbot, sir. The fellows are say—saying——" Tom Merry choked. "It wasn't Talbot, sir—I know it wasn't!"

"I am afraid there is no doubt, Merry."

"None!" said Mr. Railton.

Tom Merry almost staggered.

The Head, who had been kindness itself to Talbot—Mr. Railton, whose faith in him had been complete—they both believed that he was guilty. They would not have been satisfied without evidence—conclusive evidence. Tom Merry caught at the back of the chair to steady himself.

"I don't believe it, sir. There's some awful mistake, or else a plot of some sort. You remember Talbot was suspected before, and turned out——"

"That is quite a different matter, Merry. Calm yourself, my boy," said the Head kindly. "I understand your feelings—I admire your faith in that unhappy boy. It is a heavy blow to me to know that that faith is misplaced. I see now that I made a mistake in allowing him to come here after his wretched past. I confess it. Yet Heaven knows I had faith in him."

"It can't be true, sir," gasped Tom Merry. "I won't believe it!"

"You must, my boy!" said the Head patiently. "Unfortunately, there is no doubt whatever. I will explain the matter to you, Merry, and you may tell the others, so that there may not be the faintest suspicion that injustice has been done. My safe was robbed last night—opened in a way that showed great skill; and we all know the skill that the unfortunate boy possessed. It was evidently done by somebody with a complete knowledge of the interior of the house. Admittance was gained in the easiest way. There was no alarm—even the alarm in this room was carefully disconnected. A knife, proved to have been in the possession of Talbot, was used to open the box-room window, and was found broken. The boy's own personal possessions have been taken—a camera, some books, a colour box, a pencil-case, and other trifles. Who would want them but Talbot? Who would know where to find them, if wanted, but Talbot? There is no doubt, my boy. A warrant has already been issued for the wretched boy's arrest, and he is being sought for. That is all, Merry."

"Still, I don't believe it, sir. I can't!"

"My poor boy, there is nothing more to be said."

Tom Merry realised that. He staggered rather than walked from the study.

The Head glanced at Mr. Railton.

"It is a heavy blow to the poor lad," he said—"a heavy blow. Talbot seems to have had a gift of inspiring confidence."

"I believed in him," said the Housemaster.

"And I," said the Head, with a sigh.

"I can see now that I made a mistake; but who could have believed that that lad's apparent frankness and earnestness could hide so much duplicity?"

Tom Merry went blindly away from the Head's study. Manners and Lowther met him in the passage.

Monty Lowther caught his arm anxiously.

"Well, Tom?"

"Well," said Tom, almost crying with rage and bitterness, "it's all up with poor old Talbot. They believe he's guilty, and there's a warrant out for him."

"And a jolly good thing, too!" exclaimed Gore angrily. "We all know what he did. What's the good of talking rot?"

Tom Merry clenched his fists furiously.

"You cad!"

"Oh, cheese it!" snapped Gore. "Hard words break no bones, and we all know what to think. Why did he slope off like that? How did his penknife come to be found where he used it to open the window? Who'd know about the trick of getting in at the box-room window but Talbot? We've used the window often enough, and Talbot knew it. And who'd want his books and rubbish? A burglar? Rot!"

"Utter rot!" said Kerruish. "I believe in sticking up for a fellow, Tom Merry; but, dash it all, you can't go against positive facts!"

"Give a fellow a chance when you can," said Reilly, with a shake of his head. "But shure this is settled now."

"I can't quite take it in, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus distressfully. "I wufuse to believe that Talbot is a thief. I can't!"

"You know what he was?" said Lumley-Lumley.

"Yaas, but he dwopped all that."

"I guess he's taken it up again, then."

"It's too howwid to believe!"

But even the loyal Arthur Augustus spoke half-heartedly. The evidence was too strong even for him.

"We're jolly well rid of the cad!" growled Gore. "He had every chance here, and he's an ungrateful beast."

"Shut up!" cried Tom Merry. "I tell you I won't stand it! Talbot's not a thief—I believe in him, and I stick to him. And I won't hear a word against him from anybody."

"Yes, let it drop, anyway," said Blake, uneasily. "No good running a fellow down.

If he's done it, he's got to pay pretty dear for it; and we shall never see him again, any way."

"So you believe it, too?" exclaimed Tom.

Blake was silent.

"And you, D'Arcy?"

"I—I don't know what to believe, deah boy," muttered the swell of St. Jim's miserably; "it looks fwightfully bad."

"It looks what it is—a cert," said Mellish of the Fourth. "Even Levison believed it against him. Didn't you, Levison?"

Levison flushed uncomfortably.

"I—I haven't said so," he muttered. "I don't know what to think. I'd never have believed it, only—only——" He broke off. "I know Talbot helped me out of a tight corner once, like a thoroughly decent chap, and whether he's guilty or not I'm not going to say a word against him."

"Quite wight, dear boy," said Arthur Augustus.

"Well I'm going to say a word against him, and a good many words, and as many as I like!" exclaimed Gore violently. "I think it's like Tom Merry's cheek to stand up for a convicted thief——"

Smack!

"Oh, you rotter!" roared Gore, as Tom Merry's open palm came across his face with a crack like a pistol-shot.

"If you want any more, you've only got to repeat your words," said Tom Merry, clenching his teeth.

"I'll jolly well repeat them as loud as I like!" shouted Gore. "Talbot's a thief. A convicted thief, and—— Oh! Yah! Would you?"

The next moment they were fighting furiously.

"Cave!" muttered Reilly, as Mr. Railton came striding down the passage from the Head's study.

"What is this?" exclaimed the House-master angrily. "Merry! Gore! Cease this instantly! How dare you! What is all this about?"

"Tom Merry standing up for that thief!" panted Gore, as he separated from his opponent breathlessly, with a flushed face. "He——"



"Merry!"

"He called Talbot a thief," said Tom Merry fiercely.

Mr. Railton frowned.

"Talbot is a thief," he said coldly. "If you are going to quarrel with everyone who thinks so, Merry, you will find yourself in trouble. Go to your study immediately."

Tom Merry turned away without a word. Mr. Railton had repeated Gore's words, but it was scarcely possible to quarrel with the Housemaster. But Tom Merry's heart was burning with rage and hopeless resentment. He could not, he would not, believe that Talbot of the Shell had deceived him—he never would believe it unless his chum confessed it with his own lips.

Manners and Lowther followed him gloomily into the study.

"No good getting your back up, Tommy," said Lowther. "You can't fight the whole school and the giddy Housemaster, you know."

Tom Merry panted.

"Do you believe it about Talbot?" he exclaimed.

"And you're not going to fight me, Tommy," said Lowther very quietly. "Keep your wool on, my child."

Tom Merry gave him a fierce look for a moment; he was almost ready to fight his oldest and best chum at that moment. But the anger passed, and he flung himself into a chair, his face a picture of misery.

Manners and Lowther eyed him uncomfortably. They had never seen Tom Merry "blub," and they were almost scared to see two tears roll down his cheeks now.

"Tommy, old man——" murmured Manners.

Tom Merry choked.

"I—I say, Tom," muttered Lowther, "I—I believe the same as you do, you know. I—I—I do, really. I back up old Talbot."

"Same here," said Manners. "Pull yourself together, Tom, old chap. We three 'll stick to him against the whole school."

Tom Merry did not speak. They would stick to him.

But what use would that be to Talbot—disgraced, shamed, hunted, lost?

FREE!

Talbot could scarcely believe it as the bitter wind blew in his face in the foggy, misty street.

Free!

What did it mean?

For four days he had been a prisoner in the old rookery behind Angel Alley. He had been guarded—watched. Always the Professor and Nobbler had come together when his food was brought, lest he should make an attempt to escape. Always the door had been locked and bolted upon him. Then suddenly his imprisonment had ceased. The door had been left unlocked. He had tried it, and found it open to his hand.

The house had been deserted. No one had stopped him, no one had appeared as he stole cautiously down the stairs and made his way into the street.

He was free!

What did it mean? He asked himself that question with a throbbing heart. For he knew that this was no carelessness on the part of his captors. The Professor was not a man to make mistakes of that kind. Had the cracksmen given up in despair the hope of inducing him to join the old gang? Had he abandoned the attempt and left the Toff his liberty? Caring only to be rid of him without further trouble?

It was possible, but it was not likely. It was far more likely that the Professor was serving his scheme in thus allowing the Toff to go free; that it was all part of the cunning scheme. How? Did it mean that John Rivers had been at work at the school—that Talbot's name was already so blackened there that his return could not help him; that he would go back there only to meet with contempt and condemnation?

Talbot felt that that was the probable explanation. As a recalcitrant prisoner he was useless to the gang. But if he were turned out of St. Jim's, if he found himself once more an outcast, despised, avoided, hunted, perhaps, then the Professor might calculate that the Toff would fall into his hands an easy prey.

Where would he turn for help—for bread? In the bitterness of the injustice, would he not turn back to his old associates as the only resource left to him?

What was awaiting him at St. Jim's?

Talbot shivered as he thought of the possibilities. But he must get there at once, whatever reception awaited him. He must know the truth. He must explain. He must protest his innocence. He would convince them somehow. At all events, he would not give up hope while a gleam of hope remained. He felt only too bitterly that the Professor would not have allowed him his liberty until it was no longer of use to him. But he would try.

He tramped through the dim streets of the city. The hour was late. He had no money. That had been taken from him while he was unconscious, with all his other belongings except his clothes. It was bitterly cold, but the junior hardly felt it as he strode rapidly along. The mere exercise was a boon to him after his long inactivity. He must get to St. Jim's. That was his only thought now.

He tramped on through the night, leaving Angel Alley and the Rookery further and further behind, safe from pursuit, safe from recapture.

Through the silent streets, dimly lighted, lowering with fog, he tramped on, till the city and the suburbs were left behind, and the grey dawn rising found him tramp-

ing on still through wide country spaces. He had far to go, and he had only himself to depend upon. He had a few crusts in his pocket, saved from his last meal in the garret, and no possibility of obtaining other food, unless he should steal. Was that the Professor's hope—that sheer hunger would drive him from the path he had marked out for himself?

Talbot set his teeth. Better to fall fainting by the roadside, better to die in a ditch, than to touch anything that was not his own! He had fought too hard for his honour to give it up at last.

Through the bitter winter morning he was tramping still, fatigued now, but still determined. Only one thought was in his mind—to get back to St. Jim's. If his strength held out till then that was enough. And if the doors were closed in his face, if his old friends deserted him—then death would not come too soon.

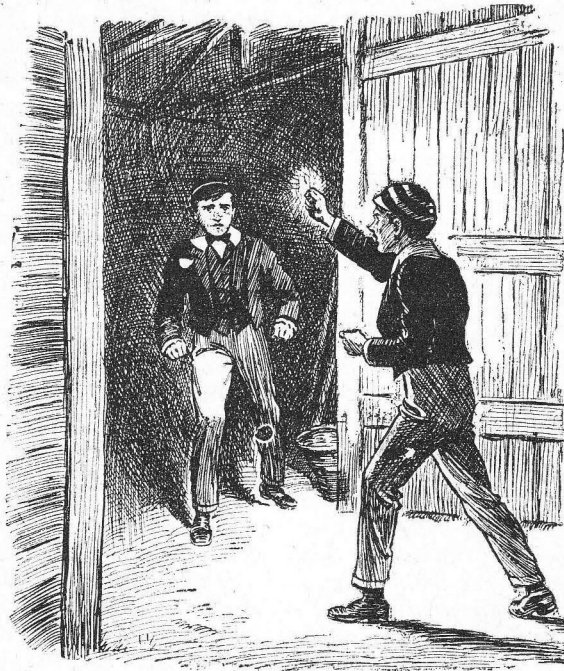
Afterwards he hardly knew how that day passed.

Weary; wearing tramping; lifts in market-carts; once a lift on a long stretch of road by a kindly motorist—somehow the ground was covered. But the early winter night was closing in when he drew near at last to the old school.

Footsore, weary, he stood at last outside the gates of St. Jim's.

There he paused.

The gates were closed, and he hesitated to ring the bell. What was to be his reception—



A glimmering match showed in the darkness, and Tom Merry caught a glimpse of a white face in the dark doorway of the old barn. "Talbot!" he exclaimed. "Thank goodness I've found you!" (See page 323.)

what was it the cunning of his enemy had prepared for him ?

He must know. He rang the bell at last.

Taggles, the porter, came down to the gates, lantern in hand. He almost dropped the lantern as he peered through the bars of the gates and made out Talbot's face in the cold winter night.

"Master Talbot !"

"Open the gate," said Talbot faintly.

"You'd better get off," said Taggles, hesitating, and wondering whether it was his duty to ring up the police. But he always liked Talbot. The boy had always been kind and considerate to the school porter, and he felt that he would give him a chance. "You cut off !" he whispered, through the gate.

"Let me in !"

"But—but they're arter you !" whispered Taggles.

Talbot looked at him with dull eyes.

"After me ! Who are after me ?"

"The perlice !"

Talbot shuddered.

"Let me in, Taggles ! I must see the Head."

Taggles opened the gate at last. He had done his best. Talbot staggered in, and the porter did not fasten the gate again.

"Which you've done very badly, Master Talbot," he muttered. "But—but this 'ere gate's open for a bit—you understand ?"

And the worthy Taggles disappeared into his lodge without waiting for a reply.

Talbot did not heed him. He dragged his weary limbs on towards the School House. The windows blazed with lights into the dim mist of the quadrangle.

How long was it since he had been there, a cheery schoolboy, among his chums ? Five days. It seemed like years. With an inward shudder the unfortunate boy felt that he had broken with his life there—that things could never be the same again with him. He felt that he and St. Jim's were parted—that between the cheery lad who had started out to cycle to Abbotsford and the haggard, weary tramp who returned there was a great gulf fixed.

But he kept on.

He dragged himself up to the steps of the School House. The great door was open, and

the hall dazzling with light. Talbot blinked in the light, momentarily blinded. He stepped into the light. There was a shout.

"Here he is !"

"Talbot !"

"The thief !"

"He's come back !"

There was a rush of feet from all quarters. Fellows gathered round him in a crowd. But no welcoming hand was stretched out, no kindly glances met him. Contempt, dislike, scorn, mingled with surprise—that was all there was to meet him !

Talbot looked at the sea of faces with haggard eyes.

"Blake—Levison——" he muttered.

"So you've come back !" shouted Gore, with a mocking laugh. "Come back, by gum ! Forgotten something you meant to steal ?"

"Cut off !" said Blake hurriedly. "What have you come back for, Talbot ? Are you mad ? Cut off ! The Head's coming—Talbot——"

"What have I done ?"

"Talbot !" It was the Head. He swept towards the white-faced junior, his brows contracted, his eyes flashing. Never had the St. Jim's fellows seen their headmaster look so angry and indignant. "Wretched boy ! You—you here ? You dare to come here ?"

Talbot panted.

"What have I done ? What——"

There was a shout on the stairs. Tom Merry had been in his study. He came tearing down the staircase, his face lighted up.

"Talbot, old man ! You've come back ? I knew you would ! I knew——"

"Merry !" thundered the Head. "Stand back !"

"But—but, sir——"

"Silence ! Do not dare to approach that wretched boy ! I forbid you to touch him—to speak to him !"

Talbot staggered. It was the worst he could have anticipated. It was worse than the blackest of his anticipations. What had he done ? What was he supposed to have done ?

Tom Merry had paused. Monty Lowther and Manners caught him and pulled him back, or at that moment he might have defied even the orders of the Head.

Dr. Holmes fixed his eyes upon the junior who had returned, and he raised his hand, trembling with anger and indignation, and pointed to the door.

“Go!” he said.

“What have I done, sir?”

“Have you come back here to attempt to brazen it out? Have you no shame—no sense of decency?” thundered the Head. “Have you left your criminal associates to make one more attempt to impose yourself upon my confidence? Go! I warn you that I shall immediately telephone to the police! You have no time to lose! Go!”

“What have I done?” Talbot panted again, his eyes growing almost wild. “I—I have been kidnapped, sir! I have been kept a prisoner. I—I—”

“Do not tell me falsehoods, boy! I repeat that you cannot deceive me now. I am not to be imposed upon a second time,” said the Head bitterly. “You have taken advantage of my trust and betrayed it. You have robbed your benefactor. You have disgraced your school. Even at this moment the police are seeking for you. Unless you wish to add more shame to your villainy by being arrested within the walls of your school, you will go at once!”

Almost stunned by the torrent of words that struck him like lashes of a whip, the unhappy boy turned blindly and obeyed. He was condemned—condemned past hope. With heavy, dragging feet he passed out into the quadrangle, out into the darkness, into the winter night. The great door swung to, and closed, and shut off the light behind him—and, with the light, hope!

He went blindly down to the gates. It was all over. He was an outcast once more; driven into the darkness. He groaned aloud in bitterness of spirit. So this was the end of his struggle; this was the outcome of his fight for the right! What remained for him now—what but the old life? He was adjudged guilty—but of what?—guilty and condemned unheard. And not a friend there to raise a voice for him. Deserted by all, what was there left for him but to throw up the useless struggle and succumb to his fate?

There was a hurried step in the dusky quad.

A panting voice: “Talbot! Talbot!”

It was Tom Merry.

He gripped Talbot’s cold, nerveless hand.

“Talbot! Don’t think that I believe it, old chap! I trust you! I believe in you always!”

A new light came into Talbot’s face.

“You, Tom! But—Heaven help me!—tell me—what has happened?”

Tom Merry told him in hurried, broken sentences. Talbot groaned as he listened. Too well he realised how cunningly the plot had been laid, how cunningly it had been carried out.

“I am innocent, Tom!”

“I know you are, Talbot. I will stake my life on it. You—you must go. They are telephoning to the police. But—but I will work for you, fight for you! I will find out the truth, somehow! You shall come back!”

Talbot shook his head. Hope was dead in his breast. But the faith of his chum had given him new courage—new life. While Tom Merry believed in him he would have the strength to fight his way, to resist temptation. The faith of one loyal chum meant everything to him at that fearful moment.

“Good-bye, Tom! Heaven bless you! Believe in me; that’s all I ask of you now. That will help me. Good-bye—good-bye! The best pal a chap ever had!”

Tom, blind with tears, watched him as he passed through the gateway. He could not speak. His voice was choked with sobs.

“Good-bye!” whispered Talbot.

He was gone.

His footsteps echoed on the frosty road—echoed for a few minutes and died away.

Tom Merry listened and then turned away with a groan. The footsteps of the outcast were lost in the silence of the night.

## THE TWENTY-SIXTH CHAPTER

### One True Chum!

TOM MERRY was very silent when the Shell fellows came up to their dormitory. The rest of the juniors were in a buzz of talk.

Talbot’s unexpected and dramatic return to St. Jim’s, and his crushing reception, formed the sole topic. Gore declared loudly



that it was like his thumping cheek to come back; and Crooke remarked that the Head ought to have detained him and telephoned for the police.

Tom Merry said nothing. He was feeling miserable and subdued. He felt he was "up against" what all the other fellows regarded as indisputable facts. It was useless—worse than useless—to rag every fellow who made disparaging remarks about his former chum. He would soon have found himself fighting his old friends one after another.

Yet his inward faith and determination did not waver. His belief in Talbot was founded as upon a rock.

He went to bed, but not to sleep. After Kildare had put out the light in the Shell dormitory there was a buzz of talk from bed to bed, and it was all upon the same subject—the Toff, and his unexpected return to St. Jim's, his yarn that he had been kidnapped, and speculations as to whether he would succeed in escaping the police.

It was no wonder, under the circumstances, that Talbot should never be heard of again at St. Jim's—that he should be forgotten there.

But Tom Merry could not forget. As he lay sleepless in bed, he thought of the unhappy junior, who had gone forth alone, friendless in the night, to face a bitter struggle. He should not want for a friend if Tom Merry could help him.

Manners and Lowther were helpless, too. They were wondering uneasily what Tom Merry intended to do. That he had some plan in his mind they were certain. And if he sought to find and help his old chum there was expulsion from the school hanging over his head. Dr. Holmes had given him warning.

Monty Lowther sat up in bed as he heard the captain of the Shell moving. Tom Merry was slipping out of bed a quarter of an hour after Kildare had gone.

"Tom!" said Lowther softly.

"It's all right, Monty!"

"Where are you going?"

"Out."

"But, Tom——"

"No good talking, Monty. I think I shall find him. I shall try, anyway. I'm going to help him if I can."

"Oh, Tom, think of the risk!"

"He wouldn't think of the risk if I needed his help," said Tom.

"I'll come with you," said Lowther.

He knew it was useless to argue.

"No good, Monty. If there's anything to be done, I can do it, and you couldn't help. It's all right."

"Hallo! What's that mumbling about?" came a drowsy voice from Noble's bed.

"Who's that going out?" asked Gore.

"Mind your own business!" said Lowther.

"Going out to look for that rotter—what?" sneered Gore. "Well, serve you jolly well right if a prefect nails you!"

"Oh, dry up!" said Manners.

Tom Merry took no notice of Gore. He dressed himself and slipped quietly from the dormitory, leaving his chums in a very anxious state of mind. They did not insist upon accompanying him; one fellow was less likely to be spotted than three. He was safer alone.

Tom was in a reckless mood, in a way—he was facing a great risk and he knew it. If the Head learned of his escapade his wrath would be great, and Tom knew what to expect. But he was careful.

He took his boots in his hand, and crept softly away down the dark passage. In the box-room he stopped to put on his boots, and then climbed from the window, over the outhouse, to the ground. There was a bitter wind outside, a slight drizzle of rain. Tom Merry cut across in the shadows to the school wall, and in a few minutes he dropped into the road.

Talbot had tramped away in the direction of Rylcombe. Tom knew that, and he hurried in the same direction. It was two hours since the disgraced junior, cast out from school, had gone.

Was there a chance of finding him yet? If he had gone away at once there was no chance. But Tom Merry remembered how footsore and weary the junior had been. All the previous day he had spent in tramping from London. He had been at the end of his tether when he had reached St. Jim's. It was not likely that he had gone. He would have to rest before he could recommence his weary tramp back to the city. He could not go to the

station, even if he had money; for he knew that the police were looking for him, to show himself in public meant arrest.

Where was he likely to be?

Sheltering in some spot from the drizzling rain, waiting for dawn before he resumed his weary tramp, that was most likely.

Now that he was outside the school walls Tom realised the difficulty, the almost hopelessness, of the task he had set himself. But it was some comfort to be trying to help his chum; better than lying in a warm bed while Talbot was facing the cold night.

He tramped down the lane towards Rylcombe, his collar turned up, his head bent towards the wind. He paused as he reached the stile in the lane.

Which way had Talbot gone?

Probably not through the village, where he would have been seen and recognised. By the footpath, perhaps, towards the moor, through the dank, dark wood.

A sudden thought came to Tom Merry's mind, and he sent forth a shrill, echoing call—the call of the Curlew. Talbot had belonged to the Curlew Patrol when he was at St. Jim's. If he were within hearing, he would recognise the signal of the Scouts.

Was he near, or was he, perhaps, miles away on the road to London?

Again and again Tom Merry sent out that call through the silence of the night.

He gave a sudden start as an echoing call came back at last—but it was not an echo this time. It was the Scout signal!

Tom's face lighted up.

"He is still here!" he muttered joyfully.

The Curlew call came ringing eerily over the dark wet fields. Tom Merry remembered the old barn in the field, a hundred yards from the hedge. He plunged through a gap in the hedge, and tramped across the sodden grass. The call came again—it came from the old barn. It was there that Talbot had taken shelter.

A glimmering match showed in the darkness. Tom Merry caught a glimpse of a white face in the dark doorway of the old barn.

"Tom Merry!"

"Thank goodness I've found you, Talbot!"

"Tom!" repeated Talbot, in amazement.

In the light of the glimmering match his handsome face showed pale and worn and troubled.

Tom Merry came into the old barn. Through the doorway fell a faint glimmer of starlight through the drizzling rain; he could dimly make out the form of his chum in the gloom.

"I—I thought you mightn't be gone," said Tom Merry breathlessly. "I came out to see if I could find you, old chap."

"It's good of you, Tom. I'm dead beat," said Talbot. "I couldn't have tramped much farther, and in the rain. I got in here to get some rest and shelter. There's straw here. I was trying to sleep when I heard your signal. I couldn't understand it at first, then I guessed and answered it. Tom, why have you run this risk? You'll get into a fearful row if they—"

"That's all right," said Tom. "Nobody knows I'm out; they won't know. I shall get back all serene. I had to see you again, Talbot. What are you going to do?"

"Get away from here as soon as it's light," said Talbot quietly. "I mustn't be seen about here where I'm known by sight. I shall start tramping at dawn, and I shall be safe enough. It will be quite like old times," he laughed bitterly. "Dodging the police! I had thought that was done with. The Toff has come to light again; Talbot of the Shell is dead and done with."

Tom Merry felt a throb in his heart. This was what he had feared—this reckless, desperate mood, which might throw his chum back into his old ways, into the hands of rascals who had plotted to drive him back into crime.

"That's what I was thinking of, Talbot," he said. "I—I want to speak to you about that. I—we—we're going to do what we can to find out the truth, to clear you. It must be possible; somehow we shall manage it."

Talbot did not answer. His silence told eloquently enough that hope was dead in his breast.

"But at the worst, Talbot, you mustn't think of letting those villains have their way," whispered Tom. "The truth must come out some day, and then you will be cleared. But—but if you should fall back, then it would be

useless to clear you. At any price, you've got to stick it out, old chap."

"You needn't be afraid, Tom. I shall never see the Professor again. I shall not go back to the Rockery in Angel Alley. I am going to earn my bread honestly or starve."

"I knew it, old chap, but—but I was afraid. I know you mean it."

"Honour bright, Tom!"

"But what are you going to do? You've got no money?"

"No. They cleared me out when they collared me," said Talbot. "The Professor thinks I shall have no resource but to go back to the gang. He doesn't know me. Resource, or no resource, I shall not go back."

"That's what I thought, Talbot. And I've brought something for you," said Tom.

Talbot started back.

"No," he said.

"But, old chap—"

"I can't Tom!"

"You must," said Tom. "I've put together all the tin I could raise, and I've brought it here. It isn't much—a couple of pounds. But it will keep you from starving at first. And I've got a bundle of sandwiches. And you are going to take my coat. You've got no coat. You must be frozen."

"Tom," said Talbot huskily.

"Don't think of refusing, old chap, this is hard enough for me as it is," said Tom. "Don't make it worse for me. Let me do a little if I can."

There was a short silence.

"Very well," said Talbot at last, "I won't refuse. You're a good pal. If I'd known you years ago all this mightn't have happened. But I suppose it was to be."

Tom Merry slipped off his coat with the money and the sandwiches in the pockets. He put it on Talbot, and as he did so he could feel the boy shivering. It was all he could do, and it was little enough. But the proof of loyal friendship was worth much to Talbot in that dark hour. So long as there was one loyal chum who believed in him and trusted him, he felt that he could face the hard fate before him with courage, strengthened by Tom Merry's faith in him.

"Now you must go," whispered Talbot.

"You're running a fearful risk for me. If the Head knew——"

"You must let me know how you get on," said Tom. "You must send me news somehow. You can't write to the school, that's forbidden. But—but you must let me hear from you sometimes, Talbot."

"I'll try, Tom. There's one other thing. Have you"—Talbot's voice faltered—"have you seen Marie—I mean Miss March—lately—the nurse, you know?"

"She isn't well," said Tom. "She's not on duty in the sanatorium now. I haven't seen her for a day or two."

Talbot groaned.

"Poor Marie! Tom, when you see her, tell her that you've seen me, that I'm safe, and that I'm all right. You will?"

"Yes," said Tom.

"That's all I can tell you about her," said Talbot, his face flushing in the darkness. "But—but she will be troubled about this. I want her to know that I'm safe. That's all, Tom."

"I'll tell her," said Tom.

A few more words, a grip of the hand, and Tom Merry was gone. He tramped back to the school sad, but his heart lighter. In the old barn the outcast threw himself into the straw to sleep if he could. But his heart, too, was lighter, his courage was higher, for he felt that so long as there was a faithful pal who stood by him and trusted him the future, dark as it looked, held at least a ray of hope.

## THE TWENTY-SEVENTH CHAPTER

### The Cracksman's Daughter

"**B**AI JOVE! It's the inspectah!"

It was the morning at St. Jim's. A crowd of juniors had come out of the School House, when the stolid figure of Inspector Skeat of Rylcombe was seen crossing the quad. He passed into the House.

"It's about Talbot, I suppose," said Blake. "They telephoned that he had come back here, and the giddy inspector is after information. I—I hope that they won't get at him."

Arthur Augustus nodded thoughtfully.

"Yaas, I hope they won't," he agreed.

"He has acted vewy wottenly; but, considerwin' all the circs, I twust that the poor bwute will get away."

"Same here," said Herries. "It's a beastly surprise, Talbot turning out like that. But, of course, there can't be any doubt now."

"Of course there can't," said Digby. "I'm blest if I can understand Tom Merry. He don't seem to know what evidence is."

"I am afraid Tom Mewwy is wathah an ass!" remarked Arthur Augustus. "It is quite touchin', the way he sticks to Talbot, considewin'— Heah he is!"

The Terrible Three came out of the Schoolhouse. Tom Merry had been the last down, for once. He was tired from want of sleep. He had returned to the Shell dormitory the previous night without discovery, but at a very late hour, and little sleep had visited his eyes after he had got to bed.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy bore down upon the captain of the Shell with a somewhat hesitating manner. Tom Merry's look was grim.

"Good-mornin', deah boys!" began Arthur Augustus.

"Morning!" snapped Tom Merry.

"Pway don't be watty, deah boy!" said the swell of St. Jim's pacifically. "I have considered the mattah, and I considah I owe you an apology."

"Oh, rats!" said Tom.

Arthur Augustus coloured. It was not a very encouraging reception.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"Oh, don't bother!" said Tom.

"Ahem! Undah the circs, I feel it is due to myself to pwoffah an apology," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity. "I do not agwee with yoah vewy remarkable opinion, but I admit you have a wight to think as you like, and I am sowwy I made a wemark in yoah studay which was somewhat wantin' in tact. That's all. Fwom one gentleman to anothah, I pwesume that an apology sets the mattah wight."

Tom Merry laughed.

"You're a good little ass, Gussy!"

"Weally, I object to bein' descwibed as a good little ass! Howevah, I will let the mattah dwop, makin' allowance for yoah

state of feelin's," said Arthur Augustus gracefully.

Tom Merry walked away with his companions. His brow was moody. He had seen the inspector enter the House, and he knew what it meant. Mr. Skeat was very anxious to lay hands on Talbot. Probably he never believed in the Toff's reformation, and he was expecting something of this kind.

"He won't get Talbot," said Monty Lowther. "He'll have sense enough to clear off and put a good distance between himself and this place, Tom."

Tom Merry nodded.

"Yes, I think very likely he'll keep clear of that," he said. "But—but suppose he does keep free, that isn't all. He's got to be cleared. How's that going to be done?"

Lowther gave a hopeless shrug of his shoulders.

"Blessed if I can see, Tom! What can we do?"

"He was suspected before," said Tom, "and he was cleared."

"That was different. If it wasn't Talbot who cracked the Head's safe last night, it's some cracksmen who's not likely to come near St. Jim's again."

"Not likely!" said Manners.

"I don't know," said Tom. "Look here. There was fifty pounds taken from the Head's safe. There's often more money in it than that. The rotter, whoever he was, made a very poor haul. He might try again for something better. It's clear he's a man who knows the ins and outs of the place."

Lowther and Manners were silent. The fact that the thief was someone who knew the ins and outs of the place was another point against Talbot.

"I'm going to think it out," said Tom. "Something's got to be done. I'll never rest while Talbot is down and out."

"You can depend on us if there's anything to be done," said Manners. "But I'm blest if I can see anything that can be done, myself!"

The Shell fellows went into their classroom. Tom Merry forced himself to work—he had no choice about it under Mr. Linton's keen eye—but his thoughts were with his



absent chum, tramping wearily through the country side, almost penniless, friendless, and alone.

After morning lessons, Tom went out into the quad by himself. He remembered Talbot's message for Miss March, the Little Sister of the Poor, and he hoped to see her. He knew that she often walked in the Head's garden, which was overlooked by the school sanatorium. He was not disappointed. Under the leafless trees, he caught a glimpse of a graceful figure, pacing to and fro. The Head's garden was "taboo" to juniors, but Tom Merry did not hesitate. He vaulted over the gate and approached the girl. Miss March was looking pale.

Tom Merry raised his cap. The girl looked at him eagerly.

"I have heard," she said, before Tom Merry could speak. "He came back last night—Talbot."

"Yes," said Tom.

"Where is he now?"

Tom Merry told her quietly of the meeting in the barn. He could see the signs of suffering in the girl's face, and he wondered why she should care so much about Talbot. He knew nothing of the secret history of the cracksmen's daughter, or that she had known the Toff in the old days, before he came to St. Jim's. That Miss March, the Little Sister of the Poor, was the daughter of John Rivers, the Professor, was a secret Talbot had never confided to his chums.

"Then he is safe, at least?" said the girl at last.

"I think so. I hope so," said Tom.

"And everyone believes that he is guilty?"

"Not everyone," said Tom quietly. "I believe that he is innocent, Miss March. I am sure of it, and I'm going to try and do what I can to prove it."

"What can you do?"

"I have to think that out. The scoundrel who robbed the Head's safe has got to be found!" said Tom, between his teeth.

The girl grew very pale.

"You are not well," said Tom, making a quick movement towards her.

It seemed for a moment that she would fall, but she recovered herself quickly.

"No, no; I'm all right! It is nothing! You—you think that—that the man can be found—the man who committed the robbery?"

"I hope so. He's got to be found. And I know who it is, too!"

The girl gave a cry.

"You know! How can you know?"

"I will explain. Before you came here, Miss March, there was a man here, a rascal who passed off on the Head as Mr. Packington, a science master. Talbot found out that he was really a cracksmen, called the Professor among his associates. He was arrested, but he escaped. I know that after that Talbot expected to hear something more of him. The Professor was a member of the gang Talbot belonged to in the old days. You know his story?"

The girl nodded, with a faint smile. She knew the story of the Toff only too well—better than Tom Merry did. She wondered what the eager junior would have thought if he had known it was the daughter of the Professor he was speaking to, but Tom Merry had no suspicion of that.

"Well, this is my idea of it," said Tom. "Talbot was kidnapped by the Professor—the villain's name is John Rivers—and he tried to make Talbot join him again. Of course, he wouldn't. Then I am certain the Professor carried out the robbery here. Having been here as a master for a short time, he knew the place perfectly well, of course. He not only robbed the Head's safe, but left Talbot's penknife where the window had been forced. He took some small things that belonged to Talbot. All those idiots, including the Head, take that as proof that it was Talbot who did it. But I am quite sure that it was the Professor, and he did it especially to make suspicion fall on Talbot."

"Oh, no—no! I can't believe that!"

"You don't know what a cunning villain he is!" said Tom, unconscious that every word he uttered was like a dagger to the heart of the girl listening to him. "His aim was to force Talbot back into his old ways. That was the way he did it. Having made it appear that Talbot had committed the robbery, he let his prisoner go, and poor old Talbot came back to here, to find himself condemned,

## THE TWENTY-EIGHTH CHAPTER

### The Professor is Disappointed

unheard. Now he calculates, of course, that Talbot will make the best of it by going back to the gang. But he doesn't know him. Talbot will starve first. And somehow or other I'm going to prove what I know to be true. I don't know how yet, but it's got to be done. As soon as that scoundrel Rivers is arrested the truth will come out!"

"And not till then?" faltered the girl.

"Not till then, I suppose. But he may come back here for another haul. I hope he will."

The look on Tom Merry's face made the girl shiver. It was upon her lips to cry out: "He is my father!" But she checked herself; that miserable secret had to remain a secret. And it would have made no difference to Tom Merry. Whoever should suffer, the truth should come out to light if he could contrive it.

Miss March made a sign of adieu, and moved away slowly and heavily towards the house. In her own room she drew out a letter—a letter she had received that morning. It was in the hand of John Rivers, the cracksman.

"I must see you. I shall wait at eight o'clock by the boat-house.—Your FATHER."

If Tom Merry had only known!

DARKNESS had fallen upon St. Jim's. There was a powdering of snow upon the walls and trees. The Ryll, which bubbled and sang among the green rushes in the summer days, was frozen hard and silent. The boat-house was deserted, buried in gloom. Close by the shadowy building a dim figure moved to and fro, wrapped in a heavy over-

coat, muttering words of impatience.

A light step came along the path from the school, and the man waiting by the boathouse started.

"Marie!"

"Father!"

"You have not been seen to come?" muttered the man, peering at her in the gloom, dimly revealing a hard, cold face and

glinting eyes. "Answer me that question."

Marie shook her head.

"I was careful," she said. "I have the key to the gate, father. Why have you come here?"

John Rivers smiled.

"It is some time since I have seen you, Marie. And I want news—news that you can tell me. What of the Toff? He came back?"

"He came back," said Marie.

"And now?"



Miss Marie made as if to speak, but she closed her lips tightly. The look on Tom Merry's face made her shiver. The miserable secret had to remain a secret. (See this page.)

"Now he is gone," said the girl dully. "He came back, to find himself in danger. He has gone, and I have not seen him."

The Professor rubbed his hands.

"Good! It has gone exactly as it should have gone. The young fool, to pit his brains against mine! Now all will be well, Marie. There is no need for you to stay longer at the school. Do not leave in a hurry. You must not excite suspicion. But the Little Sister of the Poor can find work in other directions now."

He laughed again. The Professor had cause for satisfaction.

"You must be growing tired of it, Marie. You will be glad to come back to the old life—with the Toff, too—what?"

"Talbot will not be one of us," said Marie.

"Where will he be?" sneered the Professor. "He must come back! Only with his old friends can he find bread to keep him in life—even in safety. He must come to us. Everything will be as it used to be, Marie, before he took this idea into his head to lead a new life."

"It will never be, father. I have learned that much. The Toff changed from his ways, and ours, but he will never change back to us. He will never change again!"

"I do not believe it! He must join us, or starve!"

"He will starve, then!"

"Bah!" The Professor gritted his teeth. Perhaps he felt an inward doubt himself. "If he is an obstinate fool, then let him starve. Let him die in a corner in disgrace! That will be his punishment for deserting us! If he will not come back, he will suffer for it, and we can do without him."

The Professor looked sharply and inquiringly at the girl's pale face.

"What is in your mind?" he exclaimed roughly. "Why do you not speak?"

"Father"—Marie spoke with an effort—"it can never be as it used to be. I cannot go back to it any more than the Toff. I have changed, too."

The Professor muttered an oath.

"You, also? You wish to desert me?"

"I cannot go back to that," said Marie. "I did not think before. I knew only what

you had taught me. But since—since, father, it is impossible. That life is finished for me. I have changed, too. Honesty——"

"So this is the Toff's work!" said the Professor bitterly. "Instead of leading him back to us, Marie, you have let him lead you away from us!"

The girl was silent.

"And what will you do?" said her father. "What will you live on? Have you thought of that?"

"I am a good nurse, and I have been offered a permanent place here in the sanatorium," said Marie.

"And you wish to stay?"

"Yes."

"To desert me?"

"I will not desert you, father. I want you to think—to think it over, and—and to do as the Toff has done, as I have done. It is not too late."

"Don't preach to me!" said the crackman savagely. "I was not born to be a poor man. Give me honesty and five thousand a year, and I will be as honest as the day. Until that time I will remain what I am—and you will help me, Marie."

"I will never help you again in dishonesty," said the girl quietly. "I have thought it over. I cannot."

"Have you forgotten that I am your father?" exclaimed the Professor, as much surprised as enraged at the unexpected declaration of the Little Sister.

"I have not forgotten. But even my father has no right to command me to do what is wrong now. I knew it before, but I had never thought, I had never realised. The Toff has made me understand. Now I understand there is no going back for me."

"This—from you!" exclaimed John Rivers bitterly. "Bah! You will soon forget all this! The Toff will be one of us again soon!"

Marie shook her head.

"That will never be, father! Father, I—I want you to spare him." She caught the man's arm in a trembling hand. "Father, won't you have mercy on him? Let it be known that he is innocent; let his good name be given back to him."

The Professor laughed harshly.

"Give myself up to the police, do you mean? Is it likely?"

"You need not do that. But let it be known that Talbot was innocent. Father, what do you think I feel when I know it was your deed that he is condemned for, when I could clear him by speaking a word?"

"And betraying your father?" sneered John Rivers. "Speak, then! You are welcome to do so."

The girl wrung her hands.

"You know I cannot. But—but if you would go to a place of safety, and then write to Dr. Holmes and tell him——"

"You are talking childishly. Besides, I am not finished here yet."

Marie looked at him in terror.

"Not finished! What do you mean?"

The cracksman made an angry gesture.

"I did not come at an opportune moment," he said. "What did I take—a trifle over fifty pounds! Yet, as I learned when I was staying at the school, there is sometimes hundreds in the safe, and the securities that are sometimes there, if one came at the right moment. I depended on you for information, Marie; you could find out for me."

"Never!"

"You disobey me!" exclaimed her father furiously.

"In that—yes!"

John Rivers clenched his hand. It seemed for a moment as though he would strike the shrinking figure before him. Marie did not move. The incensed rascal lowered his hand.

"You will come to your senses!" he muttered.

"I will never repay the kindness I have received with ingratitude and treachery!" said the girl in a trembling voice. "There has been enough of that—there has been too much. I must keep your secret, and let the Toff suffer unjustly, because you are my father; but further than that I will not go."

"I shall do without your aid!" said the cracksman sullenly.

"Father, there is danger for you here," said Marie. "One of the boys—Tom Merry—has told me. He is working to clear Talbot; he believes in him still, and——"

"So there is one who believes in him still?" sneered the Professor. "Not more than one, I warrant! As for danger, do you think I fear a schoolboy? And if there should be danger, it will be because you refuse to help me. Listen to me. I must repeat my visit to the school——"

"You must not!"

"But I shall! And if I am taken because you do not help me, you will know that you send your father to end his days in a convict prison."

The girl gave a moan.

"Father, you are cruel! Even if you will not give up this dreadful life, keep away from this place. There are other places."

"Not so easy—not so well known to me," said the Professor coolly. "I did not come here for nothing. What I have learned I shall put to use. Through the Toff the whole business has been rather a loss than a gain to me. I have to make good. I ask you once more, Marie—will you come with me?"

"I cannot!"

"Enough said!"

The Professor turned without another word, and strode away into the darkness. Marie clasped her hands.

"Father!" she called softly, and then more loudly: "Father!"

There was no reply; the cracksman had gone.

With a sob the girl turned away and hurried towards the school.

## THE TWENTY-NINTH CHAPTER

### Talbot's Warning!

"MERRY!"

"Yes, Kildare."

"You're wanted in the Head's study."

The Shell had just come out after morning lessons. Tom Merry nodded as the captain of St. Jim's rapped out that information.

"Right-ho!"

"What the deuce!" muttered Monty Lowther, as Kildare strode away. "More blessed trouble, I suppose. They can't have found out. No blessed sneak would have given away about your getting out that night, surely!"



Manners clenched his fists.

"If they have——"

"I don't think so," said Tom, with a shake of his head. "Even Crooke or Scrope, would stop short at that, I should think. But I don't care much. Anyway, I've got to face the music, whatever it is."

And he went to the Head's study. He found Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House, with Dr. Holmes, and both the masters were looking very grave. Dr. Holmes had a letter in his hand.

"You sent for me, sir," said Tom Merry.

"Yes, Merry. This letter has come for you," said the Head.

"For me, sir?" said Tom, wondering what the Head was doing with his letter.

As a rule, the correspondence of the boys was not interfered with, though, of course, the Headmaster reserved a right of overhauling it when he thought fit.

"Yes. Since this unhappy boy, Talbot, has been sent away, I have exercised a supervision on this subject," said the Head. "I feared that he might attempt to correspond with some of the boys. This letter is written in his hand, and therefore, by my instructions, it was brought to me."

"From Talbot, sir?" exclaimed Tom Merry, in surprise and satisfaction.

"You did not expect a letter from him, Merry?" asked the Head, with a searching look at the Shell fellow's face.

"I did not expect one, sir; but I did want him to write to me and tell me how he was getting on," said Tom.

"I desire you to open this letter in my presence, and hand it to me, to judge whether it is suitable for you to read, Merry."

Tom Merry flushed crimson, and he felt angry.

"Very well, sir. I know Talbot wouldn't write anything that the whole school couldn't well see."

Dr. Holmes passed him the letter. Tom opened the letter and laid it on the Head's table. He could see it was a few lines scribbled hastily in pencil.

"You have no objection to my reading this, Merry?"

"Of course I haven't, sir!"

Dr. Holmes took the letter and glanced over it, and an expression of surprise came over his face. He then passed it on to Mr. Railton.

The Housemaster read, and coughed.

„Now may I have it, please?" asked Tom.  
"Yes."

Tom took the letter from Mr. Railton and read it hurriedly. It ran:

"Dear Tom,—I have met the Professor. He has tried, as I expected, to get me back with him, you know where, and for what. I need not tell you that I have refused. You can always rely on me; come what may, I shall never do anything that would make you ashamed of having me as a friend.

I hope some day that the truth may come out, and I shall be able to see you again; but, at all events, I shall never forget you, and so long as you believe in me it will help me to keep decent. But that is not what I was going to say. From some words dropped by Rivers I suspect that he has some plan of further robberies at the school. I dare not write to the Head; he might not believe what I would say, though Heaven knows I shall never forget his kindness to me when he did not believe that I was honest. I am telling you, it may be in your power to stop that villain if he should make any further attempt. At least, you will be on your guard. Good-bye. old chap!

R. TALBOT."

"Good old Talbot!" said Tom Merry.  
"Oh, sir, this letter—can't you see by this letter that old Talbot is as true as steel?"

"Put it in the fire!" said the Head.

"But—but mayn't I keep it, sir?"

"Do as I tell you!"

The letter dropped in the flames.

"Now, Merry, if you receive any further communications from this boy without my knowledge I expect you to bring them to me at once."

"Yes, sir!"

"You will remember that. You may go."

Tom Merry left the study.

"That letter is very curious, sir," said Mr. Railton thoughtfully. "If the evidence against Talbot were not so absolutely over-

whelming it would lead me to suppose that there has been some dreadful mistake."

Dr Holmes shook his head.

"Nothing would delight me more than for it to prove so, Mr. Railton. But I cannot help thinking that that letter was written to meet my eyes. That wretched boy calculated its effect upon me."

"It is possible."

"I trusted him once, in spite of his past," said the Head. "I cannot trust him again. Henceforth he is dead to us."

Tom Merry rejoined Manners and Lowther in the passage.

"Another row?" asked Manners.

"No. A letter from Talbot," Tom Merry explained.

"Rotten to make you burn the letter," said Lowther. "I suppose the old codger thinks it's all bunkum?"

"I suppose so. But I don't think so," said Tom in a low, eager voice. "Talbot wrote that because he thinks the Professor means to have another try here. I thought of it myself; he didn't make much of a haul, and he might have better luck if he tried again. Oh, I hope he will try."

"What idea have you got in your head, now?" asked Lowther uneasily.

"Don't you see? Suppose he came here and we nailed him?"

"But——"

"Then Talbot would be cleared," said Tom eagerly. "Even that brute would have the decency to own up, I should think, when it wouldn't hurt him to tell the truth."

"More likely to keep silent and let Talbot suffer."

Tom Merry's eyes gleamed.

"Well, he would get his deserts, at any rate," he said. "Look here, we're going to do our best. If he comes——"

"If he comes, he'll come when we're asleep in the dorm," said Manners. "I suppose you're not thinking of keeping watch for him?"

"That's just what I was thinking of," said Tom.

"Tom, old chap——"

"I mean it!"

"But if he comes he may not come for

weeks; he's sure to wait till this has blown over a bit."

"I shall keep watch."

"But you can't, Tom," urged Lowther. "How are you going to keep watch every night, night after night? It's impossible!"

"It's not impossible," said Tom, in a low, earnest voice. "I don't say I can keep awake night after night; I know it's impossible. A thief gets into a house only after midnight, after everyone's in bed. And he won't come after a certain hour in the morning. I could keep watch for a few hours every night, from midnight till five."

"You can't, you silly ass! What about your health?"

"Blow my health!"

"You'll be found out!"

"I'll chance that!"

"I—I say," muttered Manners. "Now the Head's seen that letter, he's bound to take some steps, you know—so——"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"He doesn't believe that letter. I could see in his face what he thought. He thinks it's a trick of Talbot's to get into favour."

"Oh!"

"He doesn't know old Talbot," said Tom bitterly. "But if there's a chance—if there's a ghost of a chance—of setting him right, I'm going to take it. I don't care if it knocks me up. Let it!"

"You're not going to chance it alone," said Lowther. "If you mean this, we'll take it in turns, Tom."

"Turn and turn about," said Manners decidedly, "then it will be only one of us every third night, and we can stand that."

Tom Merry hesitated.

"I'd rather——"

"Never mind what you'd rather," said Lowther coolly, "you do as you're told, we're going to have our whack—and if you don't agree, we'll tell Railton, and have the little scheme knocked on the head."

Tom Merry laughed.

"You won't do that. But—but you can take your turns if you like—that's agreed."

"Done!" said Manners and Lowther together.

"And if he comes—if you spot him—wait

till you're sure of him before you give the alarm—he mustn't have a chance of getting away," said Tom. "If either of you spot him, come and call me before you make a sound!"

"Done!"

"And not a syllable on the subject to anyone else," added Tom Merry.

## THE THIRTIETH CHAPTER

### A Thief in the Night!

**T**OM MERRY'S face was brighter that day. Hope—ever so light a hope—was enough to raise his spirits.

There was a chance now, a slim chance, that Talbot's name might be cleared. It would be something, at all events, for the real criminal to be caught—and Tom Merry had not the slightest doubt that the real criminal, who had thrown suspicion so cunningly on Talbot, was the Professor. Even if the whole truth did not come to light, at all events Talbot's enemy would have to pay for his crime, and that was something. And Tom Merry hoped that once the scoundrel was in the clutches of the law, he would have a rag of decency left that would make him do justice to the boy he had wronged—or he might seek to make matters better for himself by telling the truth.

That night the secret scheme of the Terrible Three was carried into effect.

Tom Merry was to take the first night's watch. There was not much doubt that he would wake at the appointed time. It was more likely that he would not sleep till then. The Terrible Three went to bed as usual with the Shell, and when midnight rang out from the clock tower, Tom Merry was awake and alert. He slipped out of bed and dressed himself in the dark.

The rest of the Form were fast asleep.

He left the dormitory quietly. The whole House was in darkness, the last of the seniors and the masters had gone to bed; not a single light glimmered in the great building.

Tom Merry, in rubber shoes, descended the stairs silently. He knew where to take up his watch. At what point a burglar might enter the house he could not be certain. Probably at the box-room window as before, perhaps in some other place.

But wherever he entered, his object would be the Head's study where the safe was. It was upon the Head's study that the watchful junior had to keep watch and ward. In the deep darkness Tom Merry groped his way along the passage to the recess near the Head's door. There, in the recess of a deep window was a window-seat, deep and cushioned.

Tom sat down, his coat wrapped round him for warmth, and waited.

It was a weary vigil.

There was little danger of his absence from the dormitory being discovered. He had made up a dummy in his bed in case of a chance visit there, and nobody was likely to suspect that a junior was downstairs, in the darkness, keeping watch and ward through the winter night.

The hours passed slowly, he heard each hour strike dully from the old clock tower. He knew that he was probably watching in vain.

If the thief came, he might not come for some time—perhaps not for a long time—yet, on the other hand, he might come this night. A single night passed unwatched might mean failure instead of success.

His eyes were heavy with sleep, but he did not close them. It was for the sake of his chum, to undo a bitter wrong, to clear the innocent. That thought was enough to sustain him.

Slowly the dark night dragged. And there was no sound save a rat scuttling behind the old wainscot, no alarm. As five o'clock struck from the tower, Tom Merry knew that the first night's watch had been in vain.

He made his way back to the dormitory. It was not yet light; he undressed hastily and slipped into bed.

When the rising bell clanged out in the morning he was fast asleep. He woke up to find Monty Lowther shaking him.

"Time!" shouted Lowther, with a faint grin.

"Turn out, slacker!" said Kangaroo.

Tom Merry rubbed his eyes and turned out. The loss of sleep had told on him, strong and healthy as he was. But he could have stood more than that for a chum's sake. He was dull and heavy in the class-room that morning.

Mr. Linton was sharp with him several times. But he got through the work somehow.

It was Saturday, and in the afternoon the St. Jim's juniors were meeting a team from Rylcombe Grammar School. Tom Merry, naturally enough, did not feel very fit for footer, but Jack Blake of the Fourth cheerfully undertook to captain the team. Figgins and Co. of the New House, quite restored to health after their spell in the sanatorium, were fit as fiddles, and it was a strong team that turned out for St. Jim's. Tom Merry did not even see that match. He was asleep most of the afternoon in the armchair in his study.

He was dozing there when the door was thrown open, and Monty Lowther and Manners came cheerfully in, bringing a breezy gust of fresh air with them. Tom Merry sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"Hallo! Who's won?"

"They have," said Lowther. "Two to one against us."

"We wanted Talbot," said Manners. "We miss him, you know; and you staying out, too, you bounder."

"Better luck next time," said Tom Merry.

Even football and the school record had taken secondary place in his thoughts now.

"You look a blessed sleepy hedgehog," said Monty Lowther. "Too sleepy to help to get tea? I'm as hungry as a hunter!"

"No," said Tom, laughing. "Have the Grammarians gone?"

"Yes, rather. Gone off as cheery as crickets after licking us," said Lowther. "Whose turn to play the giddy ox to-night, you or me, Manners?"

"Toss up for it," said Manners.

They tossed up after tea, and the lot fell to Manners. He grunted.

"You'll be careful, old top?" said Tom Merry anxiously. "You won't fall asleep? I wish you'd leave it to me, you know."

"Fathead," said Manners. "If you keep awake every night, you'll have to go to sleep every day, and you'll jolly well be spotted."

There was no doubt about that, and Tom Merry had to submit to the inevitable. That night it was Manners who took up his post, secretly and silently, in the window recess in the passage, close to the Head's study, and

watched until the small hours of the morning. But he watched in vain.

On Sunday morning Manners was glad that it was a day of rest. He slept like a top most of the afternoon.

Lowther took his turn cheerfully the next night, but when Monday morning came there had been no alarm. Lowther was decidedly drowsy in class on Monday morning, though he did his best to conceal it.

He was glad when lessons were over, and he could take a "nap" in the armchair in the study. He felt better after that in the afternoon.

"Your turn again to-night, Tommy," he said as he sat up to tea that evening. "Fill yourself up to the neck with tea, it helps to keep you awake. How long are you going to keep up this game?"

"Until we succeed," said Tom Merry.

"Oh, my hat!"

"But I don't want you fellows to bother about it," said Tom hastily. "I'm quite willing to take it on my own——"

"Rats!" said Lowther.

"Likewise bow-wow! And many of them," chimed in Manners.

That night Tom Merry found himself on watch again. It was the fourth night since he had received Talbot's warning. As he sat in the window recess in the deep darkness he was thinking of the outcast junior. Where was Talbot now? What had become of him? Would he ever see him again?

Hour after hour struck dully through the night. Warily but grimly Tom Merry kept at his vigil. Three o'clock. Silence, deep and still, followed the chime.

Tom Merry started. Was it a rat in the wainscot, that slight, sudden sound he heard? He sat up, breathing hard, his heart throbbing as if it would burst. It was not a rat. A soft, stealthy sound in the passage—the sound of a cautious footfall.

Tom Merry's heart throbbed almost to suffocation. He scarcely dared to breathe as, in the darkness, that stealthy footfall passed the recess, the unseen intruder passing within two feet of him. The stealthy sound stopped outside the door of the Head's study. There was a breathless silence, then a click. The



locked door had been opened. Tom Merry, straining his ears, heard the soft sound as it was closed again.

He started to his feet, trembling in every limb with excitement.

At last!

In the Head's study was the man who had wronged Talbot. He had come again like a thief in the night. And Tom Merry knew what to do.

## THE THIRTY-FIRST CHAPTER

### Capturing the Cracksman!

TOM MERRY crept silently from the recess in his rubber shoes, and stood in the wide passage, listening.

The door of the Head's study was closed, and not a gleam of light came from under it. He guessed that the midnight intruder had placed a rug inside the door to hide the light, for from the keyhole there came a faint glimmer.

The cracksman was at work.

Tom Merry bent his head outside the closed door and listened. There was a faint sound within—the sound of a drill at work on iron.

The junior, with fast-beating heart, crept away.

The man was there. How long he would remain Tom Merry could not guess—but long enough for the junior to take measures for his capture. Tom Merry had no thought of facing the ruffian alone. The rascal was not to be given the slightest chance of eluding capture this time.

Tom Merry made his way to the stairs, treading softly, and to Mr. Railton's room. He opened the door of the Housemaster's bedroom and called softly. He was at a sufficient distance from the scene of the cracksman's operations to be sure that he would not be heard by the thief.

"Mr. Railton!"

His whispering, throbbing voice sounded strangely, eerily, in the dark room.

"Mr. Railton!"

There was a sound of a sudden movement, then a startled voice:

"What—who is that?"

"Wake up, sir. It's I—Tom Merry! Don't call out, sir, or he will hear you!" said Tom hurriedly.

"He! Who? What do you mean, Merry? What are you doing out of bed at this hour?"

"The cracksman, sir."

"What?"

"He's in the Head's study, sir!"

"Merry!"

"He is drilling through the safe now, sir."

"Good Heavens! Merry, do you mean—are you sure——"

"Yes, sir!"

"You have been down?"

"He passed within a couple of feet of me, sir."

"You should not have run this risk. But never mind now. Go back to your dormitory and leave this to me."

Mr. Railton was already out of bed, dressing himself hurriedly in the dark.

Tom Merry glided away to the Shell dormitory, as the Housemaster directed him. Not that he intended to remain there. He did not mean to be off the scene when the cracksman was taken. He crept into the dormitory and shook Lowther. Monty woke up with a start.

"What—wharrer marrer? Yaw-aw!"

"Wake up, Monty! He's come!"

"My hat!"

"Manners, old man——"

Tom Merry shook Manners.

"He's really come?" muttered Lowther excitedly.

"Yes. Railton's going down. I expect he'll call Kildare. We're going to be on in this scene, too."

"You bet!" murmured Manners.

"Don't wake the others; we don't want a crowd."

The two juniors dressed quickly. The rest of the Shell were fast asleep. Leaving them undisturbed, the Terrible Three crept out of the dormitory and down to the next floor. Mr. Railton had come out of his room and gone to Kildare's room, and then to Darrel's. In the faint starlight that came in through the hall window the Terrible Three saw them come out of the Sixth Form passage—the Housemaster and the two stalwart prefects,

each of them with a poker or a cricket-stump in his hand. They made their way quietly to the Head's study.

"We bring up the giddy rear," murmured Monty Lowther. "I say, Tommy, you're quite, quite sure, eh?"

"Yes, ass! Come on!"

"Is it the Professor?"

"I suppose so. I couldn't see him in the dark. I don't know that I should know him by sight, anyway, as he was disguised when he came here under the name of Packington. But I'm pretty sure it is he."

The juniors crept on, keeping their distance, for they knew that the Housemaster would send them back if he spotted them.

But Mr. Railton was not thinking of them just then. He reached the door of the Head's study with the two excited seniors, and the glimmer of faint light from the keyhole struck upon his eyes in the darkness. There was no doubt that the cracksman was there. Faintly, almost inaudibly, in the silence came the steady sound of the drill.

"You are ready, my boys?" said Mr. Railton, in a low voice.

"Yes, rather, sir!" said Kildare.

"Follow me in, but leave him to me," said the Housemaster.

Kildare and Darrel grinned in the darkness. They were not likely to leave all the risk to the Housemaster.

Mr. Railton turned the handle of the door and threw it open.

He rushed into the study, with the two Sixth-Formers at his heels.

A man, who was bent before the safe, working by the concentrated light of a small electric lamp, sprang round with a panting cry.

Kildare turned on the electric light in the study as he followed Mr. Railton in. The room was flooded with light.

"Surrender!" exclaimed the Housemaster.

The cracksman uttered a hoarse oath.

His hand was already in his pocket for a weapon, but the Housemaster was upon him before he could draw it.

In the powerful grasp, the smaller man struggled in vain.

The cracksman was head and shoulders

shorter than the Housemaster, and Mr. Railton had not been a lifelong athlete for nothing.

The rascal had no chance.

He panted fiercely behind the mask of black crape that covered his face, fighting wildly for his liberty.

But the Housemaster's grip bore him backwards to the floor, and he went down on the carpet, and a heavy knee was planted on his chest.

It had passed so quickly that Kildare and Darrel, keen as they were, had no chance of helping. But now they grasped the man's arms as he struggled, and held him helpless.

Outside the open doorway three juniors blinked into the lighted study. The Terrible Three were there in case they were wanted. But the cracksman was already a prisoner. Mr. Railton wrenched a revolver away from him.

"Let's see his face," said Kildare; and he jerked the crape from the hidden features of the cracksman.

A hard, clean-shaven face it revealed. But in the features, in the eyes, there was something familiar to them.

"I've seen him before somewhere," said Darrel.

"Fasten his hands, my boys," said Mr. Railton. "A handkerchief will do."

The cracksman gave a sudden low groan, and stretched out inert under their grasp. His eyes were closed, his jaw had dropped; he seemed hardly to breathe.

"Fainted, by gum!" said Darrel. "Not quite enough nerve for the business, I should say."

The man lay inert.

The grasp upon him relaxed, and they drew back. And as he was released the apparently unconscious man made a sudden spring to his feet.

"Collar him!" roared Kildare. "Shaming, by thunder! Hold him! My hat!"

The cracksman was through them like a flash, knocking Kildare aside, and eluding Darrel and the Housemaster. A desperate bound carried him through the doorway.

It had been a clever trick—a desperate attempt—and it would have succeeded if the way had been open. But the desperate man,

bounding through the doorway, rushed directly into the arms of the Terrible Three.

They fastened on him like cats, and dragged him down.

Before he could even attempt to struggle free from their grip, Mr. Railton was upon him again, and Kildare and Darrel were clutching at him.

With six pairs of hands upon him, he was dragged back into the room.

"Not this journey!" chuckled Monty Lowther breathlessly. "Not this time, my infant!"

Kildare bound the rascal's hands with a twisted handkerchief. The cracksman lay panting on the carpet.

"Thank you, my lads!" said Mr. Railton. "You should have been in your dormitory, but certainly you have been very useful here. Keep hold of that rascal, Kildare, for the present."

"I've got him, sir," said the captain of St. Jim's cheerfully. "He won't play that trick on us twice."

"Malediction!" muttered the cracksman between his teeth.

Tom Merry looked down upon him keenly.

In the hard, clean-shaven face he sought for a resemblance to the Professor, the man who had been known once at St. Jim's as Mr. Packington, the science master. And he knew that he was not mistaken.

"At last, you villain!" said Tom Merry. "Do you not recognise him, Mr. Railton?"

"Recognise him?" repeated the House-master.

"Yes, sir. You have seen him before."

Mr. Railton looked puzzled.

"There is something familiar to me in his face," he said; "but——"

"It is Mr. Packington."

"Bless my soul! Yes, I know him now!"

"The Professor!" exclaimed Kildare.

"The man Talbot denounced when he was here, passing himself off as a science master. I know him now."

"Yes," said Tom Merry steadily; "the man Talbot denounced, and the man who committed a robbery here last week, and left evidence behind him to make suspicion fall upon Talbot."

"Merry!" exclaimed Mr. Railton.

"I am sure of it, sir! Ask him. He may tell the truth now."

Mr. Railton fixed his eyes upon the baffled, panting cracksman.

"You hear, man?" he said. "You are a prisoner now; you will get your deserts. It will do you no harm—it may do you good in your position—to tell the truth. Was it you who came here in the night a week ago——"

The Professor laughed sardonically.

"I?" he repeated.

"Yes, you—who robbed this safe, which you have attempted to rob again; who took articles belonging to Talbot of the Shell, and left Talbot's penknife——"

"A pretty story!" said the Professor.

"Do you confess it?"

"Hardly. This was my job, because the Toff made so small a haul last time," said the Professor coolly. "The Toff, whom you call Talbot, is one of us now. He had better luck than I have had."

"It is a lie!" exclaimed Tom Merry fiercely.

The Professor laughed again.

"It is useless to expect the truth from him, I fear," said Mr. Railton, with a sigh; "but I begin to think, Merry, that you may be right."

"A pretty story!" repeated the Professor sneeringly. "Why, it was from the Toff that I learned all I needed to know about this place—about this safe——"

"That at least is false," said Mr. Railton quietly. "You had no need to learn anything from Talbot. When you were here as Mr. Packington you had ample opportunity to learn all you wished to."

"This is the man who kidnapped Talbot," said Tom Merry between his teeth. "You can see now how Talbot's penknife came to be here. It was easy enough for that scoundrel to take it from him when Talbot was his prisoner. And he took Talbot's things away to make it look blacker because Talbot had denounced him when he was playing his game here. Mr. Railton, you must see that it is the truth——"

"I see that it is possible," said the House-master guardedly. "But this is not a time to discuss that. Take this rascal to the

punishment-room, my boys. He can be kept securely there for to-night, and handed over to the police in the morning."

And, with strong hands grasping him, the cracksman was marched away.

## THE THIRTY-SECOND CHAPTER

### A Startling Meeting

THE house was still silent; there had been no alarm. The capture of the cracksman had been effected with little noise. The sleeping-quarters were at a distance from the Head's study. In their dormitories the School House fellows were sleeping, little dreaming of the dramatic scene that had passed below.

The punishment-room in the School House—Nobody's Study, as the juniors called it—was a small room, with a little barred window, plainly furnished. In the older days of the school, recalcitrant schoolboys had been confined there on bread-and-water for days at a time—in the "good old days" when discipline was iron and punishments hard and frequent. In latter times the punishment-room was seldom used, and the bread-and-water diet had long been a thing of the past.

The cracksman glanced round him quickly and eagerly as he marched into Nobody's Study.

It was clear that he was calculating his

chances of escape, but a glance was enough to tell him that there were none. There were strong bars to the window, and outside was a drop of forty or fifty feet. And the door was solid, the lock big and strong. And the cracksman was thoroughly searched, and every kind of instrument or weapon taken from him before he was left. Mr. Railton, too, had sent one of the juniors for a cord, and the man's hands were bound behind him—loosely enough to allow him personal comfort, but se-

curally enough to prevent him from using them.

A bed with a mattress was in the corner of the room, and Mr. Railton pointed to it.

"You will remain here for to-night," he said. "Sleep if you can. I will send you some blankets. I do not wish you to suffer."

The cracksman shrugged his shoulders, and made no reply. The door of the punishment-room closed upon him.

"He is safe!" said the Housemaster. "You may return to bed now, my boys. There is no need to cause an alarm in the house at this hour; the man is safe. One moment, Merry. It was you who discovered this man's presence in the house. How did that come about? You could not have been in your dormitory."

"I was not, sir."

"Then where were you?" asked Mr. Railton, a little sternly.

"I was keeping watch, sir."



A light step came along the path from the school, and the man waiting by the boat-house started. "Marie!" "Father!" "You were not seen to come here?" muttered the man. (See page 327.)



"Keeping watch!"

"Yes, sir. I may tell you now," said Tom Merry calmly. "Ever since Talbot wrote to me that warning that you saw, sir, we have been keeping watch—one or another of us. We knew the villain would come sooner or later."

Mr. Railton knitted his brows.

"Then it's Talbot who's really caused this rascal to be arrested!" exclaimed Kildare.

"Yes," said Tom.

"By Jove! It looks——"

"It looks as if Talbot has been wronged," said Tom Merry bitterly. "Yes, I'm glad you're beginning to see it now."

"You may go to your dormitory," said Mr. Railton, without passing any comment upon Tom Merry's confession.

The Terrible Three returned to their dormitory. The Housemaster and the prefects went back to bed; but in the Shell dormitory Tom Merry did not turn in. He sat on his bed in the darkness, thinking.

"Better turn in, Tom," said Lowther, in a low voice.

Tom shook his head.

"It's all over," said Manners. "We've got our man. There's nothing more doing, Tom."

"We've got the man," said Tom; "but he hasn't done what I hoped. It hasn't come out that he was the thief and that Talbot was innocent."

"Not much good expecting him to own up, I'm afraid," said Lowther. "Still, this makes it look better for Talbot. It can't be denied that it was owing to his warning that the Professor was collared."

"That's something," said Manners.

"That's something," said Tom Merry; "but that's not enough. Look here! We've got that man; he's our prisoner, isn't he?"

"I—I suppose so," said Lowther uneasily.

"What are you thinking of, Tom?"

"He's our prisoner," repeated Tom Merry; "and he's going to clear Talbot. If he makes a confession and clears Talbot, I don't care what becomes of him. He can go free, or go to the deuce, for all I care!"

"Tom!"

"I'm going to see him!" said Tom Merry determinedly.

"But—but it's no good, Tom," said Manners, in a startled whisper. "The fellow would say anything to get free—he would write anything—sign anything. Unless he was to make a personal confession to the police, it wouldn't be taken any notice of."

"I don't see that. If he writes out a confession, stating how Talbot was kidnapped, where he was kept, and so on, we can jolly soon find other evidence to prove it," said Tom. "Others must have seen Talbot when he was a prisoner, and they can be found, arrested perhaps, and made to confess. If we once get the true story, we may be able to prove it; but if that villain is taken away by the police to-morrow morning he will keep silent, if only for revenge upon Talbot."

"But—but——"

"He's our prisoner, and we're going to do it," said Tom.

"There'll be a row——"

"I don't care for that."

"But—but he's locked up in the punishment room, Tom. You can't get at him——"

"We've still got the key—the other key," said Tom. "You remember when I was shut up there once, you fellows got a key for the door, and I've kept it. It's in my box now."

"But I say, Tom——"

"'Nuff said, old chap. As soon as Railton's fast asleep I'm going down."

There was no moving Tom Merry from his resolution. In the darkness he hunted in his box for the key. Half an hour was allowed to pass. By that time it was pretty certain that the Housemaster and the prefects were asleep again.

"We're coming with you," said Lowther.

"Just as you like."

The Terrible Three left the dormitory silently. Manners and Lowther were feeling extremely doubtful and uneasy; but, as Tom said, the cracksman was their prisoner. They had kept watch and ward for him, in the hope of helping Talbot by means of his capture. Tom Merry was acting within his rights, whatever view the "powers that were" might take of the matter.

The three juniors crept down the passage. All was silent and dark about them.

But as they came upon the lower land-

ing Tom Merry suddenly paused, with a deep breath.

"Hold on, you fellows!" he whispered.

"What!"

"Listen!"

A sound had come from below—from the lark hall. It was a slight sound, but they knew what it was. It came from the little window in the hall.

"My only hat!" murmured Lowther. "Lucky we didn't go to bed. There's another. He must have a confederate outside, and we never thought——"

Manners chuckled softly.

"All serene! We'll nab him like the other. Wait till he's got inside."

"What-ho!"

The juniors—forgetting all about the prisoner in the punishment-room for the moment—crept silently down the stairs to the ground floor. In the darkness of the hall they watched the little window. Outside was a glimmer of starlight, and against it a form showed dimly at the window. There was another faint creak. Then creak—creak again. The juniors stood with bated breath. They had no doubt now that the cracksman had had an accomplice who had remained outside the house, and, of course, by the light in the Head's study, and then the light again in the punishment-room, the rascal outside had guessed what had happened. He was seeking to enter the house to release the Professor—perhaps to carry out the interrupted robbery. That, at least, was how it appeared to the Terrible Three. And they waited grimly and silently for the newcomer to enter—to cut off his escape when he was fairly inside the house.

The minutes passed. Evidently the newcomer was not so skilled a cracksman as John Rivers or the Toff. To them the casement window would have presented few difficulties. But minute followed minute, and the shadowy figure without was still at work. The juniors waited, wondering.

"I say," murmured Lowther, when a quarter of an hour had passed, "that can't be a giddy cracksman—it can't be! More likely some fellow who's broken bounds, and is trying to get in again. Anybody who knew

the bizney would have had that window open long ago."

The same thought had come into Tom Merry's mind.

"Might be Cutts of the Fifth," chuckled Manners. "Been on the randan, perhaps, and found that he couldn't get in again. Railton found a window open, and fastened it, you know. Cutts might have got out before the Professor got in."

The chums of the Shell laughed silently. If the black sheep of the Fifth had been out of bounds, and had found his return cut off, they could guess what a blue funk he would be in. He would have to get into the house somehow, and he might have tried the hall-window, as the easiest way. Little as they liked Cutts of the Fifth, it was not their business to give him away if he had been on the "randan," as Manners expressed it; and if the figure outside proved to be a St. Jim's fellow, they had no intention of interfering with him. But it was necessary to be sure.

The creaking at the window continued.

"We'd better make sure before we bring Railton on the scene," murmured Lowther. "It might be Cutts, or St. Leger, or Knox, or Levison of the Fourth—and we don't want to get a fellow sacked—'tain't our bizney."

"Let him get in, and we'll see who it is," said Tom Merry in a whisper. "As soon as he gets in we can see—there's enough light here. Keep in cover."

The juniors kept back in the shadow of the banisters. Thence they had a view of the dim hall, into which the starlight was falling. Dim as the light was, it was enough for them, when they had a clear view of the intruder, to tell whether he was a St. Jim's fellow or not.

The window swung open.

A dark figure appeared in the opening for a moment, and dropped lightly into the hall. The window was closed again.

The juniors remained still, scarcely breathing.

A figure, certainly not so tall as themselves, stood in the starlit hall, and they could hear a subdued, panting breath. The figure was wrapped in a coat from head to foot, but there was something in the outline that brought a strange and startling suspicion into

their minds. Under a closely drawn cap there was a glint of light on coiled hair.

Lowther grasped Tom Merry's arm. It was not a man—it was not a boy. It was a woman—or, rather, a girl—from the stature evidently a young girl—who had forced a way into the School House in the dead of night.

The Shell fellows were dumb with amazement!

Who was it?

A girl—evidently. But who? Back into Tom Merry's mind came a remembrance of something that Talbot had told him once—of a girl-chum he had had in the old days—the Professor's daughter!

Tom Merry thought that he understood. The Professor's accomplice was not a member of the gang—not a male member, that is—but his daughter! It was Marie Rivers—that was the name; he remembered it now.

There was a scratch in the darkness—a match flared out. It showed up a white, scared face.

A cry of amazement burst from the three juniors uncontrollably, for they knew that face.

The girl who had entered the School House was Miss March, the Little Sister of the Poor, the young nurse who had served so well and so bravely in the sanatorium during the influenza epidemic—Miss March!

Tom Merry sprang forward.

“Miss March! What are you doing here?”

## THE THIRTY-THIRD CHAPTER

### Father and Daughter!

THE match went out. There was a low, strangled cry, and the girl reeled; and Tom Merry had just time to catch her as she fell.

She lay heavily in his arms, scarcely conscious, scarcely breathing. The shock had been too much for her.

“Good heavens!” muttered Manners.

“Miss March, what—?”

“The Little Sister!” gasped Lowther.

“But—but what is she doing here?”

“Goodness knows!” said Tom.

The girl struggled free.

“Miss March, don't be afraid!” whispered Tom Merry. “We're your friends here—only Manners and Lowther with me. There's nothing to be afraid of!”

The girl gave a sob.

“But what are you doing here?” said Tom, in wonder.

“Oh, I—I—” In the starlight he could see the tears running down her cheeks. “I—I had to come—I had to—”

“But why? Why aren't you in bed at this time of night?” said Tom, in utter wonder, mingled with a half-formed suspicion. “Why did you come here?”

“I had to! Have pity on me—help me!” sobbed the girl.

“Of course we will help you!” said Manners. “But what's the matter?”

“My father!”

“Your father! I don't understand—”

Tom Merry understood. He could not doubt any longer. Indeed, now that the flash of truth came into his mind he wondered that he had not guessed something, at least, before. The friendship between Talbot and Miss March—many of the fellows had remarked that they seemed to have known each other all their lives. And the shock little Frayne of the Third had received when he saw Miss March in the sanatorium, and Frayne had known Marie Rivers in the old days when he was an outcast of the slums. When first the Little Sister had come to his bedside Frayne had been heard to call her “Marie.” It had been supposed that he was feverish and wandering in his thoughts; but Tom Merry understood now.

“My father!” the girl was repeating.

“But your father—he's not here!” said Monty Lowther.

“He is here! Help me to find him. Listen! I saw the light in the Head's study, and then I knew—I knew—” She sobbed again.

“Then he did not come out, and there was a light in the punishment-room, so I guessed—”

“But—but—but—” stammered Lowther blankly. “That's a burglar; that's the cracksman. It's the Professor; he's come back, and we've caught him!”

“I know—I know!”

“He is your father?” said Tom Merry.

She sobbed.

"Yes."

"You are Marie Rivers?"

"I am Marie Rivers."

"Good heavens!" muttered Lowther.

"But—but—but——" stammered Lowther blankly.

"No, no—never! I had told him I would not—I could not; but—but I knew that he would come. Ever since I have been unable to sleep. I have been doing no duty. I have slept in the day and watched at night. I knew he would come. And—and to-night I did not see him, but when I saw the light I knew——" She choked.

"Poor kid!" muttered Lowther "That awful villain is your father!"

"He is my father. I came here to save him. I knew that he must be a prisoner here, as he was not taken away. I—I must save him! He is my father!"

The juniors were silent. Villain as John Rivers was, he was her father, and she sought to save him. They understood now why the poor girl had forced her way into the School House at that hour. It was to save the cracksman before the morning came—before the police closed their grip upon him and hope was lost.

He was her father!

And the devotion of the unhappy girl went straight to their hearts. They understood that she was no confederate of the villain—she had watched for him to attempt to turn him from his purpose. But when she found that he was a prisoner, her devotion had led her to this.

It was wrong—yet it was noble. He was her father. It was not for a child to set up judgment upon a parent.

"You will help me?" breathed the girl.

"Help you!"

"I must save him! Afterwards I will go away. I will leave the school—I will do anything you choose! But you will let me save him?"

Tom Merry drew a deep breath.

"Goodness knows, I'm sorry," he said; "but—but it was the man who robbed the school, Miss March. It was he who threw suspicion upon Talbot. Talbot's name has to

be cleared. The innocent cannot suffer for the guilty."

"Let me see him. I will plead with him. I will make him tell the truth. Talbot shall be cleared," whispered the girl. "Now, in this strait, he will yield. I am sure of it."

"You can see him," said Tom Merry. "But—but as for letting him go, I——"

"Let me see him!"

"That much, yes."

"God bless you!"

The chums of the Shell, still in a state of amazement, led the girl to the punishment-room. What to do in that amazing emergency they simply did not know. Their hearts ached for Marie. They knew that she must be suffering. But in their thoughts Talbot came first. The innocent must not suffer for the guilty, even if a girl's heart were broken.

Tom Merry silently unlocked the door.

There was a low, startled exclamation from within. They heard the cracksman roll off the bed. He had not been sleeping.

Tom Merry struck a match, and lighted a candle-end that Lowther produced from his pocket. The flickering light showed up the room, and the cracksman, with his hands behind him, bound. His face was haggard. He gazed at the stricken girl as she came in, with amazement.

"You here!" he muttered.

The juniors followed the girl into the room and closed the door. The cracksman did not look at them. His eyes were fixed upon the colourless face of his daughter. For once remorse had awakened in the Professor's hard heart.

"You!" he repeated.

"Father!"

"Hush!"

"They—they know," said the girl. "I have told them that you are my father."

"Marie!"

"They have let me see you. I—I tried to come to save you," muttered the girl, with white lips. "Now it does not depend on me. Father, why did you come here? I—I watched for you—every night I have watched from the quadrangle, in the cold and darkness, to stop you when you came, to turn you back, and—and when you came I did not see you,



I did not know until you were a prisoner," she sobbed.

"And you came to save me?" said the cracksmen, in wonder.

"Yes."

"You are a good girl, Marie," said the Professor, in a softened tone. "I have not been a good father to you. Perhaps—if it were over again—things might be different; but it is too late now. Go back. Don't you understand that you are risking your liberty in coming here?"

"I do not care."

"But you must care! Go back while there is time. These boys will keep your secret. Save yourself, you foolish girl!"

Marie turned her wet eyes on the chums of the Shell.

"You will let me save him?" she pleaded. "It is nothing to you if he escapes; but he is my father."

"Let him confess, then," said Tom Merry steadily. "Let him confess that he was guilty and that Talbot was innocent. Let him prove it, and—and we'll take the law into our own hands and let him go."

"Father! You hear?"

"I hear," said John Rivers.

There was a strong expression upon his face. The white, stricken face of his daughter had deeply moved him, hard-hearted criminal as he was.

"You will do justice to the Toff?" said Marie. "It will cost you nothing now, father. That is not much to ask."

"And my liberty?" said the Professor, with a gleam in his eyes.

"You shall go free if you can clear Talbot," said Tom Merry. "But he must be cleared beyond the shadow of a doubt."

The Professor shrugged his shoulders. Even at that moment he hesitated. His plans, carefully laid—to get the Toff, the prince of cracksmen, into his hands again—they had to be thrown aside and abandoned. His face hardened again.

"Well?" said Tom Merry.

"I have nothing to say," said the Professor sullenly.

Marie uttered a cry.

"Father—father!"

"You have made your choice, John Rivers," said Tom Merry, setting his teeth. "You will remain here till the police come, then."

The Professor did not reply. The thought was working in his mind that his daughter would yet contrive to save him. He knew that the girl would not abandon him.

"Father!" exclaimed Marie appealingly.

"I have nothing to say. Leave me to my fate!"

"I cannot!" The girl turned streaming eyes upon Tom Merry. "You will let me save him? Say that you will let me! Let him go free! He is my father!"

"Miss March——"

"Let me save him! I will save him! You shall not stop me, unless you send me, too, to the police!"

The juniors looked at one another helplessly. To let the girl share the fate of her rascally father through them, was not to be thought of. Was, then, the cunning villain to escape after all, and Talbot uncleared, still an outcast? Yet to resist the pleading of the weeping girl was a harder task than Tom Merry was equal to.

There was a silence in the room, broken only by the sound of Marie's sobbing. In the silence there came a heavy step without, and the door was flung open. Mr. Railton strode in. There was an angry frown upon his brow, and angry words upon his lips, but they were checked at the unexpected sight of the weeping girl.

"Miss March! You here! Tom Merry, what does this mean?"

## THE THIRTY-FOURTH CHAPTER

### Light at Last!

TOM MERRY stood silent.

The matter was out of his hands now. The juniors had taken it a little too readily for granted that the Housemaster had gone back to sleep. Evidently he had remained very much awake. As a matter of fact, the Housemaster had thought of the possibility that the cracksmen had not come alone, and he had decided to watch for the remainder of the night. He had come to look at the punishment-room to be sure that all was safe,

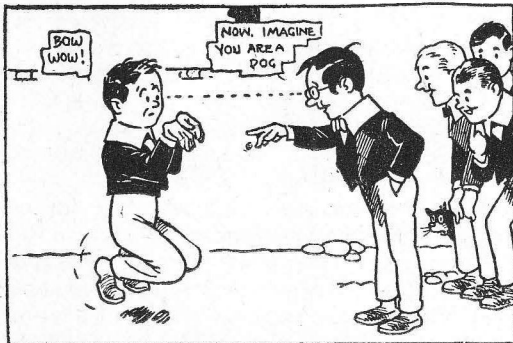
# THE SCHOOLBOY MESMERIST



1. Benjamin Broadbrow, one of the brightest pupils at Dr. Swisher's Academy, was always spotting up something or other. For a time he took up Spellmanism—until the Head cured him with his cane.



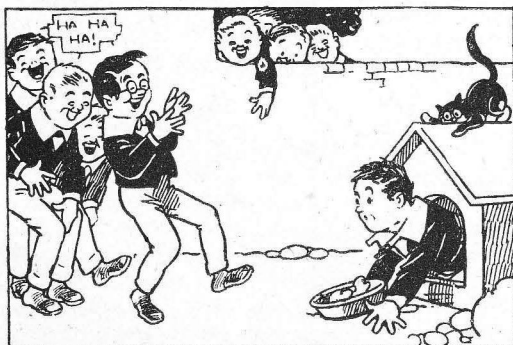
2. Afterwards Benjamin started to learn all about mesmerism in his spare time. When he had finished practising on the school mouser, he decided to put the 'fluence on some of his little pals. Out in the quad—



3. He cast his eagle eye on Willie Wiggins. "Willie," he quoth, "you are mesmerised. Imagine you are a prize pup! So get down on your benders." "Tee-hee! Now we shall see some fun!" smiled the lads.



4. "Get to your kennel!" then ordered Benjamin, "and have a tuck in from that dish of bones!" "Bow-wow!" barked Willie, leaping lightly into the kennel. "Oo-er! I'm off!" gasped the cat.



5. Then Willie Wiggins popped his head out of the kennel and growled like one o'clock. "Ha, ha, ha!" roared all the juniors. "This is funny!" "Now get into the kitchen, sir!" cried Benjamin.



6. And, arriving there, Willie straightway started licking the platters clean! But when Dr. Swisher found out about it all he gave Benjamin full marks for his cleverness—with his cane!

and he had seen the light and heard the voices. But the sight of the weeping, troubled girl had taken him utterly aback, and the vials of his wrath were not poured out upon the juniors.

"What does this mean?" he repeated. The hope that had risen in his breast was gone now.

"Miss March——" began the bewildered Housemaster. "How did you come here? What——"

"I am not Miss March," said the girl dully. "That is not my name. My name is Marie Rivers, and I am his—his daughter."

"Good heavens!"

Mr. Railton almost staggered.

"I knew he was a prisoner, and I came to set him free," said Marie. "Now—now it is all over, and you may send me to prison with him."

"Marie!" muttered the cracksman.

"That man, John Rivers, is your father?" said Mr. Railton.

The girl sobbed.

"Yes."

"But—but you had nothing to do with this—this—with his coming here?" the Housemaster said hesitatingly. "I cannot believe that!"

Marie shook her head.

"I will not keep the secret any longer," she said wearily. "I have been no better than he—no better than Talbot was in the old days; but—but since I came here, since I saw the Toff again—I—I changed even as Talbot has done. After that, it was my only object to prevent this. I would have stopped him if I could, but now I—I could not abandon him. He is my father."

"It was Talbot who showed you better things, a better way of life?" said Mr. Railton.

"Yes; it was Talbot."

"And yet he has—has gone back——"

"He has not gone back!" said Marie.

"Father, the truth shall be told now. If you will not tell it, then I will tell it."

The cracksman did not speak.

"It was not Talbot who robbed the Head, sir; it was my father. It was his plan to make suspicion fall on the Toff, to force him to go back to his old life."

"You knew it?"

"I knew it."

"And you allowed that unhappy boy to be driven from the school in disgrace when you could have saved him with a word?" exclaimed the Housemaster, in agitated tones.

The girl moaned.

"Could I betray my father? Now it does not matter. But while he was free I could not give him up—I could not, though my heart was almost broken. I have suffered——"

"My poor child," said the Housemaster softly, "I understand. Poor Talbot! But why did he not speak? If he had told us that you knew the truth, you could not have concealed it then."

Marie smiled faintly.

"Talbot would never have uttered a word to harm me," she said.

"And he has suffered for his silence," said the Housemaster, deeply moved. "The unhappy lad! But there, at least reparation shall be made!"

"But my father—my father——"

Mr. Railton knitted his brows in thought. The misery in the girl's face touched his heart, as it had touched the hearts of the juniors. The sullen cracksman deserved, a dozen times over, the punishment that was in store for him, but——

"I must speak to the Head," said the Housemaster at last. "In this I cannot act on my own responsibility. But if this man will write out a free and full confession, it is possible that something can be done. I promise nothing."

"Father!" whispered Marie.

The cracksman gave a hard laugh.

"Bah! After you have told all it is not much use for me to keep silent," he said. "I will do as you wish."

Mr. Railton made a gesture to the juniors.

"Go back to your dormitory," he said. "Kindly do not leave it again until the morning. Miss March, go back to your room; you may leave your father with me."

"But—but——"

"At dawn I shall consult the Head. You may be present. I cannot promise you more than that. But you shall see the Head before anything is decided."

"Thank you, Mr. Railton." Marie moved towards her father timidly. "Father, you will do what is right now? It is your only chance; you see that?"

"You can rely on me to see which side my bread is buttered," said John Rivers, with a sneering laugh.

Tom Merry and Co. quitted the room.

"How did you enter here, Merry?" asked Mr. Railton.

"I—I had a key, sir," stammered Tom.

"Kindly give it to me."

Tom Merry handed over the key, and the three juniors returned to the Shell dormitory. They turned in.

"Well, this has been a night!" said Monty Lowther, as he drew the sheets about him.

"It means everything for Talbot," said Tom Merry, with a deep breath. "He will be cleared, now—through Marie Rivers."

"Poor girl!" said Manners. "I—I say, we'd better keep all that dark, you know. No need for anybody else to know that she is that villain's daughter!"

"Yes, rather!"

It was some time before the juniors slept.

They were up before the rising-bell clanged out in the morning.

Tom Merry was very keen to know what had happened since the cracksman had been left with Mr. Railton.

He had a strong suspicion that John Rivers would be allowed to escape, after signing a confession, for the sake of the Little Sister.

The rising-bell was beginning to clang when the juniors came downstairs in the grey dawn.

They made their way first to the punishment-room. The door was unfastened; the room was empty. There was no sign of John Rivers.

"Gone!" murmured Lowther.

They strolled out into the quadrangle. In the grey dawn a light streamed from the window of the Head's study. Dr. Holmes had evidently been down very early. A slight, graceful figure came away from the School House, and hurried across towards the sanatorium. Tom Merry ran to intercept the Little Sister.

"Miss March!" he exclaimed. "It is all right?"

The girl stopped and smiled at him through her tears.

"Yes," she said, "I have been with the Head. He was very kind. There is a full confession, signed by my father, and witnessed by Mr. Railton and the Head. It is going to be made public to-day. Talbot is cleared!"

"Thank goodness! But—but your father?"

"He is gone," said Marie, in a low voice.

"He—he was placed in the punishment-room again, but—but the door was not locked, and—and he escaped."

Tom Merry smiled.

"I am glad," he said.

"And—and he is not so bad as you have believed," said the girl, with pathetic eagerness. "He has promised to amend. I—I hope he will keep his promise."

"I hope so," said Tom.

"I shall help him all that I can," said Marie. "I shall join him."

"You are leaving here?"

Marie smiled a little.

"After—after what has happened, could I remain?" she said.

"Why not?" said Tom. "Nobody will know about—about your connection with him. You don't think we shall chatter, surely? And Talbot, when he comes back—"

Marie shook her head.

"I must go," she said. "I'll stay a few days, that is all. I—I am not well enough to go at once, but then— And—and you will tell Talbot that I have done all I could for him, and I was sorry to let him be wronged, but he will understand that I could not sacrifice my father; he is always generous."

"I will tell him," said Tom.

Marie hurried on. Tom Merry was very thoughtful. All had gone well so far, but Talbot remained to be found. Where was Talbot?

There was a surprise for St. Jim's that morning. After prayers the whole school was assembled in Big Hall, and the Head came in with a grave face, to address the school.

There was a hush of expectancy. With the exception of the Terrible Three, no one had the faintest idea what was coming.



"Somethin' wathah unusual on this mornin'," Arthur Augustus D'Arcy whispered to Blake. "I wondah——"

"Silence!" rapped out a prefect.

"All wight, Dawwel, deah boy!"

There was deep silence as the Head began to speak, and then a buzz of wonder as the juniors heard what he had to say. Dr. Holmes, with emotion in his fine old face, told them in concise words of the discovery of the plot that had been made against the Toff, his former confederate, of the rascal's confession, and the complete clearing of Talbot from all suspicion. The St. Jim's fellows listened in blank amazement. The plotter had confessed, and not only confessed, but given proof, for sewn up in his clothes had been found some of the banknotes which had been taken from the Head's study on the occasion of the robbery that had been attributed to Talbot. Of Marie Rivers the Head had made no mention. The girl's secret was to be kept.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus, in utter wonder. "I must wemark, deah boys, that this beats the band, you know. It appeahs that Tom Mewwy was wight all the time. That is not surpwisin'; but it appeahs also that I was w'ong, and I wegard that as vewy surpwisin' indeed. Astonishin', in fact!"

"Shurru!" murmured Blake. "The Head's starting on another lap."

"My boys," resumed the Head, "I have explained this to you that justice may be done to that unhappy lad who has been so cruelly wronged. I need not say that search will instantly be made for him, that he will be found and brought here to take his place once more among us all in honour. And I can rely upon you all to give him a hearty welcome."

"Hurra!" shouted Lowther.

And the cheer was taken up.

"Hip-hip, hurrah!"

There was no doubt of the kind of welcome Talbot would get when he returned to St. Jim's.

### THE THIRTY-FIFTH CHAPTER

#### Through the Valley of the Shadow

TALBOT had been cleared!

St. Jim's was eagerly waiting to welcome his return.

But where was Talbot?

Search for him had immediately been started, but day followed day, and there was no news of him. The unhappy boy, penniless, alone, unfriended, hunted as he believed by the police, had disappeared.

That he had gone to London was assured, but in that vast, overgrown city, where was he to be sought? In what den of poverty, if not of crime, had the once happy Shell fellow of St. Jim's hidden himself?

Tom Merry and Co. waited anxiously for news.

But news did not come. Day followed day, and the detectives the Head had employed to seek the unhappy boy made ever the same reports—nothing.

Talbot had disappeared into the labyrinths of the modern Babylon. He might already, as Tom Merry felt, with a sickening sense of misery, have fallen a victim to cold, to hunger, to want. Had his justification come too late? Was the Toff, after all, to fall a victim, still more terribly a victim, of his old associate's scheming, although the truth was known, and all his old friends were anxious to repair the injury that had been done him?

A week had passed, and still there was no news, and Tom Merry made up his mind what he must do. He went to the Head's study to ask leave to look for Talbot himself, fully resolved to take French leave if it were not accorded. But the Head was kind; his own heart was heavy with anxiety for the missing junior. If he thought of a refusal, it died upon his lips as he looked at Tom Merry's pale, careworn face.

"But what could you do, my dear lad, where others have failed?" said Dr. Holmes, kindly enough.

"I can try, sir," said Tom restlessly. "I—I can't bear this, sir. He may be dying of want; he may be dead!" Tom's voice broke, and he tried in vain to keep back his tears. The picture of Talbot, once so strong and hearty and handsome, stretched upon a pallet in some frozen garret, haunted him.

"You may go, you and your friends," said the Head, with a sigh. "I give you leave for a week, but you must obtain permission from home."

"Thank you, sir!"

Permission from home was obtained easily enough, and the Terrible Three prepared for their forlorn hope. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy expressed his sympathy, but he was doubtful, owing to the Terrible Three having forgotten to ask permission for him to accompany them and direct operations. But he nobly hoped for the best. Before they started Tom Merry sought Marie Rivers to tell her they were going. He found the Little Sister pale and troubled.

"Heaven grant you success!" she said. "I have almost given up hope!"

"And you?" said Tom. "Will you be here when Talbot comes—if he comes?"

Marie smiled faintly.

"I shall be here," she said. "I—I have had a letter from my father. He has left England. He has promised me again to keep the promise he made to the Head—to repent and reform. I think he will keep his word. And—and Dr. Holmes wishes me to remain in my post here, and I have consented. He has forgiven me, and trusts me! Oh, I shall be happy here, if—if——"

"We will bring him back," said Tom. He knew she was thinking of Talbot. "We won't come back without him!"

And the Terrible Three started with determination, if with faint hopes.

Mr. Foxe of Scotland Yard met them at the London terminus. The detective, who had once hunted Talbot as a victim, was seeking him now to restore him to honour; but even Mr. Foxe had failed so far.

For several days the juniors, sometimes with Mr. Foxe and sometimes alone, pursued their search. They had put up in an hotel near the station, and every day they were at their work—searching, searching. But as the days passed they realised the hopelessness of it.

At St. Jim's it was easy to think of searching for Talbot in London. In London, they realised what it meant. In that vast desert of bricks and mortar, where millions came and went, a single human being could disappear like a drop of water in the ocean.

In the wintry, misty streets, in parks and commons, where recruits were drilling, under

the shadows of night in darkened thoroughfares, they wandered and sought in vain.

They found themselves scanning strange faces, peering into crowds, in the hope of seeing the well-known face of their chum among the thousands—among the tens of thousands—while hope died lower and lower in their hearts.

Into many strange places they penetrated, where poverty, and the vice that comes of poverty, covered for shelter from the bitter winter. Many a heartbreaking sight came under their eyes—the grim, gaunt, unnecessary suffering of an ill-governed city—but still they did not find what they sought.

At night they went without fail to the Embankment, that last hideous refuge of the homeless poor, and peered at the shivering, wasted figures shrinking pitifully on the seats, in the hope—the dreadful hope—that their friend might be among those unhappy, crushed victims of a faulty civilisation. And still they did not find him.

"We won't give in," said Tom Merry, when the week of leave was up. "I'm going to write to the Head for leave to stay longer. He must let us. Come what may, I'm not going back without Talbot. To think of him here—on the Embankment, perhaps at night, in the rain!"

"And those others," said Monty Lowther miserably. All the cheery humour had gone out of Lowther's face now. "It's horrible! It keeps me awake at nights thinking of them! Surely something could be done?"

"Yes," said Tom bitterly; "when the country wakes up, if it ever does, and elects men to do things, instead of politicians to babble. But to think of Talbot among all that— We must find him—we shall find him!"

"We must!" said Manners; but there was little hope in his voice.

But they were determined, hope or not, to succeed—to find their chum, to get him away from that noisy, roaring, heartless desert of bricks, back to the green country, where Nature is still as God had made it.

The night came on again—night dark and chill and misty, with a drizzle of rain, and the three chums turned up their coat-collars,

and pulled down their caps, and went on their pilgrimage once more along the cold, shining river—the great river that flows unchanging through so much of woe and despair.

Even in the drizzle of rain there were wretched outcasts upon the seats, huddled in their rags. With heavy hearts the juniors walked on, peering at the bleared faces, brutalised by suffering.

A figure was leaning on the stone balustrade, looking down at the river—a ragged, tattered figure, only too familiar to their eyes now in its misery.

Tom Merry paused. There was something in the fixed gaze of that outcast, bent upon the water, that startled him. Well he knew that to many of those hopeless wretches the deeps of the river were the only refuge from suffering. Was this another poor wretch about to seek release in the icy waters?

But even as he paused the figure turned away, and Tom saw him shake his head. He moved on, and in the shivering form it seemed to Tom Merry that there was something familiar. His heart bounded. Was it possible? At last!

He ran forward.

“Talbot!”

The tattered figure swung round with a startled cry. The light of a lamp flared on his face—showed it thin and wan, emaciated—a face of death. But even in that changed and frozen face Tom recognised the once handsome and healthy face of his old chum. He grasped the boy’s arm, his hand trembling.

“Talbot, I’ve found you at last, old man!”

Talbot reeled.

“Tom Merry!” he muttered thickly.

“Talbot! Oh, old chap!” muttered Lowther. “Here, take my coat; wrap it round you. Oh, Talbot, to find you like this!”

Talbot was reeling unsteadily. They wrapped him in Lowther’s warm coat, and Tom led him to the nearest seat.

They held his frozen hands. Talbot could not speak. But it was Talbot—it was the Toff—and they had found him.

“You—you’ve been looking for me?” muttered Talbot at last.

“Yes, yes!”

“But—but why—how are you here?”

“Don’t you understand? It’s all come out. John Rivers has confessed—you’re cleared. You’ve got to come back; we’re all waiting to welcome you!”

“Oh, Tom”—Talbot closed his eyes for a moment—“it—it seems more like a dream! And—and you’ve been looking for me, and I—I’ve been hiding and starving!”

Tom chafed his frozen fingers in his own warm hands.

“What have you been doing, Talbot, all this time?”

“Starving and freezing,” said Talbot bitterly. “I had no chance. I wouldn’t go back to—to—you understand?”

“I knew it!”

“And there was nothing else. I tried to get work; but unknown, without a character, and these are hard times,” said Talbot. “I got a job here and there every now and then—an odd job. But jobs are not easy to get these days. And when my money was gone—the money you gave me, Tom—I had to sleep under arches, in brickyards—anywhere I could get for shelter. And that soon settles a fellow’s clothes. You can’t even get clean with that kind of life. They talk about the poor being dirty. How are they to keep clean, Tom? They talk about their being drunken. Goodness knows I was tempted often enough, when I had a few pence, to swallow something that would keep out the cold, if only for an hour! But I never did; I had sense enough not to. But I’ve learned, and these poor wretches haven’t, and— Have you got something to eat about you, Tom? I haven’t tasted food for three days.”

“We’ll be at the hotel in five minutes,” said Tom.

He signed to an empty taxi that was crawling by. Talbot, weak and faint with hunger and suffering, could scarcely step into the vehicle. They helped him in, and drove off. And the outcast devoured ravenously a chunk of toffee that Lowther found in his pocket. Tom Merry could scarcely keep back his tears.

“Oh, it’s like new life to see you fellows again!” said Talbot, with a catch in his voice. “You don’t know what it’s like. I’m not soft, but—but I’ve been through it—hard!”



I meant to fight it out to a finish. The finish wouldn't have been far off if you hadn't found me!"

There was a terrible dread in Tom Merry's breast that it might not be far off now, as he looked at the outcast's emaciated face. Had they found him in time?

And he had cause to fear, for in his room at the hotel, when food was brought, Talbot could eat little—starving as he was—and there was a fearful greyness in his face that brought a sickening dread to the hearts of his chums.

Manners had slipped out to call in a doctor, and the medical man when he came ordered the boy immediately to bed. And in the morning Talbot did not wake in his senses—he awoke with wildly staring eyes and babbling tongue, not knowing where he was or what he said. It was evident that he was ill—that he was going to be very ill—and he could not remain where he was.

Unconscious of what was done to him, the unhappy boy was carried down, warmly wrapped, into an ambulance car, and, with his three chums caring for him, was carried swiftly away from the cold, grim city where he had known so much suffering.

The journey was swift, but Talbot saw nothing—knew nothing of it. He did not know when they arrived at St. Jim's; he did not see the kind, anxious face of the Head bending over him. For that day and for many days he was dead to his surroundings.

There was a hush of sadness in the school during those dark days, while it was known that Talbot lay between life and death in the sanatorium, under the care of the girl who had been his childhood's chum, and whose face now he did not know. They were dark

days for Tom Merry. The chilling fear was in his heart that he had found his chum too late to save him.

But a strong constitution pulled Talbot through the crisis, and there came a day at last when his eyes opened with meaning in them, and he looked about him in wonder, and recognised a sweet, kind face that watched by his bedside. Talbot stretched out a thin, feeble hand.

"Marie!" he whispered.

The girl's pale face lighted up.

"Toff, you know me again!"

"Where am I now?" Talbot's eyes wandered about him. "This is—is——"

"The school," said Marie. "They found you and brought you back."

"And I never knew! Have I been very ill?" asked Talbot.

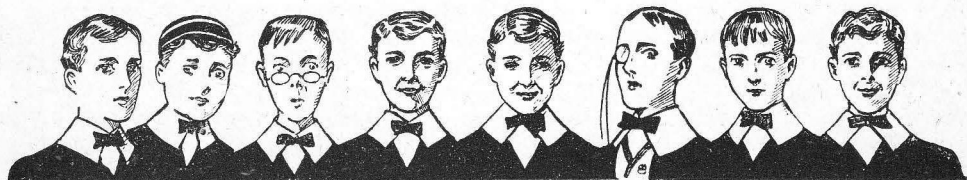
"Very ill," said Marie softly. "But you are better now; you will be well soon."

"I'm very happy now," said Talbot.

From that day he mended fast. In a few more days his chums could come in and talk to him; and the other fellows came in to chat with the invalid—to tell him they were sorry they had doubted him. And Talbot listened to them with a smile.

He was very happy now. The dark days of the Toff were over, and the future stretched bright and golden before him. The Professor was gone—the wide sea rolled between him and the boy he had persecuted—but Marie remained. And when Talbot at last emerged from the school hospital, the rousing welcome he received from the St. Jim's fellows was more than enough to banish from his heart the bitterness of the past.

THE END.



Figgins Dwyinn H Skimpole Tom Merry G. Herries A. A. Darcy M. Lowther J. Blake



# WERE YOU RIGHT?

## Solutions to the Puzzles and Tricks on Pages 247-9

### 1. The Travelling Draught-man.

YOU cannot make the draught-man traverse all the squares in less than sixteen moves, as shown in Fig. 1.

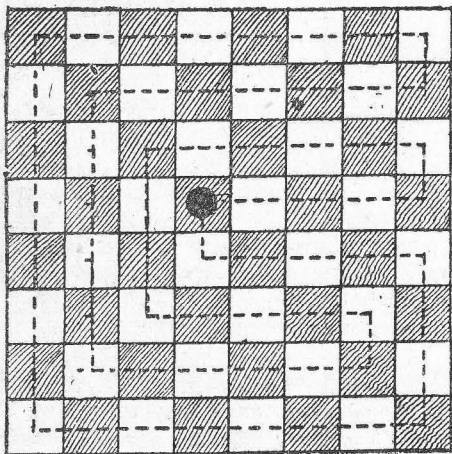


Fig. 1

### 2. Another Draught Puzzle.

THE way to place the sixteen pieces so that no three are in a line in any direction, can be seen from Fig. 2.

### 3. The Rings Joined.

THE nine rings can be joined by four lines, as shown in Fig. 3.

### 4. The Ten Rows.

THE complicated geometrical figure shown in Fig. 4 shows the ten rows formed with nine counters.

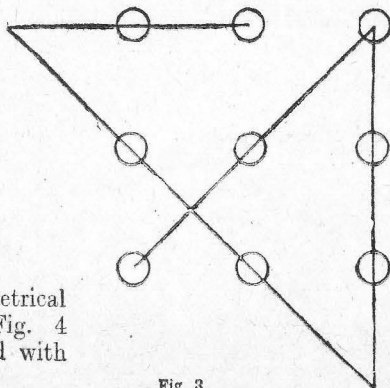


Fig. 3

### 5. The Cabalistic Sign.

BY making the two cuts shown in Fig. 5, the piece of paper will be divided into four parts that will fit together into a square.

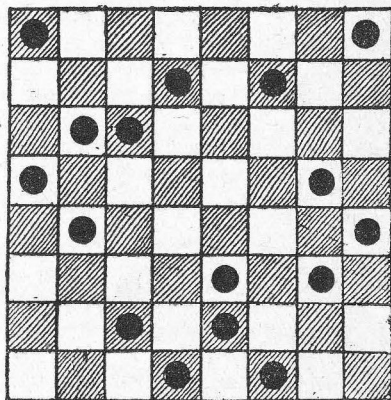


Fig. 2

### 6. The Dangerous Anarchists.

THE simplest method of rearranging the prisoners was as follows (as there was only one vacant cell at any time the numbers designate which prisoner was moved therein) — 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 6, 5, 3, 1, 2, 6, 5, 3, 1, 2, 4, 8, 7, 1, 2, 4, 8, 7, 4, 5, 6.

### 7. Catching the Donkey.

ACCORDING to the rules of the game, the donkey moves first, and the following is one of the shortest methods by which the man can catch him. It will doubtless amuse you to find other, and probably quicker, ways of cornering Ned.

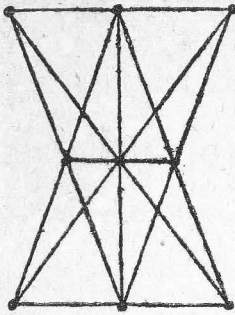


Fig. 4

Donkey to 3  
 Man ,, 36  
 Donkey ,, 21  
 Man ,, 30  
 Donkey ,, 3  
 Man ,, 8  
 Donkey ,, 4  
 Man ,, 7  
 Donkey ,, 3  
 Man ,, 12

When the man has driven the ass into the corner at 5, of course

there is no more chance of escape, and Ned has to submit to the bridle with resignation.

**8. Like to Like.**

**M**OVING two men at a time, the four moves are :

2 and 3 moved to spaces 9 and 10  
 5 and 6 moved to spaces 2 and 3



Fig. 6

8 and 9 moved to spaces 5 and 6  
 1 and 2 moved to spaces 8 and 9  
 The counters will then appear as in Fig. 6.

**9. The Broken Chain.**

**T**O repair the chain the jeweller had recourse to a very simple device. Breaking the three links of one of the pieces he used them to join the remaining four pieces, thus restoring it to its original length.

**10. The Diamond Cross.**

**T**HE owner of the diamond cross thought she had been very clever in counting the stones as she did, but her cunning overreached itself,

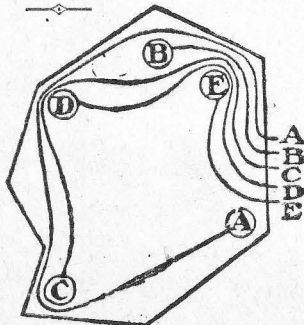


Fig. 8

for the jeweller had only to remove the diamonds at the extremities of the crosspiece, and shift this latter up one point, as in Fig. 7, to make this theft almost unnoticeable. You will find the diamonds count nine, even though two stones have been removed.

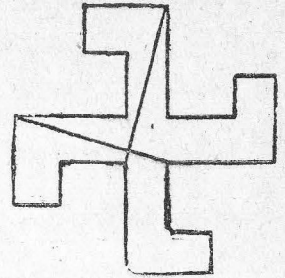


Fig. 5

**11. The Quarrelsome Railways.**

**A**FTER much surveying and discussion, the railways laid their lines as shown in Fig. 8.

**12. The Other Railway Problem.**

**T**HE following is the simplest method by which the engine could transpose the trucks G, H,

I pushes G into F, and returns and pushes H up to G. The two trucks are then coupled together, drawn down to C, and pushed over to A. G is then uncoupled, and I takes H back to F, and leaves it there. I then returns to G, pulls it back to E, and leaves it there. I then returns to H by way of C, and draws it down to D, thus completing the task.

**13. The Mitre.**

**A** GLANCE at Fig. 9 will show how the mitre can be divided into four similar parts.

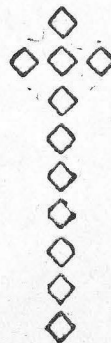


Fig. 7

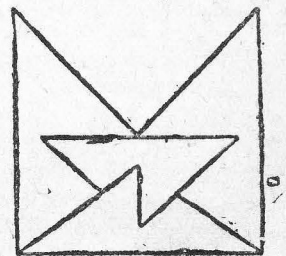


Fig. 9