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— No. 362. — Vol. 9. —



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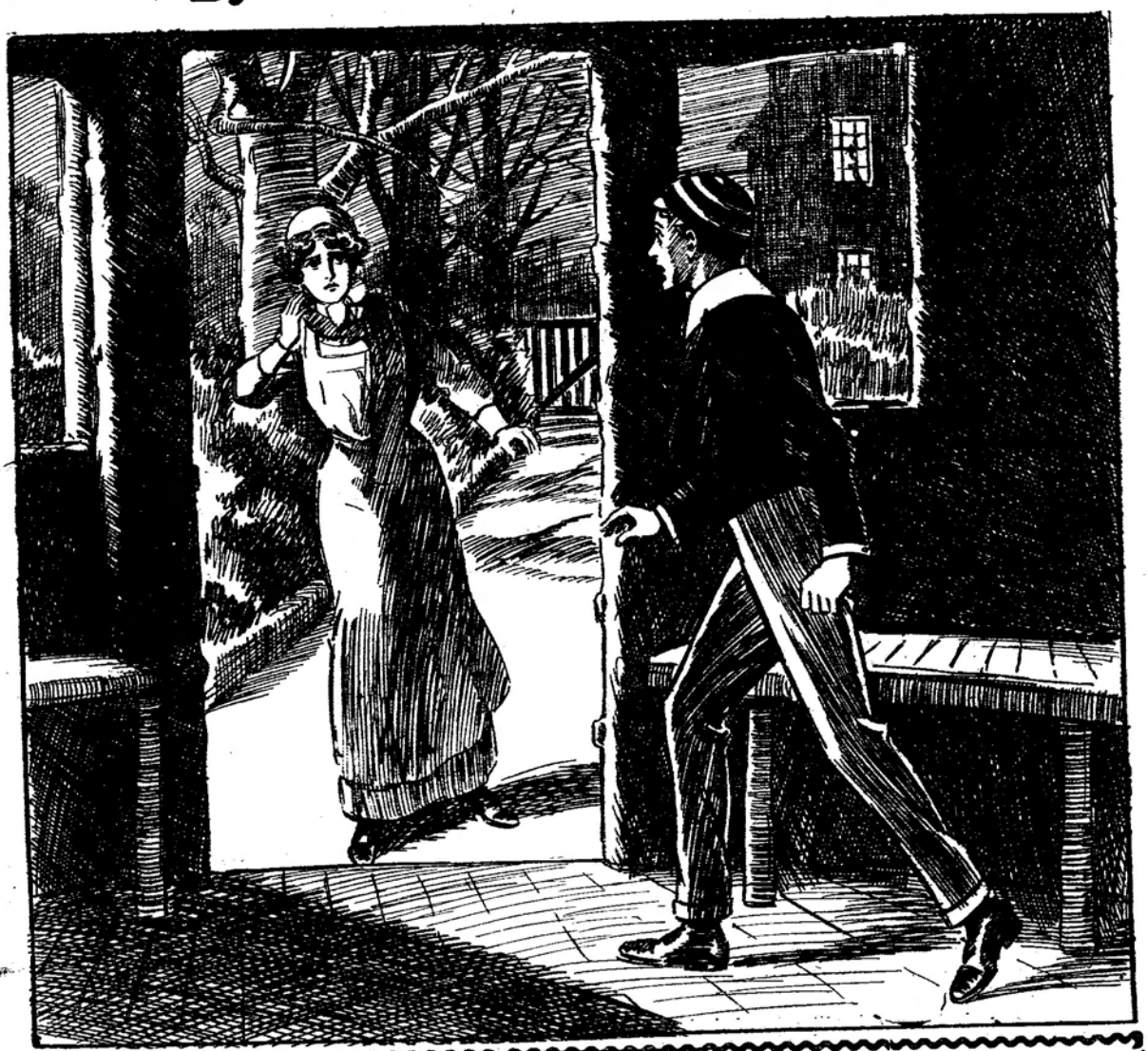
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COMPLETE STORIES FOR ALL, AND EVERY STORY A GEM!

CAST OUT FROM THE SCHOOL!

A Grand Long, Complete Story of Tom Merry & Co., Talbot and Marie Rivers.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.



There was a light step on the garden path, and Talbot sprang to his feet. "Toff!" It was a soft whisper. Marie Rivers, in her nurse's dress, and with a silk muffler drawn about her graceful neck, stood before him.
(See Chapter 2.)

CHAPTER 1.

D'Arcy Knows What To Do.

"WHAT'S the wowwy?"

D'Arcy of the Fourth asked that question, as he lounged gracefully into Tom Merry's study at St. Jim's.

Tom Merry was looking worried.

Manners and Lowther were frowning in sympathy.

The Terrible Three of the Shell, in fact, looked as if a large proportion of the troubles of the universe had settled upon their youthful shoulders.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was quite a striking contrast. His aristocratic face expressed the most complete satisfaction with himself and things generally. Arthur Augustus evidently considered, like the immortal writer, that everything was for the best, in the best of all possible worlds.

"Anythin' up?" pursued Arthur Augustus, as the captain of the Shell did not immediately reply to his question.

Tom Merry grunted.

Next Wednesday:

"LOYAL TO THE LAST!" AND "OFFICER AND TROOPER!"

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"It's the Abbotsford match to-morrow," he said.

"Yaas; that's what I've come to see you about."

"And it's rotten," said Tom Merry discontentedly. "Here are more than half the team laid up in the sanatorium——"

"Wathah lucky bargees, I think, considewin' what a wippin' nurse they have to look aftah them——"

"Oh, rats!" said Tom Merry crossly. "Here's Manners only just on his legs again, and he isn't fit to play. Figgins and Kerr and Wynn are all on the sick list. What are we going to do for a goalkeeper, with Fatty Wynn laid up? It's rotten!"

And Tom Merry grunted again, very much put out.

It was a serious matter enough, for the junior football captain of St. Jim's. The outbreak of influenza at St. Jim's had knocked the junior eleven into a cocked hat, so to speak. A match with the Grammar School had had to be scratched. But Tom Merry was naturally anxious not to scratch the next outside fixture if he could help it. He wanted to play the Abbotsford match. But with a depleted team, and with even his reserves laid up in the school hospital, his task was not easy.

Hence his worried looks.

But the satisfied smile did not leave the face of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. He seemed to have an inward source of satisfaction that was impervious to mere considerations of footer.

"The fact is, deah boy, I came to see you about the match to-mowwow," said the swell of St. Jim's. "I've been thinkin', and I've got an ideah."

"About a goalkeeper?" asked Tom, interested a little. "Whom do you suggest?"

"I was not thinkin' about a goalkeepah."

"Fatty Wynn and Herries are both laid up, and Clifton Dane is too crocked to play," said Tom Merry. "I suppose it will have to be Gore."

"I was goin' to suggest——"

"Lucky we've got Talbot at inside-right," said Tom thoughtfully. "Jolly lucky for us that old Talbot's here, and he's not laid up. I shall have to put Hammond on the wing next to him, I suppose."

"I was thinkin'——"

"If you've got a suggestion to make, Gussy, out with it. I'd let anybody suggest anything just now," said Tom Merry resignedly. "You've got something to suggest about the match to-morrow?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I was thinkin' that Miss March——"

The Terrible Three stared at Arthur Augustus blankly.

"Miss March?" repeated Monty Lowther.

"Nursey!" ejaculated Manners.

"Fathead!" roared Tom Merry. "What are you getting at? Miss March is a jolly good nurse, but she can't play footer, I suppose?"

"Pway don't be widiculous, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus stiffly. "I was not suggestin' that Miss March should play footah. I was goin' to wemark that Miss March is a wippin' girl, and though she is weally only a kid, she has done wondahs—wondahs!" repeated Arthur Augustus emphatically.

"What the dickens has that got to do with the Abbotsford match?"

"I'm comin' to that, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy calmly. "I have been thinkin' that Miss March must be bored to death lookin' aftah a lot of sick boundahs, especially with the twouble she takes with them. I heah that she sat up neahly all night with young Fwayne, f'winstanee. Well, wouldn't it be a good ideah to awwange it somehow to take Miss March ovah to Abbotsford to see the match?"

"What!"

"Wathah surpwised you—what?" grinned Arthur Augustus "The ideah flashed into my bwain, you know. I am suah that Miss March would enjoy a wun out, and she would like to see the match, you know. And Talbot will be there, and she seems wathah taken with Talbot for some weason. Isn't it a wippin' ideah?"

"You—you——" gasped Tom Merry.

He could hardly believe his ears at first.

Here he was, worried to the verge of bad temper by the difficulties of making up an eleven that would not be hopelessly licked at Abbotsford. And the best suggestion Arthur Augustus could make was that Miss March should be taken over to Abbotsford to see the match.

The juniors liked Miss March immensely, of course She was a member of the Little Sisters of the Poor, and she had devoted herself to the task of nursing the invalids in the school hospital. She was very popular. But popular and undoubtedly nice as Miss March was, Tom Merry & Co. were not thinking about her just then. There were more pressing matters to be considered.

The Terrible Three glared at Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

But that cheerful youth, quite taken up with his ripping idea, rattled on:

"Blake says that Miss March was quite an angel, you know, when he was in the sanatowium, and he was quite sowwy to get well. Kangawooh says the same. And she has been lookin' wathah pale. A wun ovah to Abbotsford to see us play in the match will do her lots of good, you know. We must get permish for her somehow fwom the matwon. Of course, I shall look aftah her. You fellows needn't bothah at all. I will take the mattah entirely into my own hands."

"You fathead!"

"Eh?"

"You burbling ass!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"You bother me about that rot, when I'm at my wits' end to make up a team!" roared the indignant junior captain.

"Wot! Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"You silly jabberwock! Go and eat coke!"

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort! I wegard your wemarks, Tom Mewwy, as the wemarks of a wottah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus indignantly. "Considewin' what a weally wippin' gal Miss March is, I wegard it as our bizney to put our heads togethah, and awwange for her to come——"

"Oh, ring off!"

"I decline to wing off. I considah——"

"Fathead!"

"Ass!"

"Duffer!"

And with these three clear and succinct expressions of opinion, the Terrible Three rose to their feet, laid violent hands upon Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and pitched him through the doorway into the passage.

Bump!

"Yawoooh!"

Tom Merry slammed the door.

"The blithering ass!" he growled, breathing hard through his nose. "The unutterable chump! When I'm turning my hair grey trying to make up a team, the unspeakable duffer comes bothering me about taking girls to the match——"

The door was flung open, and Arthur Augustus rushed into the study, a little dusty and ruffled, and with his famous monocle streaming at the end of its cord.

"You uttah wottahs! You feahful beasts! I am goin' to give you a feahful thwashin', Tom Mewwy!"

"Oh crumbs!" gasped Tom Merry, as D'Arcy's noble knuckles came into sudden violent contact with his nose. "Yarooh! Collar the lunatic!"

"Leggo! You wottahs! Yow-ow-ow!"

The Terrible Three closed upon the warlike swell of St. Jim's, and they all grasped him at once. He was swept off his feet, rushed out of the study, and along to the Fourth Form passage, where he was bumped down in Study No. 6. Blake and Digby, who were in the study, jumped up in surprise.

"What the dickens!" ejaculated Blake.

"Yawooh! Wescue!"

"Brought your tame lunatic home," said Monty Lowther affably. "I recommend a strait-jacket!"

And the Terrible Three returned to their quarters, leaving the swell of St. Jim's gasping on the carpet. Somewhat consoled, Tom Merry turned his thoughts again to the difficult task of making up an eleven for the Abbotsford match.

CHAPTER 2.

The Toff's Secret.

GORE of the Shell came into his study, next to Tom Merry's, 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 lately 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 bounder Wynn was up. Luckily, he's still

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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 bobtail 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 big 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!"

"I do not see anything to laugh at, Gore. Miss March was quite intelligent on that subject. She did not interrupt me once," said Skimpole. "Now, as a rule——"

"Must be frightfully intelligent if she can see any sense in your fatheaded inventions," said Gore.

"My dear Gore, if you would listen while I explained the principle of my new propeller——"

"Shut up!" roared Gore.

Skimpole sighed. He was a very inventive youth, and simply brimming with tremendous ideas. But a prophet, it is said, is unhonoured in his own country; and Skimpole, the inventor, found no encouragement whatever in his own study. Only Talbot would listen to him patiently sometimes, letting Skimmy run on while he was thinking about something else.

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!"

And 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 carpeted 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 unsuspicious 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 almost 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.

So Tom Merry & 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 cracksman 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 cracksman; 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?

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.

THIS IS A GRAND STORY—ASK YOUR FRIENDS TO READ IT!

—The Editor.

NEXT WEDNESDAY: "LOYAL TO THE LAST!" A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 3.
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?"

She nodded.

"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 for 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 to him."

"You must not go!"

Womanlike, 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 tell even 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.

CHAPTER 4.
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."

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"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; and 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 st

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

"Will you tell me 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 did not 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 bring 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. "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 crocked! 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 somewhere, with the police after him. Besides, why should that—even if he'd heard from them—why should that have anything to do with a footer-

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match? You wouldn't suggest that he's throwing us over to meet any of those rotters to-morrow?"

"Oh, no! He's given us his word 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 rot 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! 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.

CHAPTER 5.
The Day of the Match.

"LEVISON!"

"Bai Jove!"

"My hat!"

"But what about Talbot?"

There were all sorts of exclamations as the juniors read the footer list which Tom Merry had posted up on the school notice-board.

It was the morning, and lessons were over, and the School House fellows found the list posted up when they came out of the Form-rooms. There was another list on the notice-board—the First Eleven list for the match with Wayland Ramblers. But the juniors did not bestow any attention upon that.

Kildare's eleven was quite a secondary matter, from their point of view. All their interest was centred in the junior match.

It was their first discovery that Talbot of the Shell was left out, and that Levison of the Fourth had been put into the team in his place.

And it was easy to see that pretty nearly every fellow disapproved thoroughly of the change.

"I must wemark that Tom Mewwy seems to be wight off his wockah," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I suppose he is goin' in for philanthwopy, and is goin' to make Abbotsford a pwesent of the match!"

"Looks like it," growled Jack Blake.

"Sure, and what's the matter with the omadhaun intirely?" exclaimed Reilly, of the Fourth. "Sure, it must be some of Levison's tricks—he's dodged this, somehow."

"Yaas, that's quite poss."

"Rats!" growled Levison, who had read his own name in the list with great pleasure, though Tom Merry had told him already that he would be wanted. It was Levison's first chance of playing in a regular fixture.

The juniors gave Levison inquiring looks. It was not easy to live down a bad reputation, and Levison's reputation had been very bad. His new departure, of late, was not wholly taken in; a good many of the fellows surmised that the black sheep of the Fourth was up to some of his "little games" again. And the inclusion of his name in the footer list looked as if he had been playing some cunning trick, and had succeeded, to those who knew him best.

Levison coloured angrily under the suspicious looks of the other fellows.

"How did you work that, Levison?" demanded Blake.

"I didn't work it," growled Levison, "Tom Merry told me last night that I should be wanted."

"You didn't even ask him, I suppose?" said Kerruish sarcastically.

"No, I didn't."

"What!"

"I wanted to play in the match, of course," said Levison; "but I never asked. I never thought there was a chance for me. Tom Merry told me of his own accord."

"And why isn't Talbot playing?"

"How should I know?"

"You mean to say, Levison, that you have not worked this, somehow?" demanded Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"No, you ass."

"I wefuse to be called an ass; and I considah——"

"Oh, rats!" said Levison rudely, and he stalked away.

"Bai Jove! I'll——" began Arthur Augustus wrathfully.

"Oh, ring off!" growled Blake. "It may be as he says. No good rowing with Levison, anyway. Can't blame him for shoving in if he gets a chance. But Tom Merry must be fairly off his rocker. Here he comes; let's tackle him!"

The Terrible Three, as they came away from the Shell Form-room, were surrounded at once by eager inquirers. Talbot had gone another way, to avoid being questioned. He knew the surprise that would be caused by the unexpected change in the team, and he did not want to be overwhelmed with questions as to the cause of his resignation.

"What does it mean, Tom Mewwy?"

"What's the little game?"

"Sure, and is it dotty ye are intirely?"

"Do you want to make Abbotsford a present of the match?"

"What's Talbot left out for? What's he done?"

Tom Merry answered gruffly enough. He had by no means recovered from his own annoyance on that subject.

"Talbot's not left out—he's standing out of his own accord," he said.

There was a buzz of surprise.

"But why?"

"Ask him!" said Tom Merry. "He's not given me any reason. He doesn't want to play at Abbotsford to-day, that's all."

"My hat!"

"Make him play!" growled Blake. "He's no right to leave us in the lurch like this. The team was pretty scratchy, anyway."

"Can't be helped."

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus. "I am surpwised at old Talbot! It's wathah wotten to leave us in the lurch in this mannah. Pewwaps I had bettah talk to him."

"Do!" said Monty Lowther. "Serve him right!"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"I thought perhaps it was one of Levison's tricks, to shove himself into the team," said Blake.

"Well, it isn't—it's Talbot's own decision; and as for his reasons, if you want to know them, you'd better ask him—I don't know."

"Keep your wool on, old son!" said Blake. "'Tain't my fault, you know."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Sorry; but this makes me ratty, and I can't help it. Better look to your bikes before dinner, you chaps, as we're cycling over, and we shall have to start early."

"Right-ho!"

The Terrible Three went into the quad, Tom Merry frowning. Talbot was not to be seen. But Tom Merry did not want to see him just then. He was still feeling very sore. As Talbot was comparatively a new fellow in the school, it was a distinction for him to be played in the junior eleven at all, and for him to "stick out" of the team in this unreasonable way, on an important occasion when he was badly needed, was extremely disconcerting and exasperating. Skimpole joined the Terrible Three in the quad. He was blinking round through his big glasses as if in search of someone.

"Have you seen Talbot, my dear Merry?" he asked. "I looked for him immediately we came out of the Form-room, but he seems to have gone off somewhere."

"Haven't seen him," said Tom shortly.

"Dear me! I want to explain to him about my new propeller," explained the inventive genius of the Shell. "Talbot is really interested in it, you know. It is curious this way he has of disappearing. I was explaining to him last evening in the quad, you know, and he left me quite suddenly——"

"Go hon!"

"It was very odd," said Skimpole. "He said he was going back to the house, but when I got there he had not come in. I could not find him anywhere. Perhaps he is in the Head's garden now, though," Skimpole added thoughtfully.

"Ass!" said Lowther. "Juniors ain't allowed in the Head's garden."

"But he was there last evening, my dear Lowther," said Skimpole, blinking at him. "After I could not find him in the house, I came out again to look for him, and saw him coming away from the Head's garden. I suppose he had gone there to meditate quietly over my invention. I had told him all the details. He was very thoughtful, and did not even hear me when I called to him. It is very gratifying to me to find one fellow who takes an intelligent interest in scientific matters."

And the amiable Skimpole toddled away to the Head's garden to look for Talbot.

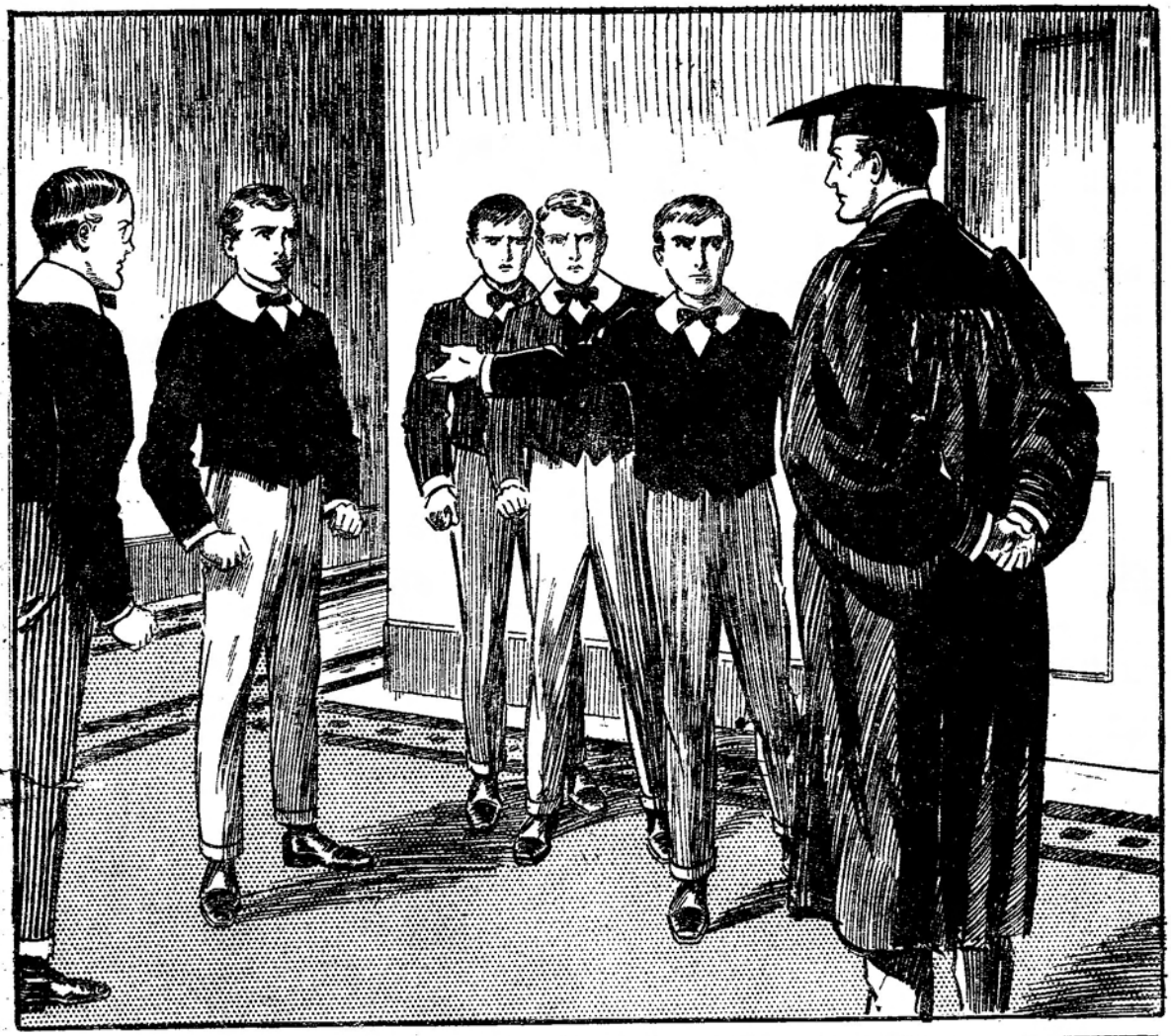
The Terrible Three looked at one another oddly.

"What the dickens was he doing in the Head's garden last evening?" muttered Lowther. "It must have been just after that that he came to tell us he couldn't play at Abbotsford."

"Been to the sanatorium, perhaps," said Manners. "You have to go through the garden, you know."

"Visitors ain't admitted there in the evening." Monty Lowther burst into a sudden chuckle. "My hat! The

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"What is this? exclaimed the Housemaster. "Merry! Gore! Cease this at once! How dare you! What is all this about?" "He called Talbot a thief," said Tom Merry fiercely. (*See Chapter* 14.)

nurses come out into the garden, though. I wonder——" He did not finish, but he chuckled again.

"Oh, rot!" said Tom Merry uneasily. "Talbot is very chummy with Miss March, but he would not be meeting her secretly. What rot!"

"Might have been making plans for this afternoon?" hazarded Lowther. "Gussy says he's asked Miss March about coming over to Abbotsford, and she can't come."

"Well, she's wanted in the sanatorium."

"Ye-es—I suppose so," assented Lowther, but he spoke very thoughtfully.

The subject was dropped; but Tom Merry, though he said nothing, thought the more. If Talbot had "dodged" Skimpole to get into the Head's garden, he must have had some reason; and if his reason had been a meeting with the Little Sister, it was odd that that interview should have been immediately followed by his withdrawal from the team for Abbotsford. Was it possible that Talbot had thrown the team over in that way, because he had some arrangement for the half-holiday with the girl he had become so chummy with? Tom Merry shook his head at the thought. Yet Talbot had not given a reason for his resignation, and he had looked confused and worried about it.

Arthur Augustus might have been a victim to an attack of calf-love—the juniors remembered more than one instance, over which the swell of the Fourth had been chipped unmercifully; but Talbot was not that kind of a duffer. Tom Merry smiled as he remembered the time when Gussy had chucked cricket, and deserted his old chums, in order to hang around a certain bunshop in Rylcombe. But the idea of Talbot haunting the porch of the sanatorium in the same way was too absurd.

"Rot!" said Tom Merry finally.

Talbot was not seen again till dinner-time, when he had to turn up in the dining-room in the School House. And after that, the juniors had no time to attend to him, as it was necessary to start at once for Abbotsford.

CHAPTER 6.

Crocked.

ELEVEN juniors wheeled their bicycles out of the gates of St. Jim's. They had a good long ride before them; but 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 still avoiding his comrades, to escape their comments and questions upon his inexplicable conduct.

Tom Merry & 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.

Arthur Augustus cast a glance or two back as he rode off. The swell of St. Jim's was considerably disappointed by the failure of his ripping idea.

Certainly, it had not been received enthusiastically in Tom Merry's study; but that had not made any difference to Arthur Augustus.

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He had sought Miss March and endeavoured to impress upon her the great benefit that would result from a little trip for the afternoon. But the Little Sister had explained that she would be wanted in the school hospital.

"It's wotten," Arthur Augustus remarked, breaking his thoughtful silence as the juniors left Rylcombe behind, and buzzed along the wide high-road for Abbotsford.

"Anything wrong with the bike?" asked Blake.

"The bike? No, dear boy. I was thinkin' that it's wotten she can't come."

"She! He, you mean," said Blake.

"I was weferrin' to Miss March," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity. "If she had come, I should have got out my motah-bike and a twailah. It would have been wippin'!"

"Might have been too ripping, the way you manage that stink-bike," said Blake. "Perhaps Miss March prefers being a nurse to being a patient, and that's why she wouldn't come."

"Wats! It would have been weally wipping', and I'm suah Miss March could have had the aftahnoon if she had asked. Now that boundah Talbot will be hangin' wound——" Arthur Augustus frowned. "It is weally wemarkable that Miss March seems to think so much of Talbot, deah boy. I wemembah when she came, and Talbot and I met her at the station, Talbot didn't seem pleased at all. He was as mum-chance as anythin'. I wathah suspect that Talbot is mashed, deah boy, which is weally widiculous in a kid of his age."

Blake grinned.

"My hat! That can't be why he's chucked the match this afternoon, surely?"

"I wondah!" said Arthur Augustus thoughtfully.

"Oh, rot!" said Lowther, who was riding next to Blake. "He wouldn't be such an ass."

"When a fellow's in love, deah boy, he isn't weally account-able for his actions, you know," said Arthur Augustus, with an air of wisdom. "I've been thah myself, you know, in—ahem!—in my youngah days."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry had heard Arthur Augustus's remarks, and though he said nothing, he frowned. The idea that had come into his head had evidently come into D'Arcy's also. It seemed too absurd to be true, but he had a feeling of annoyance.

He was going to play a hard match with a weak team, further weakened by Talbot's defection; and the fact that Talbot had given no explanation was more exasperating even than his action itself.

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 & 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 strung 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 road-side 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 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 brows. "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, somebody. 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 Abbots-ford, 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 Abbots-ford 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 even 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 crocked. Man short. Come at once. Waiting for kick-off till you arrive Abbotsford. TOM MERRY."

And that peremptory message was promptly ticked off.

CHAPTER 7.

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.

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"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-cab, his machine being mounted on top. He started off on the return journey, and Tom Merry & 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 & 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.

Whatever 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. Whatever 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. Do you remember that it was here that he first played for us, old chap—the day we hid him from the giddy detective by putting him into the team?"

Tom Merry's brow cleared a little at the recollection.

"Yes, and he played up rippingly," he said. "We beat them three to two that time. I hope it will turn out the same again for us. They beat us on our own ground last time, though. They're a good team. I wish he'd come."

"Well, 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."

"Talking of football accidents," said Monty Lowther Lowther musingly, "there was a footer accident in the war——"

"Oh, pway don't be funnay, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus. He could see from the gleam in Lowther's eye that one of his little jokes was coming. But the humorist of the Shell was nobly drawing upon his fund of humour to pass the weary time of waiting, and he went on unheeding.

"They were playing footer in the trenches, you know, over there in Flanders——"

"Wats! You can't play footah in a twench," said Arthur Augustus.

"Ass! You can play it near a trench, I suppose? There are lots of footer games at the front," said Lowther. "Well, they were playing, and there was a chap who was specially good on the left wing. Then the Germans opened fire on them——"

"Bai Jove! I call that playin' it wathah low down to open fiah when a fellow's playin' footah!"

"And this winger chap was hit in the belt with a half-ton shell," said Monty Lowther seriously. "Of course, that put him off his form."

"Go hon!"

"Fact!" said Lowther. "They operated on him after that, and scooped him out, you know."

"Grooh!"

"And ever after that they had to play him on the other wing," said Lowther. "They made him outside-right."

Arthur Augustus looked puzzled.

"I weally don't quite see the connection, deah boy," he said thoughtfully. "If the chap wecovahed, why couldn't he go on playin' left. Why should they make him outside-wight?"

"Because he had no inside left," explained Lowther.

"You uttah ass!"

"There was another chap——" began Lowther.

"Oh, wats!"

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

NEXT WEDNESDAY: "LOYAL TO THE LAST!" A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

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, unless he did not choose to 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.

CHAPTER 8.

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.

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 sanitorium, 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, Toby."

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 taxi-cab, 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 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 remount 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 on 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 the 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 a heavy drive on his chest, and pitched against the car. But even as he reeled away the Professor was upon the schoolboy. He had torn off his glasses, and it was as 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 two 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,

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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 them, quick! There's a waggon on the road."

The insensible junior was lifted swiftly into the car. Down the road a farm waggon had appeared in sight, jogging on slowly towards the scene of the kidnapping, with the driver half asleep.

Talbot was seated in 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 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 tore 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.

CHAPTER 9.
A Surprise.

"BEATEN to the wide!"

"Rotten!"

"Hard cheese, deah boys!"

Tom Merry & 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 all the Saints' 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 it 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 of it 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 & 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 of the Shell. "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 can give 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 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? Looks 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 terrific 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 didn't stop to answer, but he saw me. Do you mean to say that he didn't arrive at Abbotsford?"

NEXT WEDNESDAY: "LOYAL TO THE LAST!" A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

"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—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 kept on without stopping, going like blaz—ahem!—like thunder!"

"Going towards Abbotsford?"

"Yes, I tell 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 feahful accident," said Arthur Augustus soberly. "I was suah all the time Talbot wouldn't have let us in the lurch. You fellows 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 help his comrades 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 Monty Lowther uneasily. "I—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 this at once."

Tom Merry nodded, and turned his steps in the direction of the House-master's study.

CHAPTER 10.
Dark Suspicions.

MR. RAILTON received the captain of the Shell with a genial smile

"How did your 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 was 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 had been an 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 happened. Of course, on a road frequented by motor-cars—— But even so, word should have reached us before this. Talbot would have something upon him to show his identity. His cap would be known by its badge. Then there is the telephone. Certainly, whoever 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 news of an 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've 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 his books were in his studay 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 here," 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 Talbot hadn't had any accident, but had gone off "on his own." If there had been an accident something would have been 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 & 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 an 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 the 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 of it would have reached us before this. We have been in communication with the police at Rylcombe, Wayland, and Abbotsford, also with the hospitals. Nothing has been heard or seen of Talbot. No accident is known to have happened, even to any unknown person. It is extraordinary."

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?"

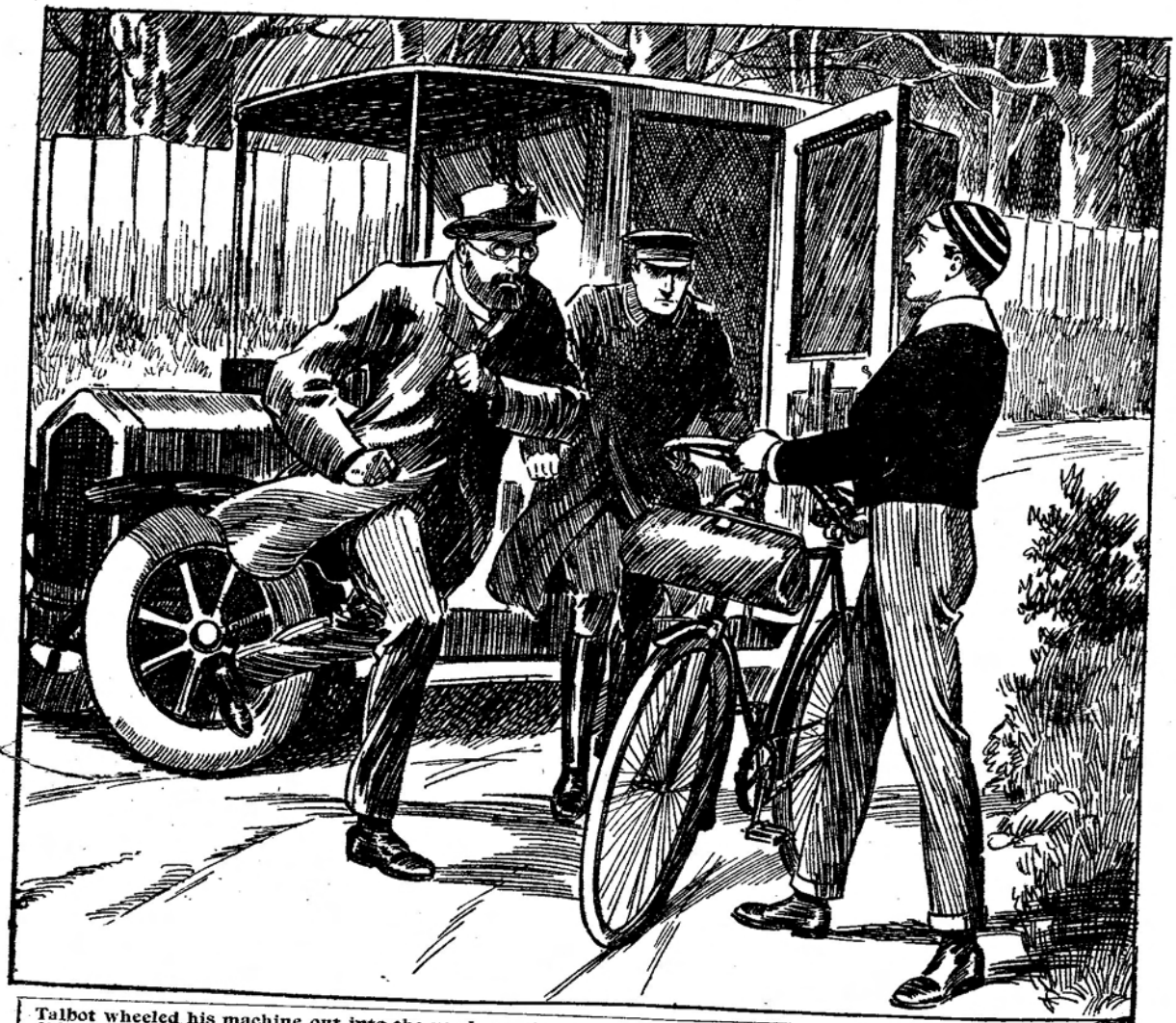
"Never, sir."

"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 was not, sir. I know he has thrown them over. I think he proved it when he gave away that rascal

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Talbot wheeled his machine out into the road, angrily, to remount and ride on past the halted car. But as he did so the bearded, spectacled motorist jumped out, and at the same moment the chauffeur left his seat. "What the dickens——" began Talbot. Then he almost staggered. "The Professor!" "Well met!" said John Rivers, with a chuckle. (*See Chapter* 8.)

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 now 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'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 mentioned to me last week that he was afraid the Professor had not done with him; that he would try to cause him some harm. He said that he feared the villain would come back. But after that he seemed quite to have got over it, and 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 be 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 any consideration. If he has indeed reappeared, and Talbot has gone with him, it must have been of his own accord."

"I—I've been thinking, sir, that poor 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, certainly 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 crocked 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 that he did not 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 matters 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 to ride 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 party. If he has 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 miles out of the place, sir, and he was scorching for Abbotsford as hard as he could go."

"That is no proof that he did not intend to stop at some place this side of Abbotsford. You say he gave no reason whatever 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 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 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 for a moment a chilling doubt.

Was it possible that the Toff had yielded to temptation at last—that the persuasions or the threats of the Professor had turned him at last back to the old paths?

It was a miserable thought, and Tom Merry drove it angrily from his mind; but, in spite of himself, it would come back to him.

CHAPTER 11.

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 the 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 grounds that had once surrounded the old mansion were 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 cracksman, 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 a 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

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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 always were 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 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 Crow 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 re-distributor 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 cracksman? 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 rent 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 cracksman, you are in the same position as most millionaires and dukes and princes—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 wrong-doing. 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 something 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 friends 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!"

"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 was turned in the lock, on the outside.

Talbot sat up dazedly.

There was no chance. He was a prisoner—a helpless

ANSWERS

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 could never believe in him when the Professor's diabolical plot had been carried into effect. It was all over. The unhappily 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.

CHAPTER 12.
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. He remembered what Skimpole had said of Talbot's visit to the Head's garden—of the strange thought that had come into his head that Miss March had had something to do with Talbot's giving up the Abbotsford match.

"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!"

That 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 for ever, 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.

CHAPTER 13.
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

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life. Sick of the poverty of a scholarship schoolboy, after the wealth and waste he had known as a cracksman, he had stayed behind from the match on Wednesday afternoon, in order to be free to leave the school unhindered, unquestioned. And he had gone. 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 & 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 had looked very grave, and hummed and hawed. To the doctor's anxious inquiry as to whether he thought a kidnapping possible, he had replied with a shake of the head. His opinion simply was that the boy was "fed up" with his new orderly life, and had gone back to his old haunts and his old 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 reason to be thankful that the schoolboy cracksman had gone empty-handed. Probably some latent conscience in him, some scruple, had kept 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 the securities there would have afforded him a very valuable plunder, to pay his footing among his old friends. But Dr. Holmes shook his head decidedly at that. The boy had gone, apparently of his own accord, but he would not go back to dishonesty. Above all, he would never have robbed the man who had been kindness 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 precautions to guard his valuables, a warning that fell upon deaf ears.

Tom Merry & 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 discussions 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 was tired and pale when the rising-bell clanged out, and he rose.

The Shell fellows came down

They had not been down long when they realised that something very 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 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 rather 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 there had been some happening in the night. If there was 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 & 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 portentious look they had seen on Inspector Skeat's face.

Later in the day the details were all 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 was gone! And he had not come back. Had he paid a surreptitious visit to his old school for that purpose?

Tom 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 nature of 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 on 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, of course, impossible to suppose. What would a burglar want with Talbot's cheap little camera, with his lesson-books, with his colour-box?

"But—but——" said Tom Merry. "I—I can't believe it! I can't! It—it wasn't Talbot, you fellows—I know it wasn't Talbot."

Monty Lowther and Manners were grimly silent. They, too, wanted to believe that it wasn't Talbot. But their faith was shaken.

Tom Merry strode away towards the Head's study. He could endure the suspense no more—he felt that he must know the worst.

CHAPTER 14.

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 just then. But the white misery in Tom Merry's face touched his heart, and his voice was very kindly.

"About—about Talbot, sir. The—the fellows are 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 a 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 it turned out——"

"This 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

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his wretched past—I confess it. Yet Heaven knows that I had faith in him."

"It can't be true, sir," gasped Tom. "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 a faintest suspicion that injustice has been done. My safe was robbed last night—opened in a way that shows great skill—and we all know the skill that unfortunate boy possessed. It was evidenty done by someone with a complete knowledge of the interior of the house. Admittance was gained in the easiest way. There was no alarm—even the electric 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 should want them but Talbot? Who should 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 the 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 would 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 that he did it. 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 that window often enough, and Talbot knew it. And who'd want his books and rubbish? A burglar? Rot!"

"Utter rot!" said Kerruish. "Dash it all, Tom Merry; I believe in sticking up for a fellow, but you can't go against positive facts."

"Give a fellow a chance, while you can," said Reilly, with a shake of the head. "But sure this is settled now."

"I can't quite take it in, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy distressfully. "I wefuse 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."

"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, anyway."

"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, deah 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 you like!" shouted Gore. "Talbot's a thief—a convicted thief, and—ah! Would you?"

The next moment they were fighting furiously.

"Cave!" muttered Reilly, as Mr Railton came hurriedly down the passage from the Head's study.

"What is this?" exclaimed the Housemaster angrily. "Merry! Gore! Cease this at once! How dare you! What is all this about?"

"Tom Merry's standing up for that thief," panted Gore, as he separated from his opponent, panting, 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 nelpless 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 boy."

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 the 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 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?

CHAPTER 15
Cast Out!

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 to-night 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 cracksman 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?

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It was possible, but it was not likely. It was far more probable 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 back 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 tramping 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 wayside, 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 could not come too soon.

Afterwards he hardly knew how that day had passed. Weary, weary tramping; lifts in market-carts; once a lift upon 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—what was it that 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 gate, lantern in hand. He almost dropped the lantern as he peered through the bars of the gate and made out Talbot's haggard face in the winter night.

"Master Talbot!"

"Open the gate," said Talbot faintly.

"You'd better get off," said Taggles, hesitating, and wondering if it was his duty to ring up the police-station. But he had always liked Talbot. The boy had always been kind and considerate to the old 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.

Taggles 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 still 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—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 the steps of the School House. The great door was open, the hall dazzling with light. Talbot blinked in tthe light, dazzled. He stepped into the House. 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 glance met his. Contempt, dislike, and scorn mingled with surprise—that was all there was to greet him. Talbot looked at the sea of faces with haggard eyes.

"Blake—Reilly——" he muttered.

"So you've come back!" shouted Gore, with a burst of mocking laughter. "Come back, by gum! Forgotten something you meant to steal?"

"Cut off!" muttered 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 little 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 you. Unless you wish to add more shame to your villainy by being arrested within the walls of this school, you will go at once!"

Almost stunned by the torrent of words that struck him like the 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

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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—he knew not 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 thoroughly it had been carried out.

"I am innocent, Tom!"

Tom Merry pressed his hand.

"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 can 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.

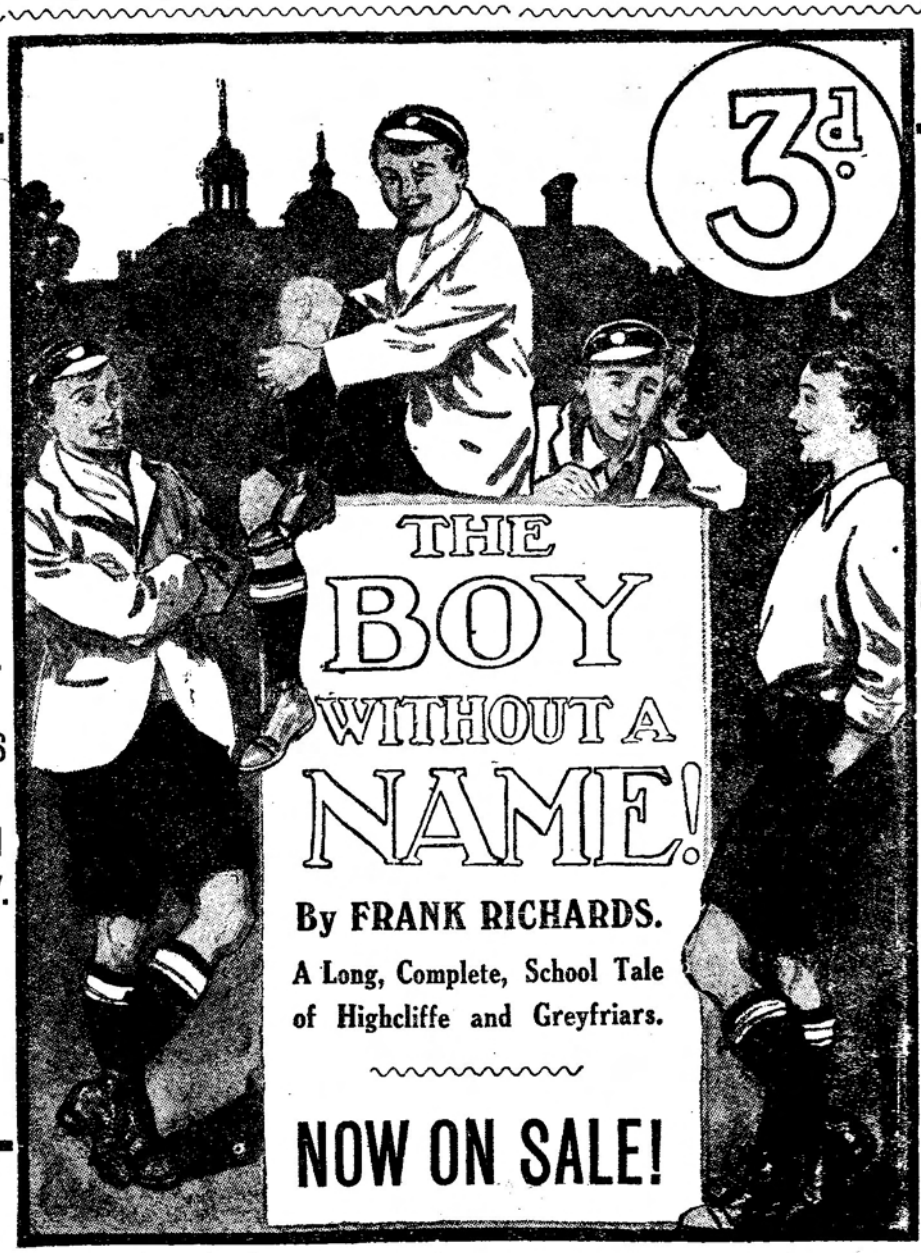
He was gone.

His footsteps echoed on the frosty road—echoed for a few minutes, and died away.

Tom Merry listened—listened, and then turned away with a groan. The footsteps of the outcast were lost in the silence of the night.

THE END.

(Another fine story of Talbot's adventures will appear in next Wednesd y's issue o. the GEM Library. Order in advance, and make sure of getting a copy. There is certain to be a big demand.)



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SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS INSTALMENTS.

Bob Hall, a fine, strapping young fellow, succeeds in joining a famous hussar regiment known as the "Die-Hards," where he incurs the enmity and hatred of Private Cole, who causes an accident to befall him during riding-drill. Bob afterwards challenges Cole to a fight to square matters up, but before this can be carried out, the villain takes a murderous revenge upon Bob. A play is being arranged, in which they are both to have a duel with foils. Cole tampers with his own foil, with the result that Bob is severely wounded. Captain Lascelles, a ne'er-do-well cousin of Bob's, discovers the treachery, and uses his knowledge to make Cole, whom he takes into his service as officer's servant, do Bob an injury.

When Bob comes out of hospital he is talking with some of his comrades, who have grave suspicions as to foul play on Cole's part, when at that instant Cole enters the room for the purpose of sending Bob to Captain Lascelles. The same thought occurred to Bob and his friends—how much of the conversation had he heard?

(Now go on with the story.)

The Plot Develops.

"Who wants me?" Bob inquired coldly.

"Captain Lascelles," replied Coles.

"Captain Lascelles! Why, what does he know of me? He's only joined since I went to hospital, and——"

Cole wheeled round and walked to the door.

"I've given you the message, and that's all I care about," he sneered. "I'm sure I don't know why he should be bothered to see you. Please yourself whether you come or not. I'll tell him I told you, anyhow."

Cole vanished, and Bob gazed wide-eyed at Dent and Hosty.

"This is a rum business!" he laughed. "I don't suppose Cole could have made a mistake."

"Not he. Scoot off, Bob, and look sharp!" Dent urged. "I haven't had any dealings yet with Lascelles, but he looks an awkward customer if he was riled."

"All right, chaps. Wait here. I'll be back shortly!" Bob cried; and he hurried away after Cole.

In due course he reached Lascelles' quarters. The officer laughed when Bob entered the room.

"How do, Hall?" he cried, advancing with outstretched hand. "You and I have outgrown one another's recollection, I guess. I sent for you, as later on we're bound to knock up against one another, and I preferred that our first meeting should not be on parade."

"Are you Swinford Lascelles?" Bob asked, gazing earnestly at the hard, swarthy face, now wreathed in a forced grin.

"Yes."

"Then you and I are cousins."

"That's so, worse—you're right; our mothers were sisters."

"It's kind of you to do this," Bob began frankly. "As you know, I'm only a trooper in the Die-Hards."

"Yes; and I exchanged into this regiment not knowing that I would have a cousin in the ranks. I'll be frank with you, Hall, and tell you that if I had known you were here I'd have selected some other corps."

"I don't blame you for that," Bob replied quietly. "I've been long enough in the Service to realise that it is awkward for an officer and a ranker of the same family connection to be in the same regiment. Discipline must be kept up, and the one chap must be always ordering the other about. Yes, it's awkward; but you needn't worry, for it's not likely I'll put either of us in a false position. No one need ever know that we are relations. You go your way, Lascelles, and I'll go mine."

"That's sportsmanlike; but, still, it's not altogether what I want," Lascelles replied slowly. "I'm not the sort of chap to forget the claims of relationship, and I'd like to see you now and then, old fellow. Of course, outside here we are officer and trooper; that's always the way; but if you come to my rooms now and then I'll be very glad. They're a bit of a change for you, and we can be quite chums when we're not on parade.

Bob looked round the sumptuously furnished room in which he was standing, and certainly it had a cosy look. His cousin, too, spoke straightforwardly, and what he said seemed to Bob to be kindly meant. The lad felt he would be acting roughly were he to decline the other's invitation. All the same, though, he had little intention of availing himself of it. He was quite happy amongst his own chums.

"Thank you for the offer. I'll be glad to have a chat whenever you're not too busy," he replied. "All men are not like you, Lascelles. There are many who wouldn't trouble to notice a poor relation."

"And another thing," the officer went on. "It would look rather marked if I were to send over constantly for you to D Squadron, so I've had you transferred to mine. That was a good idea, wasn't it?"

Bob felt dismayed. He had made many true friends in his old squadron, and now he would have to give them up. He would see but little of Dent and Hosty, whom he liked beyond all the other troopers in the regiment, and instead of Haines he would have other officers over him with whom possibly he would find it somewhat difficult to get on. He tried to hide his feelings, for he believed that his cousin had acted from the kindest of motives.

"Cut along, now, and join your new messmates," Lascelles suggested, hiding a grin of delight as he saw the young fellow's disappointment. "You're posted to Barrack-room No. 4. I'm glad to have met you, after all these years, and it won't be long before I'll find an opportunity of having you here for an evening."

Bob left the room, and went to his new quarters with a foreboding of coming trouble. Very possibly the other troopers would resent his intrusion. They had settled down together, and knew one another's ways. Besides, they would want to know why he had been transferred. As he could not explain the reason without creating jealously, the lad knew that at the outset his silence on this point would be prejudicial. Altogether, he had not a pleasant time in store; he would have to go over the old ground again, and make friends.

His first entrance into the barrack-room was not cordially received. Some of the troopers stared at him, others turned their backs on him, a few winked at one another; none spoke. Bob addressed the colour-sergeant.

"I've been sent here by Captain Lascelles," he explained. "He told me I'm transferred from D Squadron. Could you tell me which is my bunk?"

"That one yonder by the window," the sergeant grunted. "There goes the trumpet! Lights out! Tumble into bed, the lot of you!"

Bob made for his bunk and hurriedly undressed. The gas was turned off, the room was plunged in darkness, and the troopers, grumbling and stumbling about, at last managed to reach their cots and lie down.

The lad, with eyes wide open, pondered over the events of the day, and wondered what Dent and Hosty thought of his strange absence. Then, again, it was a singular coincidence that his cousin should be an officer in the Die-Hards, and thinking of Lascelles made Bob's mind go back to the past, to his own childhood, which he dimly remembered, to the loss of his parents, and the hard struggles he had had since then. How was it, he asked himself with some surprise, that he should be penniless, whilst his cousin was evidently a man of means and able to live like an officer? That was curious. Why had Lascelles all the money, whilst he had none? Well, he couldn't explain that, but he supposed it was legal and according to justice. Bob knew nothing of his own family affairs; there never had been anyone to explain them to him. His father had not been a successful man, and had met with several misfortunes; that was all he had ever heard.

He was dropping off asleep when a tremendous clatter arose at the door, and a soldier stumbled into the room in the dark and tramped along the floor. The other troopers yelled to him to walk quietly; a couple of boots were hurled at the offender's head, and the sergeant in his cubicle bawled for silence.

The late comer, ignoring all the shouts and cries, tramped along till he came to the bunk where Bob lay, and then sat down heavily on the lad's chest. He jumped up angrily and gave a yell.

"Hi, there, clear out of that; you're in my bed!" he shouted. "Who the dickens are you to try on a game like this? I'll warm you up if you don't sheer off at once!"

As he spoke he clutched Bob by the arm and tried roughly to throw him to the floor.

"This is my bunk; get away!" Bob retorted. "Don't you go on hauling me about, or else——"

The other bent down, gripped the lad by the waist and flung him out on to the floor, rasping his hands and knees. Bob was on his feet in a second, and as he turned to face his assailant he received a thump across the head. He let out and caught his antagonist a resounding smack on the jaw. They clinched, broke away, and without more ado began slogging in the dark.

The room at once was in an uproar. The soldiers jumped out of their cots and stumbled towards the scene of the conflict. Some of them came too close, and Bob and his assailant, hitting wildly in the dark, knocked a couple of them over. More pressed forward, and in self-defence every trooper struck his neighbour. Men fell and rose again; the barrack-room had suddenly become like a battlefield, and hoarse yells accompanied the blows, whilst old friends heartily belaboured one another.

The sergeant, bawling for order, fumbled in the dark for matches. He found a box, and tried to make his way towards a gas-jet. Twice he was knocked down, but at last he succeeded. He turned on a jet, struck a match, the light flared up, and again he was down like a ninepin, with half a dozen of the troopers falling over him.

Then the excited troopers paused, and as they gazed blankly at one another the door was flung open, and Lascelles stalked in.

Bob Avenges His Father's Memory.

"Sergeant Hardy, what's the cause of this row?" Lascelles thundered. "If you can't keep order I'll have you reduced. Nothing as disgraceful as this has ever happened amongst men under my command."

The sergeant extricated himself as best he could from the dead-weight of troopers lying on top, and scrambled to his feet, his face purple with wrath.

"I dunno how it happened, sir," he stammered. "We were in the dark, and a trooper came in and the row began sudden like and——"

"Who was the trooper?"

Cole stepped forward.

"I'd just come from your rooms, sir, and when I went to my bunk I found another bloke lying there. He struck me when I tried to reason with him, and——"

"Who did that?"

"Trooper Hall, sir."

Lascelles walked towards Bob.

"So it's you, was it, who kicked up the row?" he rasped out. "This is a nice return for my kindness. If I'd known——"

"It wasn't my fault!" Bob retorted. "I went to the bunk that the sergeant allotted to me, and——"

"Don't address your superior officer impertinently!" Lascelles shouted. "Stand to attention. Sergeant, get your men to bed again. Trooper Hall, come to my rooms tomorrow morning; I will inquire into this business. Trooper Cole, you come there too—ten o'clock sharp. If there's any more row I'll have you all in the guard-room. You'd better behave yourselves, or I'll come down with a heavy hand!"

Lascelles strolled away, and the men made haste to get back to bed. Bob found another cot, and speedily fell asleep.

At ten o'clock next morning he presented himself at his cousin's rooms, and the latter welcomed him coldly, so Bob at once stood at attention, seeing only his superior officer in Lascelles.

"Where's Cole?" Lascelles demanded.

"Don't know, sir," Bob replied.

Lascelles muttered something inaudible, and left the room. He was absent for a full ten minutes, and then he stamped up the stairs again.

"Clear out, and come back at twelve o'clock!" he cried curtly. "Cole has gone into the town, and won't be back for a spell yet. Mind you're up to time too. I find that before I can make a friend of you I'll have to make sure that you don't presume on our relationship. Go!"

Bob saluted and walked away. For the rest of the morning his heart was in a tumult, and sharp at noon he stood outside his cousin's door again. Voices inside were raised in angry altercation, and he had to rap twice on the panel before he was bidden to enter.

The room was in a state of great disorder. Half the furniture had been pulled out into the middle; the doors of every press now swung open, the drawers of every cupboard lay about the floor, articles of every sort were scattered on sofa, table, and chairs, and Lascelles was standing in the midst of his belongings, gazing at Cole, who doggedly gave him look for look.

"What you say is an insult to me; I cannot believe it!" Lascelles snarled, as Bob entered.

"It's true, all the same, sir," Cole retorted. "I'm certain there can be no doubt about it. The only one to come to this room, you say yourself——"

Lascelles turned and caught sight of Bob. The officer's face grew dark, and he hurriedly stopped Cole.

"Go and make your investigations, then, and hold your tongue whilst you're about them!" he ordered. "Trooper Hall, I want to speak to you. I little thought—— Close the door!"

Bob banged the door on Cole's heels, and advanced into the room. The lad was already angry, and Lascelles' mode of speech did not improve his temper.

"You wish to speak to me about the row last night, sir?" he suggested coldly, looking his cousin full in the face.

"Not at present," Lascelles replied harshly. "I left you alone here for some minutes this morning. You do not deny that, do you?"

"No."

"I thought I could trust you," Lascelles sneered; "but I might have known that the son of a—— Look here," he continued hotly, "if you own up I'll give you a chance, but if you brazen the thing out then I'll have you gaoled. Though, unfortunately for me, you are my relation, yet all the same——"

Bob took two steps forward, and his fists were clenched, his muscles were taut, his eyes flashed scorn.

"What about my father?" he thundered. "Don't funk it! What were you going to say?"

"Take care how you talk to me," Lascelles replied. Of a sudden he had become extraordinarily cool. "Please to remember that I'm your superior officer. If you don't——"

"We're here as man to man now, and we'll settle this business as such," Bob interjected. "You sneered at my father, and I'm going to know why. Of course, if you are a poltroon and fall back on your rank——"

"It's with you I have to deal, and not with your father," Lascelles retorted. "I accuse you of——"

"Got it, sir!" Cole cried, flinging open the door. "Here it is, safe and sound!"

As he spoke he held up a ring. In the centre a solitary diamond of magnificent size sparkled like a ray of light. The gem might have been worth anything up to a thousand pounds.

"Ah, glad to see it's not lost, after all!" Lascelles cried, stretching out his hand. "Where did you find it?"

Cole paused a moment.

"Where I said I believed it was hidden," he replied.

Lascelles tugged at his moustache, and looked at Bob.

"Have you anything to say?" he demanded.

The lad started back with horror. Instinctively he saw

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the plot that had been laid for his destruction, and an icy hand like a grip of steel seemed to be closing around his heart. Lascelles, for some unknown reason, meant to ruin him if he could. All his professions of goodwill were but a blind. He had got Bob into his squadron in order the better to compass his ruin, and he had selected Cole as a fit instrument for his vile purpose.

Bob saw it all, and the realisation of the imminent peril in which he stood steadied him on the moment. A cool and resourceful brain was needed if he was to extricate himself from the dilemma. He must be alert, watchful, cautious. To display temper would only land him deeper in the morass. When he spoke, therefore, all trace of anger had disappeared.

"Your question is more than I understand, sir," he said respectfully. "Would you kindly explain yourself?"

Lascelles laughed mockingly.

"I might have known that that is the tone you would adopt," he retorted. "I could hardly have expected you to convict yourself!"

"Convict myself! With what do you charge me?"

Lascelles took a small morocco case from a drawer, laid the ring in it, and closed the lid with a snap.

"Theft!" he sneered.

"It's a lie! I can easily clear myself of the vile charge! Give me your proofs!" Bob continued coolly.

"There's no use in trying to bluff." Lascelles spoke with determination. "I warn you, if you persist in that course, that I'll hand you over to the civil authorities. I'd like for many reasons to avoid a scandal, because I'd have to appear to prosecute you, for instance, and for the sake of the regiment, and——"

"Give me the proofs," Bob repeated. "You say I've been guilty of theft. What, then, do you accuse me of stealing?"

"This mock display of innocence is all rubbish!" Lascelles retorted, changing his tone again. "However, I will go through the form of charging you with a crime of which you, of all men, must know that you are guilty. You stole that diamond ring from these rooms this morning when I left you here for a few moments. It was in its case last night."

"That's an infamous lie!" Bob replied, struggling to keep himself in hand. "What proof do you think you have against me?"

"The best proof possible," Lascelles grinned. "It was found in your kit!"

"By whom?"

"I found it there just now," Cole leered.

"Then you put it there!" Bob retorted, swinging round. "There's no blackguardism of which you're not capable!"

"Like his father! Brazen to the last!" Lascelles scoffed. "I'm not surprised he——"

Bob's head began to buzz, and the veins on his forehead throbbed wildly. He forgot Cole was in the room, he forgot everything except that Lascelles was once more seeking to besmirch the good name of his dead and respected parent.

"I'd advise you to drop it!" he cried hoarsely "This is the second time you've dragged my father's name into this business. Not content with trying to ruin his son, who is of your own flesh and blood, you are also cad enough to defame one who is gone. My father's memory is dear to me, and if you dare——"

As in a mist Bob saw the sneering, cynical face of Lascelles, the white teeth showing in a mocking smile, the pupils of his eyes contracted to pin-points, venom, hatred, and contempt all stamped on his evil face.

"The worthy son of a worthy father!" the cowardly officer lisped softly. "Both thieves, both scoundrels! One was caught, and became a gaol-bird, and before long the other——"

Crash!

Unable to control himself, swept away in a whirlwind of righteous passion, the lad avenged the insult to the dead, and Lascelles, flinging up his hands, tumbled with a yell of agony to the floor.

Bob stepped forward and stood over him.

"Get up!" he gasped, in a hollow voice. "I mean to give you more!"

A strong hand gripped the lad's shoulder as he bent over his prostrate enemy, and, turning, Bob saw, to his horror, that Captain Cecil Hamshaw, the adjutant of the regiment, had been a witness to the assault.

Ruin swift and certain was before the trooper. He had struck an officer!

(This Most Exciting Serial Story will be continued in next Wednesday's grand issue of "The Gem" Library. You will be doing a good turn to your Editor if you get a new reader for "The Gem.")

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(Exclusive to "The Gem" Library.)

No. 15.—

THE BATTLE OF THE RAFTS!

Long before you receive this despatch, I fear the glorious news I have to relate will already be known to you. I refer, of course, to the King's visit.

You can well understand that when you've got the enemy before you, when his Jack Johnsons and shrapnel are likely at any minute to shower down on you, when you may be called upon to do a spell in the trenches, to wade through swollen, icy canals to the attack, or to take to the saddle and slip about over the frosty, iron-bound, shell-wrecked roads, you're not exactly like the smart Tommy you may have seen at home on church-parade.

You come out of the trenches smothered from head to foot in clay, you feel like a carcase of frozen mutton, and you've usually got a crop of whiskers that would break a German barber's heart if he had to take 'em off for twopence. Whether you're a cavalryman, or a gunner, or a sapper, you're not exactly a dude during war-time, I can tell you!

You can imagine something of the astonishment of all and sundry when we received orders to "off whiskers, clean and smarten up, and turn out for special parade."

Few of us guessed the reason. That's why, when we saw the King, the Prince of Wales, and our gallant general moving along our lines we were so surprised, so delighted, and gave him such hearty cheers. It was a scene none of us will ever forget. Our cavalry were lined up, and stretched as far as the eye could see. It must have looked magnificent.

Several of us received our medals—an honour we little dreamed of—and whilst the ceremony was going on our gallant young Prince was moving about amongst the boys with a cheery word for everyone.

His Majesty's visit came just at the right time. There'll be big things doing after this, mark my words!

Now I'll tell you about the raft battle—a scrap in which I had a hand—both hands, in fact. I think I've already told you how I and a patrol of troopers have been out for some days past rounding up the wire-tappers—the German spies who intercept the messages passed over our telephone lines.

It was in connection with this duty that we were able to put up such a good show against the Germans; for the secrecy and the skill and the pluck with which they attempted the movement almost deserved success. I emphasise the pluck. The Germans, as a whole, would sooner double for twenty miles than face a Tommy with a bayonet or a sabre, but in all other forms of fighting they're by no means craven curs.

The first day or two we were very lucky, and rounded up about a dozen of the wire-tappers. After that, it was nearly a week before we made another prisoner, though we were in the saddle practically from morning till night, and scoured our lines from corner to corner.

This capture was rather amusing. We were coming back to camp one evening, tired out and a bit disappointed, the result of our efforts being nil, when right in the heart of the bivouac a French priest, in cassock and cowl, stepped politely back to allow us to pass.

Naturally, I saluted. Imagine my surprise when, instead of inclining his head and smiling at us, as the French priests invariably do, this chap brought his heels sharply together and put up his hand in a military salute.

It was an absolute give-away. Force of habit, I suppose. Anyway, he was caught on the hop.

"Hands up, Herr Lager-swiller!" I called to him, showing him the business-end of my revolver.

I wasn't mistaken. He was not a priest at all. He was a well-educated German soldier—could speak French and English perfectly—and a quantity of written notes were found upon him that would have provided his officers with valuable information about the distribution of our forces.

The strange part of it is that he had been wandering about the camp all day, suspected by nobody. He had a fair trial, of course. He was a plucked 'un. He just shrugged his shoulders and smiled when they ordered him to be shot at dawn the following morning.

In a way I was sorry for him. Still, had he got back to his own lines, Heaven knows how many of our brave lads might have had to pay the penalty for the German spy's daring.

This affair led us to act with greater precautions than ever. Yet though we knew, by the action of the enemy, that we still had spies in a certain area near the Yser Canal, we could find no traces of them for days.

You'll not be surprised to hear that in this corner of Belgium there's hardly one brick standing upon another. With their mad lust for destroying everything, the Germans have shelled down buildings of all kinds. The once fertile farmsteads are now barren wastes, littered with spent shells, Jack Johnson holes, and heaps of bricks. Here and there, however, a haystack stands in a more or less shattered state.

Shrapnel was screeching overhead, and the evening sky was lurid with artillery fire, for a hot duel was in progress between the Allies and the enemy, as we moved along by the canal, determined to spend all the freezing night in a search for the wire-tappers.

When one or two shells dropped uncomfortably near us, I gave the order to make for what looked like the ruins of a farm-shed in the distance. It was only for cover, not protection. But it wasn't a farm-shed. When we got close, we discovered it to be a haystack.

"By George!" I exclaimed. "Fancy decent forage like this being left close to the banks of the canal for the square-heads to come over and collar it for their horses!"

"Funny they've left it standing," added one of the troopers. "They've been across here more than once, to my knowledge."

"I'll report it," I said. "It's first-class stuff."

I dived my hand in to pull out a sample, and as I did so I was astounded to hear an unmistakable snort of pain or surprise. I also snorted. And for a good reason!

The haystack was hollow. My hand had shot through into a hole. As I learned afterwards, I had dug my finger-nails into the cheek of a spy engaged in the act of peering through at the strange visitors.

"Come out of it, you German rats!" I cried, at the same time ordering the troopers to stand ready with their carbines.

When we had torn a doorway into the stack, which was completely hollow, we found three Germans huddled up in a corner. They were of the white liver variety—not a ha'porth of grit to divide between 'em.

How long they had been spying there I'm unable to say, but they had sufficient grub with them to last three weeks, and, besides having a store of civilian clothes and complete sets of British and French uniforms, they also possessed a telephone installation.

(Continued on page ii. of cover.)

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We were just clearing off with the prisoners, when an idea occurred to me.

"Report to the colonel, and tell him it wouldn't be a bad thing to send someone back who understands German," I told one of our boys. "Tom and I'll wait here to watch over the telephone, and to see what happens."

Well, a couple of hours passed. Hail and sleet whirled down on us, for we'd broken the stack to pieces in getting out the spies, and it was no protection now; while the night was so black you could have cut through it with a knife.

We were soaked to the skin, half frozen, out of sight of a soul, with only the scream and boom of the howitzers and shrapnel to amuse us, before at length our boys returned with an interpreter.

It must have been pretty nearly midnight, however, before we got to business. That is to say, we were all crouching out of the way of the stinging hail, when suddenly, sharply, there came a distinct "tap, tap" on the telephone-receiver.

Our interpreter—a young professor from Oxford—was there like a shot. For two or three minutes he was gurgling and groaning in the awful German tongue, whilst we others waited in breathless wonderment.

"They're coming across on rafts!" cried the professor, his dilated eyes gleaming in the darkness. "From what I gather, they've mounted machine-guns. They've not guessed as yet we've collared their spies. I told them the coast was clear and favourable, but advised them not to begin the attack for an hour. Now, how can we let headquarters know, and get ready for 'em?"

"You leave that to me," I told him.

There and then I got into the saddle. I galloped like mad back to headquarters. Our colonel, dear old chap, patted me on the shoulder.

"Get back again, lad, if you want to be in the fun!" he said. "Your news corroborates information we've already received. We're ready for 'em!"

Anyway, I was determined not to be out of the fun. When I got back to the haystack, there were my pals waiting. Pitch-black darkness was everywhere. Before us were the swollen waters of the canal. Sheeting down was an intensely cold rain and hail. Not a light, not a sound anywhere.

To left and right and rear of us were the advance trenches, where our Tommies were watching whilst their pals were snatching a couple of hours' sleep; but they might have been in the moon for all you could see or hear of them. And slap before us, on the other side of the Yser, were the Germans, in what strength we had no idea.

Minutes passed slowly by. Were the Germans never coming? Should we see nothing of the Allies' preparations to meet them?

Then, as quickly as a shell bursts, we were in the thick of it. There had come a slight splashing sound from the direction of the canal.

Dim shapes took form in the darkness. Men were steering rudely-constructed rafts across the black waters, whilst others crouched upon them, beside machine-guns.

It was the pluckiest thing I've heard of or seen yet about the Germans. Think of it! They had waded across the canal, through ice-cold, swollen waters, at about one in the morning, with rain and hail beating down, and then began fighting at the end of it.

That shows you we've not got a soft thing on over here. Well, up they came, soaked through like drowned rats, a mad lot altogether. We of the King's Dragoons had given up all hope of ever seeing Old England again, when, as if the earth had opened, just in the nick of time, our boys appeared.

They had crept silently out of the trenches, and had waited till the full force of the Germans were on our territory, before a single order to attack was given.

But that was quite enough for Tommy. It was all hand-to-hand scrapping—mostly bayonet work, though a trooper next to me sent two of the squareheads hurtling back into the canal with a straight left.

Of about ten of the rafts, six of them were overturned, and the machine-guns and the men in charge of them went overboard, never to see daylight again, whilst the others were dragged ashore and captured.

For half an hour, crammed full of excitement of the highest horse-power, we showed the Germans what the British bulldog can do when he's roused.

The twenty or so of Germans who swam back to their own side will never forget it, I'll wager—nor will the eighty-three exhausted and wounded squareheads we took prisoners. At least twice that number perished in the canal. They say that next morning the waters were choked with bodies.

I can well believe it, but I didn't have any desire to go down and see. When you go through these grim experiences, you want to forget them, not live them over again.

(Next week's GEM Library will contain another stirring despatch from our chum at the front. Order your copy in advance.)

THIS WEEK'S CHAT.

The Editor's Personal Column.

For Next Wednesday—

"LOYAL TO THE LAST!"

By Martin Clifford.

The story of St. Jim's contained in next Wednesday's issue of "The Gem" Library is one of intense interest, Tom Merry's unchanging fidelity to his old chum forming a fine feature of a fine yarn. Talbot has been cast out from the school, hunted, driven, and penniless; but Tom Merry refuses to regard what is considered overwhelming evidence of his chum's guilt. Through Tom Merry's vigilance John Rivers, the gentleman crook, is smartly captured, and Talbot's name is cleared. But where is Talbot? That is the question of the moment. Determined not to stray from the path of honour, the poor lad has been starving in the metropolis, and here they find him. He is taken back to the old school in a very critical condition; but, ably nursed by Marie Rivers, he rallies; and his heart is filled with a great joy at being back once again with his now remorseful schoolfellows, thanks to that splendid chum who proved

"LOYAL TO THE LAST!"

REPLIES IN BRIEF.

Alfred Watson (New South Wales).—I am extremely obliged to you for your most interesting letter and helpful suggestions.

Ernest Bird (Kensington).—You should have no difficulty in joining a troop of Boy Scouts in your district. Glad you liked Mr. Clifford's 3d. Library story. Best wishes.

F. E. Bridge (West Drayton).—Very many thanks for your long and interesting letter, and for the good work you have done on behalf of our companion papers.

A Darlington Reader.—The articles you mention are of a purely fictitious nature.

Dennis W. Bushell (Folkestone).—Many thanks for your loyal support, and for furthering the interests of the Invincible Trio in your popular seaside town. Best wishes.

Miss M. J. (Edinburgh).—I am very much afraid the Correspondence Exchange must be confined to Colonial readers at present. Why not write to some of those who have advertised? Look out for the resumption of this feature in our new companion paper, "The Dreadnought."

"Interested" (Adelaide).—The Terrible Three are all about the same age—namely, 14½. The Christian names of Kerr, Wynn, and Redfern are George, David, and Harry respectively.

W. C. (Liverpool).—In reply to your postcard, the successful reader sent in his contribution several weeks before yours came to hand, and was therefore entitled to a reward. I hope, however, that you won't be discouraged by this not infrequent occurrence. Try again.

"Four 'Gem' Readers" (Bathgate).—I much regret I can give you no information regarding the hire of caravans.

J. Thompson (Armley).—The characters you mention are still at St. Jim's, with the exception of Vavasour. The name of the boy who brought his belongings to the school on a wheelbarrow is Algernon Blenkinsop.

G. G. L. Briggs (Halifax).—The persons and places you name are purely fictitious. Cousin Ethel is fifteen years of age, and Wally D'Arcy twelve. You should write to the firm you mention for their price-list.

Will those readers who have entered into correspondence with T. J. Hopwood, of British Columbia, please note that, owing to a serious fire, his letters have unfortunately been destroyed. He would like his former correspondents to write to him again as soon as possible.—T. J. Hopwood, P.O. Box 1116, Nelson, British Columbia.

F. L. (London, N.).—A splendid idea, and one which is already under consideration.

A. Collins (New Cross).—The Christian names of Manners and Talbot are Henry and Reginald respectively.

"True Blue" (Newton-le-Willows).—A good book on sketching can be obtained from Messrs. Reeves, Cheapside, London, E.C. You should write for their catalogue. The best writer at St. Jim's is Manners. The St. Jim's colours are red and black.

G. L. (Shropshire).—I fully sympathise with your position, and, while not wishing to discourage you in any way, I must say I fail to see a field for your services in the direction you name. It is a situation which you must try and bear, even though it be hard to grin. Best wishes.

YOUR EDITOR.

A Cash Prize for Every Contributor to this Page.

Our Weekly Prize Page.

LOOK OUT FOR YOUR WINNING STORYETTE.

SHAME!

McTavish was a Scotsman, and had been given a return ticket to London, so, of course, he accepted it, and went. On his return, his better half asked him what he thought of London.

"Weel, lass," he said, "it's a fine place, but they're awfu' swindlers!"

"Fo' why, Jock?"

"Weel, lass, ye mayn't believe it, but a shop offered ten thousand pins for saxpence, an' when I bought 'em there were sax short!"—Sent in by Stanley Evans, West Green Road, N.

NO NEED FOR GRATITUDE

"Smithkins," said that young man's employer, "you may take a month off."

"Oh, sir," said the clerk, as soon as he could command his voice, "it is so good of you to suggest it! I have felt the need of a holiday for some time, but have hesitated to ask for it, knowing how busy we are. But it will do me no end of good, and I thank you most heartily for your kind consideration."

"Smithkins," thundered the employer, "are you crazy?"

"Why, no, sir. Didn't you say I might take a month off?"

"Certainly, that is what I said. This is the first of the month, and last month's calendar remains on your desk. Take last month off, and keep up to date. That's what I mean."—Sent in by Robert Heggie, Glasgow.

A P T-FUL F8.

A sailor has no easy time
When on the D P sails;
It's R D finds aloft to climb,
Exposed to I C gales.

And then in K C makes a slip,
Or if he dizzy grows,
A tumble from the I N ship
Is the last N D knows.

When, overboard, for A D cries
With N R G and vim,
And, though of little U C tries,
A vain S A to swim.

But when no L P finds is near,
Nor N E way to save,
He then, in an X S of fear,
Must C K watery grave.

Old A J sailor seldom knows,
But if old A G gains,
H U of 'baccy cures his woes,
And grog L A's his pains.

We N V no poor sailor's life—
In D D has no fun—
And, feeling P T for his wife
Our M T talk is done.

—Sent in by B. F. Oxley, Palmer's Green.

BOILED ON THE PREMISES.

An old sailor, who was fond of relating adventures—many of which happened only in his imagination—was describing a cruise in the Pacific.

"One day," he said, "we passed an island that was positively red with lobsters!"

"But lobsters are not red until they are boiled," objected a listener.

"I know," replied the old salt. "But this was a volcanic island with boiling springs."—Sent in by D. Youe, East Ham, E.

NOT STATED.

A farmer engaged a new hand, who stated he could build a haystack in the shape of an egg.

As they were then in the midst of stack-building, the farmer thought it was a good opportunity to give the man the chance to do what he said he could.

So the stack was started. But just as it was nearing completion, the whole thing tottered, and collapsed flat on the ground.

"I thought you said you could build a stack in the shape of an egg!" roared the farmer.

"So I did," returned the new hand meekly. "But I didn't say whether it was like a boiled or fried one."—Sent in by Thomas Allan, Ochiltree, Ayrshire.

OLD ACQUAINTANCES.

They were both retired Army officers, and they met at the club.

"Pardon me, sir," said the colonel, "but I think I have seen you somewhere before."

"Strangely enough, sir, your face seems familiar to me," said the other. "Were you at the Siege of Smashupabad, when the rebels blew up the magazine?"

"I was, sir," replied the colonel.

"Then that is where I saw you. I met you coming down as I was going up!"—Sent in by John Medland, Liverpool.

CRUEL!

"Why, sir," bragged Hamlet de Hasbin, "one night when I played Hamlet, it was half an hour before the audience could leave the theatre!"

"What was the matter?" queried the unbelieving Press agent. "Was he lame?"—Sent in by Miss M. Slaughter, Tooting, S.W.

BRAVERY!

"This is one of my ancestors," she said, pausing before a portrait. "He fell at Waterloo. Have you any ancestors?"

Her visitor suddenly remembered an uncle of his who had sole charge of the front of a cinema show, and murmured:

"Er—yes; one."

"Did he fall anywhere?" she asked.

"N-not exactly. But I remember being told how, clothed in full uniform, and unarmed save for a light cane, he stood before an Eastern palace, and kept a howling, surging mob at bay single-handed."

"Really? How splendid!"

"Oh, he thought nothing of it! He did it every night for years."—Sent in by H. Fitzerman, Holborn, W.C

MONEY PRIZES OFFERED.

Readers are invited to send ON A POSTCARD Storyettes or Short Interesting Paragraphs for this page. For every contribution used the sender will receive a Money Prize.

ALL POSTCARDS MUST BE ADDRESSED—The Editor, "The Gem" Library, Gough House, Gough Square, Fleet Street, London, E.C.

THIS OFFER IS OPEN TO READERS IN ALL PARTS OF THE WORLD.

No correspondence can be entered into with regard to this competition, and all contributions enclosed in letters, or sent in otherwise than on postcards, will be disregarded.