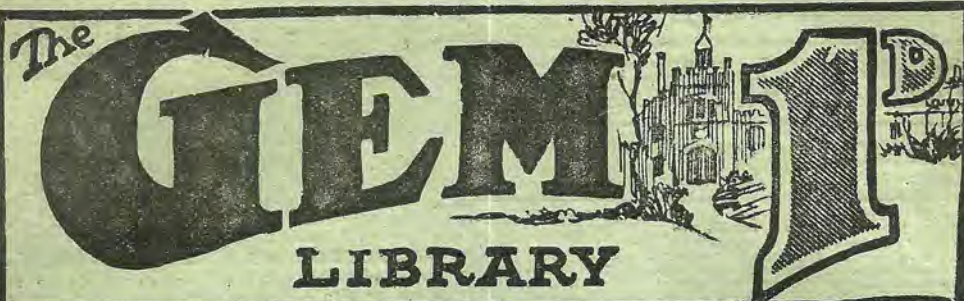


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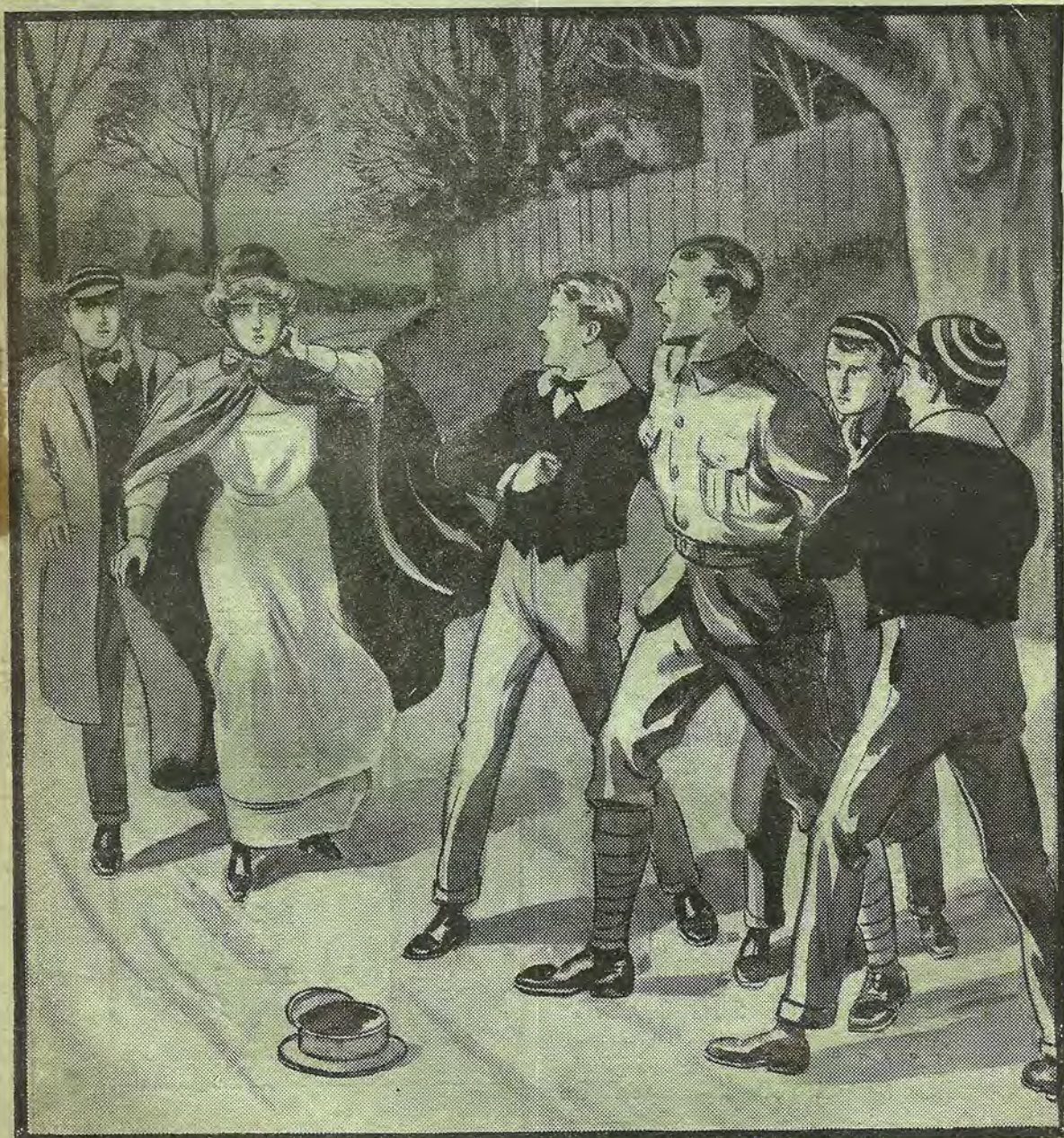
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By **MARTIN CLIFFORD.**



Dr. Holmes almost fell down at the sight of Mr. Railton mounted on the shoulders of Kildare and Darrel, unable to escape. "Bless my soul!" exclaimed the Head, "Mr. Railton! What—what does this mean?" "Private Waiton, sir!" chirruped Arthur Augustus. "Hurray for Private Railton!" (See Chapter 10.)

CHAPTER 1. D'Arcy's Duty.

TOM MERRY & Co. were chatting on the steps of the School House at St. Jim's, when D'Arcy of the Fourth came out, with a heavy frown upon his noble brow. "Have you fellows heard?" he demanded. "Heard what?" asked Tom Merry. "News from the front?"

"No, ass!"

"Then don't bother," said Tom. "We're talking footer. We shall simply give the New House bounders the kybosh this afternoon. Talbot's as fit as a fiddle again, and I tell you——"

"Figgins & Co., won't have a look-in," agreed Jack Blake of the Fourth. "The only weak bit in our side will be the outside-left."

Next Wednesday:

"HERR SCHNEIDER'S SECRET!" AND "OFFICER AND TROOPER!"

No. 354. (New Series), Vol. 9.

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Arthur Augustus D'Arcy bestowed a glare upon Blake. Arthur Augustus was outside-left in the School House junior team.

"Weally, Blake—"

"But with Talbot on the wing, we'll give 'em socks," said Tom Merry cheerfully. "It's Talbot's first match since he was on the sick-list; but—"

"Will you listen to me, you duffahs?" demanded D'Arcy of the Fourth indignantly. "I have heard somethin' vewy surpwisin'."

"Nothing the matter with old Talbot?" asked Monty Lowther anxiously.

"Blow Talbot!" said Arthur Augustus. "I am not thinkin' of our footah match—"

"Then you ought to be," said Tom Merry. "Now, as I was saying, Figgins—"

"Blow Figgins!" exclaimed the exasperated D'Arcy.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Oh, blow everybody, if you like!" said Blake; "but don't bother—"

"I wepeat, that I have just heard somethin' vewy surpwisin'," said Arthur Augustus firmly, "and I want you fellows to come with me."

"Eh? Where? What for?"

"To wemonstwatw with Wailton."

Tom Merry & Co. started at Arthur Augustus. As Mr. Railton was the Housemaster of the School House, they were not likely to "remonstrate" with him, whatever he had been doing.

"Remonstrate with Railton!" repeated Manners.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy spoke with great emphasis. He was evidently very much in earnest. The School House juniors smiled at one another.

"What has he been doing?" asked Monty Lowther. "Has the order gone forth that your collars are to be limited to a height not exceeding six inches?"

"Weally, you ass—"

"Or has he commanded that you limit yourself to one new topper a week—"

"Look heah—"

"Or has he found fault with the colour scheme of your new waistcoat?" asked Monty Lowther seriously. "I don't see why he should. It's a dazzler. It beats Joseph's coat hollow."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wufuse to weply to your ridiculous questions, Lowther. And there is nothin' to cackle at. This is a sewious mattah," said D'Arcy indignantly. "I have just heard it fwom Levison. I wegard it as surpwisin'—not to say shockin'. Mr. Wailton is goin' to Abbotsford this aftahnoon."

"Is there a new bye-law forbidin' Housemasters to go to Abbotsford?" inquired Jack Blake.

"He is goin' to see the football match there," said Arthur Augustus.

"Shows his sense," remarked Digby. "It will be a ripping match—Abbotsford Athletic against a Manchester team."

"Yes, rather," said Blake. "If we hadn't been playing this afternoon, I should have buzzed over there on my bike to see it, too. They're two jolly good Second League teams."

"Blake, I am surprised at you!"

Blake stared at his elegant chum.

"What is there to be surprised at, fathead?" he demanded. "A chap can pick up lots of footer tips by watching a really good game."

"Yaas, at any othah time," said Arthur Augustus; "but at the pwesent time we are at wath with Germany."

"Are we?" said Blake reflectively. "Yes, now I come to think of it, I've seen something about it in the papers. Have you got any more startling new news?"

"Pway don't wot, Blake! I wepeat that this is sewious. At a time like the pwesent, when the countwy is engaged in a gwapple with a barbwous horde of howwid Pwussians, I disappwove of pwofessional football bein' cawwied on at all."

"Oh!" said Blake. "Now I tumble! Drop a line to the Football Association, tell 'em plainly that you disapprove of it, and, of course, they will cancel all their fixtures for the season, and sack all their players and swell the ranks of the unemployed, and hide their diminished heads. Of course, they've only been keeping the game on because they didn't know what you thought about it."

The juniors chuckled, and Arthur Augustus turned pink with wrath.

"If you are goin' to tweat this mattah in a wibald spiwit, Blake, I wufuse to entah into any discush with you. I wepeat that I wegard it as stwictly necessary to stop pwofessional football at this stwivving powiod of our histowy, and, therefore, I wegard it as wotten for Wailton to encourage the game by goin' to a League match. That is my opinion, for

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what it is worth," added Arthur Augustus, with stately dignity.

"Well, I wouldn't mind giving you what it's worth," remarked Blake. "It would only cost me a farthing or so."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus's eye gleamed through his eyeglass. Somehow or other, the juniors did not seem to share his indignant excitement. He was disappointed in them.

"I twust!" he exclaimed—"I twust you are goin' to back me up in wemonstwatw with Wailton against goin' to a League match at a time like this."

"You awful ass!" said Tom Merry, in measured tones. "If you had the cheek to tell Railton your idiotic ideas, he would lick you and kick you out of his study. What business is it of yours to criticise your Housemaster?"

"Undah the cires—"

"Besides, how do you know he's going?" asked Manners. "Railton doesn't often go to a football match."

"Oh, it's quite cowwest. Levison heard him askin' Kildare for a time-table for the Abbotsford twains, and askin' him the neweast way to the football gwound fwom the station. He is goin'—unless we point out to him—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What are you cacklin' at, you duffahs?"

"You thumping ass!" said Blake. "If you have the cheek to say a word to Railton—"

"I am certainly goin' to. I wathah think that he is actin' without weflection, and a word in season, you know—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors yelled with laughter. The idea of a Fourth-Former taking it upon himself to speak a word in season to his Housemaster tickled them immensely. Arthur Augustus glared at them wrathfully. He did not see anything funny in it.

"Then you won't back me up?" he demanded.

"Ha, ha! Rather not."

"Then I shall go alone."

"You fathead!" shrieked Blake. "You'll be licked."

"I am weady to face that, at the call of duty."

"You—you— Oh, there ain't a word for you," stuttered Blake. "What you want is a strait-jacket."

"I wegard it as my duty—"

"Fathead!"

"Chump!"

"Hallo!" said a pleasant voice, as Talbot of the Shell came out, with a smile on his handsome face. "You fellows ragging?"

"Oh, it's Gussy going balmy again!" said Blake. "Right off his rocker this time."

"Ask Talbot's advice," chuckled Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah! I am suah Talbot will agwee with me, as a sensible chap. Talbot, deah boy, at a time like this, when our bwave tweops are wallowin' in blood and mud in the stwicken fields of Flandahs, I discovah that Mr. Wailton is goin' to attend a football match — a pwofessional League match, you know. What would you advise me to do undah the cires?"

Talbot stared.

"I don't quite see that it has anything to do with you, Gussy," he replied.

"Oh, wats! You are as big a duffah as these chaps. I feel called upon to wemonstwatw with Wailton. What would you advise?"

"I should advise you to mind your own business," said Talbot, laughing.

"Hear, hear!" said Blake.

"Wubbish! If you fellows will not come as wewpewesentatives of the public opinion of St. Jini's, I shall go on my own," said Arthur Augustus. "I wegard you as failin' to appreciate the sewiousness of the situation."

Arthur Augustus turned to stride into the house. Blake caught him by the shoulder just in time.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

"I am goin' to see Wailton in his study."

"You—you ass! You'll be licked!" yelled Blake.

"Oh, wats! Welease me—"

"Hold him!" ejaculated Blake. "We're not going to let the idiot go and ask for a licking. Collar him!"

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus wrenched himself away from Blake, and rushed into the house before the other fellows could seize him.

"After him!" gasped Blake.

"Collar the fathead!"

Tom Merry & Co. rushed in pursuit. They could imagine the consequences of Arthur Augustus remonstrating with his Housemaster, and they wanted to save the swell of St. Jini's from them. They dashed down the passage after him at top speed, determined to collar him and drag him away by main force.

But Arthur Augustus was determined too. He ran hard, and reached the door of the Housemaster's study before he could be overtaken. He knocked on the door, and grasped the handle just as the panting juniors came up.

"Come in!" called out the voice of Mr. Railton.

"Yank him away!" breathed Blake.

"Yow-ow! Welease me, you wottahs!"

Tom Merry & Co. grasped him, and strove to drag him off. Arthur Augustus clung desperately to the handle of the door.

"Let go, you ass!" hissed Blake. "You'll have Railton out—"

"I wefuse to let go! Welease me! Yawwooh!"

"Oh, my hat! Drag him off, for goodness' sake!"

"Welease me! Ow, ow, ow! You are wumplin' my collah! Yow, ow!"

A hand was laid on the handle of the door inside; the Housemaster had evidently heard the scuffle in the passage. But with Arthur Augustus clinging to the handle outside, and the juniors dragging at Arthur Augustus, the door refused to open. The voice of Mr. Railton was heard.

"Bless my soul! What ever does this mean? Who is holding the door?"

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped Blake. "Gussy, will you come—"

"Wats!"

Mr. Railton, inside the study, made another effort, and the door came open a few inches, and disclosed the struggling, scrambling crowd of juniors to the astonished eyes of the Housemaster within.

"Why, what—"

"Bolt!" gasped Tom Merry.

The juniors released Arthur Augustus as if he had suddenly become red-hot, and fled. Mr. Railton was still pulling the door from inside, and the result of Arthur Augustus's sudden release was that the door flew open, and the swell of St. Jim's was dragged headlong into the study. He let go the handle, and rolled over on the floor at the Housemaster's feet, gasping.

CHAPTER 2.

Something for Gussy!

MR. RAILTON stared blankly at Arthur Augustus.

The swell of St. Jim's sat up, pumping in breath, and groping for his eyeglass.

"B-b-bai Jove!"

"D'Arcy!"

"Yaas, sir! Oh, gweat Scott! Where's my beastly eyeglass? Gwooh!"

The Housemaster's brow grew stern. He bent down, caught Arthur Augustus by the collar, and swung him to his feet with a single jerk of his powerful arm. Arthur Augustus staggered against a table.

"Gwooh!"

"Now," said Mr. Railton, fixing his eyes sternly upon the junior, "tell me what this ridiculous scene means. How dare you!"

"Those asses, sir!" gasped D'Arcy, recovering his breath a little. "Pway do not be watty, sir—I mean, don't be angry! Those silly youngstahs acted without wefection."

Mr. Railton checked a smile. Arthur Augustus's allusion to Tom Merry & Co., some of whom were older than himself, as "youngsters" was quite in Arthur Augustus's usual fatherly style.

"I was comin' heah to speak to you, sir," explained Arthur Augustus, a little more himself now, and trying to get his tie straight. "Those foolish boundahs tried to pwevent me, sir."

"Indeed! Then, I presume you were coming to say something that would be better left unsaid?" said the Housemaster good-humouredly. "I will not question you. You may go, D'Arcy."

"But—but I haven't said what I came to say yet, sir."

"You need not trouble," said Mr. Railton. "You may go."

"But it is vewy important, sir."

"Oh, very well!" said Mr. Railton. "If you have something of importance to say, you may say it, but please waste no time, as I have to go out soon."

"It's about that I want to speak to you, sir."

Mr. Railton raised his eyebrows.

"About my going out, D'Arcy?"

"Yaas, sir."

"I really fail to understand you, D'Arcy!" exclaimed the School House master, with very visible signs of impatience.

"Natuwally, sir; I have not explained yet," said Arthur Augustus cheerfully. "But it is wathah important—vewy important, in fact. It has come to my knowledge, sir, that you are goin' to the football-gwound at Abbotsford this afternoon."

"And how does that concern you, please?"

"Vewy much, sir. Pway allow me to explain. At a time like the pwesent, sir, I have weflected upon the mattah, and I have come to the conclusion that pwofessional footballers ought not to go on playin' games. They can play what somebody calls the Gweatah Game, you know, sir."

Mr. Railton looked rather oddly at the swell of St. Jim's, but he did not interrupt him. Arthur Augustus went on, encouraged.

"You see, sir, all those playahs could be fightin' at the fwont—they are all of militawy age, and men of militawy age are wanted. There are lots of othah men of militawy age who can't go—such as the undahgwaduates at Oxford and Cambwidge, sir, who are pursuin' their studies—and actahs, sir, who are goin' on playin' in the theatres—and men who are employed in the cinemas—and footmen and butlahs, who are wanted to open cawwiage doors and serve dinners, sir—and journalists, who have to go on descwibin' murdahs and divorce cases in the papahs—all these men can't go—at least, I suppose they can't, as they don't—so at a time like this, sir I think all the pwofessional footballahs ought to go to the fwont."

"Really, D'Arcy—"

"Therefore, sir, I feel that it is up to us not to recognise League matches," said Arthur Augustus. "I have therefore come to remonstrate with you, sir—"

"What!"

Mr. Railton's tone made Arthur Augustus jump, but he went on manfully:

"I feel it my duty to point out, sir, that by goin' to a League match at this time you are encouwagin' men to stay away from the fightin'-line. I'm sure, sir, you will see that when I point it out to you."

"And you think it is necessary, D'Arcy, for a junior schoolboy in the Fourth Form to point out to me a right course of conduct?" asked Mr. Railton.

"Ahem!" said Arthur Augustus, not quite liking that way of putting it. "Of course, sir, I have not the slightest intention of bein' impertinent, sir—"

"You may not have the intention, D'Arcy, but you are very impertinent."

"Oh, weally, Mr. Wailton—"

"And as I do not allow impertinence from juniors, I shall cane you," said the Housemaster, taking up a cane from the table. "Hold out your hand."

"Oh, bai Jove!"

"You hear me?" rapped out Mr. Railton.

"I have been actin' fwom a sense of duty, sir—"

"That is what I am about to do also," said the Housemaster grimly. "Hold out your hand at once!"

Arthur Augustus held out his hand in a very gingerly manner. Swish!

"Yow-ow!"

"Now the other hand, D'Arcy."

Swish!

"Oh cwumbs!"

Mr. Railton laid down the cane.

"Now you may go, D'Arcy. I may, however, mention to you that I am not going to the Abbotsford ground to see the football match, but to make a recruiting speech to the crowd there. You may go."

"Bai Jove!"

And Arthur departed from the study, feeling quite limp. Tom Merry & Co. were awaiting him at the end of the passage, and they grinned as the swell of St. Jim's came up, twisting his hands painfully.

"Got it hot?" asked Blake.

"Gwooh! Yaas, wathah!"

"Serve you jolly well, right!" said Blake unsympathetically. "Of all the cheek—"

Arthur Augustus groaned.

"The fact is, deah boys, I have wathah put my foot in it. Mr. Wailton is not goin' to see the footah match at all."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There is nothin' to cackle at. He quite agwees with my views—at least, I pwesume he does, as a sensible man—and he is goin' to the football-ground to make a speech to get wecwuits for Kitchenah's Army."

"My hat!"

Monty Lowther whistled.

"Railton's awfully keen about the recruiting bizney," he remarked. "Quite right too; but there are some rough customers on Abbotsford ground, and they mayn't like it. An old chap made a recruiting speech there the other day, and had his hat biffed over his head."

"Wotten!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Rotten!" agreed Lowther solemnly. "A nasty, rude man said to him that, after working nine days and a half at making boots for soldiers, he wanted to be let alone on his only half-holiday. Cheek, wasn't it?"

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A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

"Awful cheek!" agreed Arthur Augustus unsuspiciously. Tom Merry wrinkled his brow.

"I say, you chaps, I shouldn't wonder if there's a rag, if Railton makes them ratty," he remarked thoughtfully. "I don't quite see why people are making this dead set at footballers. Nobody's talking about closing the theatres and the clubs and the golf-links and the Universities; it's only King Football that's getting smacked in the eye. I'll tell you what. If our respected Housemaster is going out looking for trouble, it's up to us to look after him a bit."

"Better tell him so," yawned Blake.

"Ahem! We won't tell him so. He might—might——"

"Might think it was cheek," suggested Herries.

"Well, he might," agreed Tom Merry. "You never know. All the same, I suggest postponing the House match and going over to Abbotsford instead, in case of trouble. We don't want to have our Housemaster mauled by a lot of fiery bounders, you know."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "I approve."

"Then there's nothing more to be said," remarked Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But what about Figgins & Co.?" asked Talbot. "They're expecting a match this afternoon, you know."

"We'll ask them to come along. Anyway, we can see the League game——"

"I wefuse to see the League game," said Arthur Augustus firmly. "At a time like this I wefuse to wecognise pwofesional football. You should heah what my cousin at Oxford says about it. He told me that he has sat in his armchair and blushed for his countwy to think of it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus looked puzzled.

"What are you cacklin' at?" he demanded.

"How old is your cousin?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Weally—about twenty-two, I think."

"Then what was he doing in an armchair?"

"Sittin' in it, of course, you ass!"

"And blushing for his country!" chuckled Monty Lowther.

"There are a lot of fellows at the same game in these wicked times." And Monty Lowther burst into song:

"Send my father or my mother, my sister or my brother,
But for goodness' sake don't send me!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove, I nevah thought of that!" said Arthur Augustus. "I'll wite to him and ask him why he doesn't go."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Arthur Augustus rushed off at once to write that letter, leaving the chums of the School House chuckling.

CHAPTER 3.

The Return of the Cracksmen.

TALBOT of the Shell sauntered away across the quadrangle, and some of the juniors smiled as they saw him go. It was only recently that Talbot had recovered from his illness—the illness that had followed a time of privation in the London slums, when he had been driven from St. Jim's under a false suspicion. Tom Merry & Co. had found him and brought him back, and Talbot had been nursed back to health by Miss March, the "Little Sister of the Poor." Talbot's chuminess with the Little Sister was well known, but only Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther knew that Talbot had known her in his former days, before he came to St. Jim's, and before the Little Sister became a nurse in the school hospital.

Talbot's face was very bright as he walked into the Head's garden, and a graceful figure came down the path to meet him.

Talbot of the Shell had passed through troublous times, but the clouds had lifted at last, and the boy who had once been known as the "Toff," whose early life had been spent among cracksmen and law-breakers, found the present happy and the future bright. The shadow of the past no longer lay upon his young life.

And his greatest happiness lay in the fact that his girl chum, Marie Rivers, had taken the same course as himself, and broken with her old, bad surroundings; that her cracksmen father, John Rivers, was far away, and the girl's life now as unclouded as his own.

He greeted the girl with a cheery smile, but he noted at once that there was a thoughtful expression upon the usually sunny face.

His own face became a little anxious.

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his old associates, but he had to remember that his girl chum's father might yet throw a shadow over the life of Marie. True, John Rivers had promised amendment when he was allowed to go, but Talbot knew of old his cynical nature.

"No bad news, Marie?" the Shell fellow asked quickly.

"I—I hardly know," said the girl slowly. "I have had a letter."

"From your father?"

"Yes."

Talbot stood quite still, his hands clenching hard.

Was there to be no end to it? he asked himself savagely. John Rivers had done his worst for him, and had been defeated. But for his daughter's sake the cracksmen would have been sent to the imprisonment he had richly earned. Could he not be satisfied with freedom, and keep away?

"What does he say, Marie?" he asked. "There are no secrets between us, you know."

The girl nodded.

"He was supposed to have gone abroad," said Talbot.

"He promised to go abroad."

"He went," said Marie. "But—but he has come back."

"And he wishes you to rejoin him?"

"No."

Talbot looked puzzled.

"Then what does he want?"

"He wants to see me," said the girl, with a troubled look.

"His—his letter came from Abbotsford this morning. He says that he has a new plan—he does not say what it is—and he wants to say good-bye to me before he goes; I do not know where."

Talbot's face hardened.

"It is a trick," he said.

"He is my father, Toff," said the girl quietly.

"But—but you cannot see him, Marie. He cannot come near the school without danger. Although Mr. Holmes and Mr. Railton let him go, the police are hunting for him. If he shows himself in this neighbourhood, he will be known and taken."

"I know. He is not coming here. He wishes me to go to Abbotsford——"

"You cannot go, Marie."

The girl looked deeply troubled.

"I cannot, Toff, because I am wanted in the hospital this afternoon. Now that the epidemic is over there are only Miss Pinch and myself remaining here, and Miss Pinch wants me."

"You must not see him, Marie," exclaimed Talbot. "He is only trying to regain his influence over you. You must not go."

"He promised that he would reform, Toff," said Marie softly. "I—I believed him. It is possible that he has come back with a good motive. I hope the best."

Talbot's lip curled scornfully.

"Where is he now, Marie?"

"At Abbotsford. He has asked me to come over there. He will meet me at the football-ground," said Marie. "It is safest for him to be in a crowd, of course. You—you are playing this afternoon?"

"No; the match is put off," said Talbot. "Tom Merry and a crowd of us are going over to the League match at Abbotsford."

Marie's face brightened up.

"You are going?" she exclaimed.

"Yes, with the others," Talbot started. "Marie, let me see him instead of you."

"That is what I was thinking of, Toff," said the girl, with a sigh of relief. "If—if he is thinking of anything like—the past, you can give him my message that I will not see him, that I will have nothing to do with it. But—but if he only wants to see me, as he says, then—then I will see him later, Toff. You will tell him so. He is my father; I can't forget that. He was a criminal, but he was always kind to me—or nearly always."

"How shall I know him, Marie? He cannot venture out in his own proper person. He will be in some disguise, I suppose?" said Talbot moodily.

"He will be in the grand stand, he says, and will be dressed as a Frenchman, with a pointed black beard and a dark face, and he will wear a red rose in his coat. It will be easy to know him, Toff."

"Easy enough," muttered Talbot.

The brightness had gone out of the Shell fellow's face. He had thought it was all over—disguises, secrets, secret meetings—the whole miserable business. So it was all over for him. He could have washed his hands of it all if he had liked. But he could not think of deserting the girl chum who had stood by him.

Marie watched his handsome, frowning face anxiously. The colour deepened in her pretty cheeks.

"You—you are angry, Toff?" she said timidly. "I—I should not have told you. I am sorry."

Talbot's face cleared.

"Don't say that, Marie," he said remorsefully. "I should be a brute if I didn't stand by you, after the ripping way you've stood by me. Forgive me! Only—I was thinking it all over, and now—I shall have to keep it a secret from the fellows, of course. But you know you can rely on me. You know I would do anything for you."

"I know you would, Toff. But after you have broken with it all, it isn't fair that you should have to trouble yourself about me."

"Stuff!" said Talbot, forcing himself to speak cheerfully. "I'm jolly well going to look after you, Marie, I can tell you. It's all right. I shall see him, and when he finds there is nothing doing he will clear off again."

"But—but he may mean well—this time," murmured the girl wistfully. And Talbot's face softened. He knew how the girl longed to know that her father had abandoned his old rascally ways and taken to honest paths. Talbot had little faith in the repentance of John Rivers, but he knew that the crackman's daughter was willing to cling to a straw of hope.

"It's possible, Marie," he said, with as much conviction as he could.

"You—you will be careful, Toff. You will not anger him. After all, he is my father," Marie said, with a sigh.

"Depend on me, Marie. It will be all right."

And Talbot chatted on cheerily, and brought the smiles back to the girl's face before he left her. But when Marie was gone, and the Shell fellow walked away, the cheeriness died out of his face. His brow was moody as he strolled across the quadrangle towards the School House.

Once more he had a secret to keep. He who had hoped never to have another secret. Once more it was necessary to plan and scheme and shuffle, and avoid the eyes of his chums. His brow grew black at the thought.

A slap on the shoulder startled him out of his gloomy reverie.

"Time we got off!" said Tom Merry.

"Oh, yes; all serene! I'll get my coat," said Talbot confusedly.

The Terrible Three looked at him curiously.

"Nothing wrong?" asked Monty Lowther.

Talbot flushed.

"No. Why?"

"You were looking as if you were going to a funeral, that's all," said Tom Merry. "Not feeling fit?"

"Fit as a fiddle," said Talbot. "If—if you fellows are starting for Abbotsford now, I'll go and get my coat."

"You don't want your coat," said Tom. "Get into your Norfolk; we're going on bikes."

"Oh, good!"

Talbot hurried into the School House, only too plainly glad to get away. Tom Merry wrinkled his brows.

"Penny for 'em!" said Lowther humorously.

"I suppose it's all right," said Tom, after a pause. "But—but after what's happened, you know, I feel rather—well, rather concerned about old Talbot. He was looking just now just as he looked when— You remember the time that scoundrel Rivers was trying to get at him?"

Monty Lowther whistled softly.

"Can't be anything of that kind again," he said. "Talbot would tell us. It's understood that he doesn't have any sort of communication with his old pals."

"Yes, I suppose it's all right," said Tom. But his brow was very thoughtful. "I know he's just seen the Little Sister. And you know her father—"

"Shush!" murmured Manners. "That's a dead secret. Marie is a ripping girl, and she can't help that rotter being her father."

"I know. And it would be rather rotten to blame her for being fond of him, rotter as he is," said Tom. "But—but if the villain is trying any of his old tricks with Talbot, he's going to get it in the neck. The police want him; and if he comes round here again they're jolly well going to have him, if I can lend a hand!"

"What-ho!" said Lowther emphatically. "The beast promised to mend his ways, when the Head let him off. And if he's sticking to his old tricks, the best place for him is chokery. And it would be better for Miss Marie, too, if he were shut up; though she can't be expected to see it in that light."

Tom Merry nodded.

"Anyway, Talbot will be with us this afternoon," said Manners; "and we'll keep a fatherly eye on him."

"Weady, you fellows?" asked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, joining the Terrible Three in the quad. "Walton's gone by t'wain, you know. Time we were off."

"Come and get out the bikes," said Tom Merry. "Figgins & Co. are at the gates already. I hope we shall see a good match."

"I shall refuse!"

"Bow-wow!" said the Terrible Three together, and they marched off to the bicycle-shed, and Arthur Augustus followed them with a sniff.

CHAPTER 4.

Tom Merry on the Track.

Q UITE a little army of cyclists gathered outside the gates of St. Jim's in that keen, sunny, winter afternoon.

The fact that Mr. Railton, the young and popular master of the School House, was going to make a recruiting speech on Abbotsford Athletic Ground, had spread, and a great many fellows were keen to go and "see him do it," as Figgins put it.

Mr. Railton had interested himself keenly in recruiting, and had taken any amount of trouble, in attending meetings, making speeches, and making himself useful generally. He gave up almost the whole of his leisure to the matter. Many a stalwart young fellow, who "hadn't thought much about it," had decided to join the colours, after a talk with the Housemaster. Mr. Railton would explain, in a friendly and convincing way, how men were needed to keep the soil of Old England free from invasion, by strengthening the "thin khaki line" in Belgium. And how men, and more men, were needed to drive the blow home, and to reinforce Field-Marshal French's gallant army for the great march over the Rhine, which was the only possible way of ending the terrible war that was devastating Europe. For that was what it meant. Either the British Empire or her ruthless enemy had to "go under." And brave and loyal hearts were wanted, and still wanted.

Tom Merry & Co. admired their Housemaster immensely, and they were keen to hear him "going it." But that was not their chief reason for going to Abbotsford that afternoon. They were going, as Tom expressed it, to "look after Railton."

For on the occasions of big matches on Abbotsford Athletic Ground, though most of the crowd were good sportsmen, there were a good many rough characters who might take offence at the recruiting speech, and might even "handle" the Housemaster.

Mr. Railton gave no thought to the possible danger. But Tom Merry & Co. kindly thought of it for him.

And so quite a little army had gathered. There were the Terrible Three and Talbot and Kangaroo and Clifton Dane and Glyn, all of the Shell, and D'Arcy and Blake and Herries and Digby and Reilly and Lumley-Lumley and Hammond, of the Fourth. And Figgins & Co. of the New House, cheerfully postponing the House-match to join the School House fellows, had turned up in force—Figgins, Kerr, Fatty Wynn, Redfern, Owen Lawrence, and one or two others.

The crowd of cyclists started off in cheerful spirits.

There were about twenty fellows in all, and though they were only juniors, there would be enough of them to "chip in" with effect, if matters went badly for Mr. Railton. And though the Housemaster would certainly have felt exceedingly annoyed if he had known that they were coming to "look after" him, Tom Merry sagely surmised that he would be glad of help at the pinch, if it came.

And if there was no trouble, as Figgins remarked cheerfully, at least there would be a good football match to see, as Abbotsford Athletic were playing Manchester Southern. And the fellows who came from the North-country confidently opined that they would see the Mancunians walk over the Athletic.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy loudly announced his intention of refusing to see the match, but the other fellows persisted in taking that in a humorous spirit.

The St. Jim's party dashed away at a good speed, strung out along the road in twos and threes, pedalling away for all they were worth. There was not much chance of talking, and Talbot was glad of it. His was the only face that was not cheerful. Try as he would, the Toff could not banish the clouds from his brow, or the heaviness from his heart.

He was going to see John Rivers that afternoon, and he had to keep it a dead secret from his comrades. He was determined that, if he could prevent it, Marie should not see the crackman again, and risk falling under his old influence. He was willing to take the task upon himself. But he felt a deep sense of discouragement. It was the wretched old shuffling beginning over again, and he had longed almost passionately to be free from secrets, free from concealed thoughts, free from anything that smacked of his old life.

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He would have to get away from his comrades somehow to see the disguised crackman, and he would probably be missed, and he had an uneasy feeling that Tom Merry was already disquieted on his account.

And he knew what would happen if the chums of the Shell suspected—if they should discover that John Rivers was there. They would have no mercy on him. The fact that he was Marie's father disarmed Talbot against him. But the Terrible Three would see in him only the enemy of their chum—the man who had sought to bring Talbot to ruin—and at the mere suspicion that he was trying his old game again they would be implacable.

Talbot had plenty of food for thought during that ride to Abbotsford, and it was not pleasant thought.

Once or twice, as he saw Tom Merry's eyes turn upon him oddly, he "buckled up," and smiled cheerily. But he could not keep it up. He was in a mood of black despondency, and it mastered him in spite of himself.

Tom Merry drew his own conclusions, and his face, too, had a grim expression every now and then.

The cyclists rode into Abbotsford, and put up their bicycles, and walked to the football ground. There was a goodly crowd going in at the gates; the athletic matches were always well patronised. The juniors joined the stream.

"What part are we going in?" Talbot asked, remembering that Marie's father was in the grand-stand, and that it was there that he must see him.

"Follow the crowd," said Tom Merry. "Tanner each is enough for us, I suppose? You don't want to sit down, do you?"

"N-no. But—"

"Oh, come, even Gussy isn't too aristocratic to go in the cheap places!" said Monty Lowther. "If you're rolling in money, you can shove some in a collection for the Red Cross, you know?"

Talbot laughed.

"Yaas, wathah! Pway come in and stand, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus.

"Of course that's all right," assented Talbot.

And he went in with the rest, paying his sixpence at the turnstile. The juniors looked round for Mr. Railton, as they came into the big enclosure. He was in the crowd, too, and after a time they caught sight of his erect head and broad shoulders in the distance.

"There he is, Talbot," said Tom Merry, as he noticed his chum looking away in the direction of the grand stand.

"He's in the crowd, like our humble selves."

Talbot started violently.

"What! Tom! You—you have seen him?"

Tom stared at him.

"Certainly. There he is."

Talbot looked round in the direction indicated by Tom Merry. He caught sight of Mr. Railton's broad shoulders over the crowd, and understood. It was not the Housemaster Talbot had been looking for. He coloured deeply as he realised how he had betrayed himself.

"Oh! Mr. Railton! I—I see!" Talbot stammered.

"Were you looking for somebody else?" asked Tom Merry. Talbot coloured yet more deeply under the inquiring eyes of his chum. He had given himself away with a vengeance now.

"Friend of yours heah, deah boy?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"Where is he?"

"No—no," stammered Talbot. "I have no friend here."

Tom Merry compressed his lips.

Talbot moved away a little, pushed by a surge of the crowd round him, and was separated from the Terrible Three. But Tom Merry was no fool. He knew that Talbot had allowed himself to be pushed away in order to avoid further speech on the subject.

Tom Merry looked steadily towards the grand stand, the direction Talbot had been looking in when his attention was called to Mr. Railton.

The seats were pretty full, and among the hundreds of faces, and at the distance, Tom Merry could hardly hope to recognise a single one, even if he knew a face there. He dropped his gaze at last, unsuccessful and troubled. The Terrible Three moved a little away from the rest of the party.

"Well?" murmured Monty Lowther.

"You saw it?" said Tom. "Talbot was looking for somebody in the grand stand. He was flabbergasted when he misunderstood me, and thought I'd seen him—whoever he is."

Lowther nodded.

"But he said he had no friend here," said Manners.

"True enough," said Tom Merry. "He has no friend here, but an enemy."

"Oh!" murmured Manners and Lowther together.

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Tom Merry's eyes gleamed.

"I couldn't help suspecting it before," he said. "Now it's jolly certain. Talbot has heard from those rascals again, and he's been idiot enough to agree to meet one of them, and this place has been selected for the meeting. It's plain enough."

"But he agreed—"

"I know he did!" growled Tom Merry. "They have got round him, somehow. I can't quite understand it. He wouldn't be afraid of threats. They must have tricked him somehow into doing this, I should think. But whatever his motive is, we're going to see that he doesn't risk getting himself into trouble again. If that man Rivers is here to meet Talbot, we know what to do."

"Collar him?" said Lowther.

"Yes, keep an eye on Talbot, see if he meets anybody, and collar the man and make him give an account of himself. We've told Talbot plainly that if those rascals bother him again, we're going to chip in, so he knows what to expect."

A loud shout announced the entrance of the players into the field, and all eyes turned towards the football ground.

CHAPTER 5.

The League Match.

TOM MERRY & CO. looked on with keen interest, as the Athletic and the Manchester team came in through the wicket. They were two fine teams, and they were received with enthusiasm. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy seemingly had forgotten his heroic intention of refusing to see the match, although he was on the spot, for he was gazing on to the field as keenly as anyone.

Abbotsford Athletic won the toss, and the Manchester men kicked off, and the ball was soon rolling merrily.

Tom Merry glanced towards Mr. Railton, and he saw that the Housemaster was watching the play keenly, and the junior smiled a little. In spite of the Housemaster's object in coming there, he could not help being interested in a fine match finely played. The Manchester men were attacking hotly, and the Athletic were hard put to it to defend, and the game was fast and furious from the start.

In their keen interest in the game, the Terrible Three forgot Talbot. The Shell fellow was separated from them by the crowd, and they did not observe his movements. They did not know that when the game had been in progress some time, Talbot quietly worked his way back among the on-lookers and disappeared.

The attack of the visitors was driven back at last, and the game went into the Manchester half; but the Athletic could not score. Again the Mancunian forwards came sweeping down on the home goal, and there were loud shouts as they pressed their attack home.

"Goal!"

"Hooray!"

"Goal! Goal!"

There was a roar and a ripple of hand-clapping.

"Bwavo!" shouted Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Bwavo! What a wippin' goal! Huwway!"

Blake gave the swell of St. Jim's a dig in the ribs.

"What are you burbling for?" he demanded. "You disapprove of all this."

"Bai Jove, I nevah thought of that!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pewwaps it's a good ideah to look on now that we're heah, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus thoughtfully. "I must say that they are playin' up wippingly. It's a splendid game. Aftah all—"

"Well?" grinned Blake.

Arthur Augustus looked very thoughtful.

"Aftah all, deah boys," he said, as if a new idea had come into his head, "there are at least five thousand people here, I should say. Most of them have been hard at work all the week, and they're weally entitled to see a good game on their half-holiday. They have only one in a whole week, you know. And lots of them would go into the beastly public-houses if there wasn't a football-match to come to. You see, they would have nowhere else to go."

"Well, they don't belong to West End clubs, and they don't play golf, most of 'em!" chuckled Blake. "And they can't go out in their motor-cars, as they haven't any. So perhaps you'll be kind enough to leave 'em their Saturday afternoon footer-match, Gussy, as they've got nothing else."

"Pewwaps it would be wathah selfish to depwive them of it," said Arthur Augustus, still more thoughtfully. "It takes only twenty-two playahs to provide a healthy and manly



Mr. Railton raised his head proudly. "You are perfectly right," he said. "It is my duty to enlist as a private soldier, and I shall do so." "Gammon!" "Come on!" "I shall show you that I am in earnest," said Mr. Railton. "Gentlemen, there is a recruiting office open in this town. Who will follow me there, and sign on with me?" (See Chapter 8.)

amusement for five thousand people; and if twenty-two weewuits are specially wanted, they could easily be got some-whah else, I should think. Pewwaps, aftah all, it would be bettah to close the theatres and send the actahs to the fwont."

"Go hon!"
"Or they could close all the westaurants in the West End, and send the waitahs," said Arthur Augustus. "There must be ten times as many waitahs as pwofessional footballahs in the countwy."

"Gussy, old man, you're growing quite intelligent," said Blake admiringly. "I like to see your brain working like this. Does it hurt?"

"Weally, Blake—"
"Play up, Abbotsford!" shouted the crowd.
"On the ball, Athletic."

The Athletic were playing up hard, but they could not get through, and at half-time the score remained one up for the Mancunians. The players went off the field. Tom Merry looked round for Talbot. He could not see him. The party of juniors were separated in little groups among the crowd now. Tom Merry gave the curlew call, the signal of the Boy Scouts, and the fellows answered it and drew together. But Talbot did not answer it, and he did not appear.

"Here we are again!" said Blake cheerfully. "It's a ripping match. Gussy is going to allow football to continue after all."

"Weally, Blake—"
"He is going to write home to his noble pater to send all

his butlers, footmen, gamekeepers, and so on to the front," went on Blake.

"I didn't say anythin' of the sort, Blake!" said Arthur Augustus warmly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"How could my patah get on without a butlah, you ass?" demanded Arthur Augustus. "A chap must be weasonable. And how could he get his cawwiage door open without a foot-man? Pway have some sense. As for the gamekeepers, of course, they cannot be spared, or who is to look aftah the game?"

"You were suggesting abolishing the game, weren't you?" demanded Monty Lowther.

"I was weferrin' to the game of football, you ass! My patah thinks it ought to be stopped duwin' the war."

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"What are you cacklin' at, you duffah?"

"Your pater wants to abolish other people's games, but not his own game!" grinned Lowther. "It's a wicked world, and there's a lot of unconscious humour about."

"Weally, Lowthah, that is quite diffewent," said Arthur Augustus. "There must be gamekeepahs on a big estate, you know. The game has to be looked aftah."

"Couldn't it all be killed and sent to the hospitals?"

"Bai Jove, I—I suppose so!" said Arthur Augustus. "Weally, you know, there are quite a lot of things that want thinkin' out, you know. It's quite possible to be down on

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somebody else, when that somebody is down on you all the time."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Where's Talbot?" asked Tom Merry.

"Haven't seen him," said Blake. "In the crowd somewhere, I suppose."

"Got your glasses with you, Gussy?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Lend them to me," said Tom.

"Certainly, deah boy."

Arthur Augustus had his field-glasses slung in a beautiful leather case over his shoulder. He extracted them, and handed them to Tom Merry.

The captain of the Shell opened the glasses, and turned them upon the grand stand. He knew that Talbot had disappeared, as he had not answered the curlew call, and he had no doubt whether he was gone.

The powerful glasses brought the crowd in the grand stand quite close to him, and Tom Merry could distinguish every face quite clearly.

He gave a start as he recognised Talbot.

The Shell fellow was in the stand, and he was speaking to a slim man with a dark, swarthy face and a short, pointed black beard, and a red rose in his coat. Tom Merry scanned the swarthy face, but he could not recognise it. It looked like the face of a Frenchman. But he knew of old the skill of John Rivers in disguise. He had not forgotten that the cracksmen had once come to St. Jim's looking like a man of sixty, and that he had seen him afterwards looking not more than thirty-five. And of course the rascal, if he came there, would not have ventured to come in his proper person. He would naturally be in disguise.

Tom Merry set his teeth hard.

Talbot had said that he had no friend there, and yet he had disappeared from among his chums and gone to speak to this French-looking man in the grand stand. He had spoken the truth, doubtless. The man was not a friend. But if Talbot had gone deliberately to meet a man who was no friend of his, there could be only one explanation—it was one of the old gang. Tom Merry was feeling concerned about his chum, but he was feeling angry with him too. It had been so clearly understood that Talbot was to have no connection with the associates of his former life, and the Toff's action now was dangerously like breaking his word.

Tom Merry handed the glasses back to Arthur Augustus. Jack Blake cheerfully intercepted them.

"I'll keep these glasses, Gussy," he remarked. "Field-glasses are wanted at the front just now."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Give me that case," said Blake. "I'll pack 'em up carefully, and send them by registered post. I'll pay the postage myself," added Blake, in a burst of generosity.

Arthur Augustus's face was a study.

"Weally, deah boy—" he murmured feebly.

"That's what I like about Gussy," said Blake affably. "There's no humbug about Gussy. He wouldn't think of badgering a poor chap who's earning an honest living at footer, and at the same time keeping back anything that would be useful for the men at the front. Would you, Gussy?"

"Nunno," stammered Arthur Augustus.

Blake coolly slung the glasses over his shoulder.

"You can depend on me to see that these get to the right quarter, Gussy," he said. "I'll take all the trouble off your hands."

"Oh!"

The expression on Arthur Augustus's noble face made the juniors shriek. Blake was merciless. He fully meant what he said. And after Arthur Augustus's indignant remarks on the duty of others, he could not very well claim an exemption for his own field-glasses. He stood for some moments in deep thought—very deep thought indeed.

"You are wright, deah boy," he said at last—"quite wright. A fellow who would ewitcise othahs, and then keep back anythin' himself, would be a howlin' cad. I am very much obliged to you, Blake, for pointin' it out to me."

Blake clapped him affectionately on the shoulder.

"Good old Gussy!" he remarked. "You're an ass, but you're a very good little ass."

"I wefuse to be called a good little ass!"

"Hallo! Here they come!" called out Kangaroo.

The players were coming back. The juniors turned their attention to the field of play again.

"Where are those Shell bounders?" said Blake, looking round.

The Terrible Three had disappeared.

CHAPTER 6.

To Atone for the Past.

TALBOT entered the grand stand, while his comrades were still busy watching the first half of the League match. He had not seen the man he had come to meet from where he stood in the crowd, but in the stand he soon spotted him. The French-looking man was by himself in a back seat, which was only partly occupied. Talbot spotted him and looked at him hard.

The pretended Frenchman bore no resemblance, excepting in height, to John Rivers the cracksmen. But Marie's description fitted him exactly, and there was the red rose in his coat. And if Talbot had wanted any further proof that this was the man, he would have received it in the violent start the Frenchman gave as his eyes fell upon the Shell fellow from St. Jim's.

He half rose from his seat, and then sat down again. Talbot approached him, and dropped into the vacant place on the seat at his side.

The man with the black beard looked at him furtively out of the corners of his eyes.

"Well?" said Talbot quietly.

The Frenchman looked at him.

"Bon jour, monsieur!" he said in French.

Talbot smiled contemptuously.

John Rivers had come there to meet Marie, and he had been surprised and alarmed by the appearance of Talbot of the Shell. Whether the junior penetrated his disguise he was not certain. That he had only ennfity to expect from the Toff he knew. Had Marie betrayed him, and had Talbot come there to hand him over to the police? The rascal could not believe that. He knew that Marie, however much he shadowed her young life, would never turn against him. Yet Talbot could not have come as a friend, after all that had passed between them. The cracksmen concluded that the junior was there by chance, simply to see the football match, and he resolved to play out his assumed part. Talbot evidently suspected him, but he could not be sure.

"Il fait beau temps aujourd'hui," said Rivers, still speaking in French, as if conversing amicably with a polite stranger.

"I did not come here to speak about the weather," said Talbot.

The disguised cracksmen shook his head.

"Mais je ne comprends pas l'Anglais," he said politely.

"Je suis Français."

Talbot understood the secret apprehensions of the cracksmen, and he smiled again.

"Je vous connais tres bien," he said, in the same language.

"Pass possible?" said the Frenchman. "Je ne vous connais pas, monsieur."

"Voulez vous que je vous arracher cette barbe, monsieur?" asked Talbot grimly.

The pseudo Frenchman started back, as if to draw his false beard out of reach of the junior. Talbot had raised his hand as if to suit the action to the word.

The cracksmen realised that his game was up.

"Well, you know me, Toff," he said in English at last.

"Did you come here to see me?"

"Yes."

"Then Marie—"

"Marie told me of your letter. She could not come—and I, too, would not have let her come," said Talbot.

"If she has told you, it is because she knows that you will not betray me," said John Rivers coolly. "I have nothing to fear from you, then. I was afraid you had come here by chance and had spotted me."

"If I had done so I should have called the police at once," said Talbot coldly.

The cracksmen nodded.

"I know it. But now—"

"Now you are safe from me. I am not a traitor. I have come here to see you, and to find out what you want to see Marie for, for I have resolved that you shall not see her."

Rivers looked round quickly and nervously. But the other occupants of the stand were not near him, and all their attention was on the game.

"Speak low," he said, in a subdued voice. "If you are not careful you may betray me without wishing to do so."

"I will be careful. But this matter has got to be finished for good and all," said Talbot. "I have come here at the risk of being missed and suspected by my friends."

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The cracksmen shrugged his shoulders.

"Voilà l'entracte," he said, as the whistle went for half-time. "You did not come to see the match, mon petit?"

"My friends came to see the match, and I came with them. But my business here was to see you, and to learn what you want."

The cracksmen smiled sarcastically.

"You have set yourself up as the defender of my daughter, it appears," he remarked.

"Yes," said Talbot coldly.

"You think of standing between her and her father?"

"Undoubtedly. You shall have no chance of dragging her back into what she has been saved from," said Talbot bitterly. "You let her come to St. Jim's as a nurse to serve your own purposes, but she stays there as a refuge to escape from you and your influence. And I will see to it that you never have a chance of exerting again your influence over her. She shall be saved from that. Make any attempt to see her, and I will denounce you instantly, and do my best to put you in the hands of the police. You are mad to come here. At this moment my companions may have missed me. It is not at all impossible that they may guess that something is afoot."

Talbot did not guess that at that very moment Tom Merry was turning the field-glasses upon him, and watching him in conversation with the disguised cracksmen.

John Rivers shrugged his shoulders again.

"You have only yourself to thank for that," he said. "You came here of your own will. It was my daughter I wished to see."

"And why?"

The cracksmen laughed.

"To say good-bye to her," he said.

"You said good-bye to her when you were allowed to leave the school after your attempted robbery," said Talbot sternly. "You promised Dr. Holmes that you would reform, and that you would leave England."

"I shall keep both promises."

Talbot started.

"You mean that?" he exclaimed.

"I mean it."

"But—why, then, are you here?" exclaimed Talbot, watching the man's face keenly.

He could hardly believe it. He knew of old the duplicity of the cracksmen; yet he could not see why Rivers should lie now.

"As I have said, I must see my daughter once again before I go," said Rivers quietly. "You do not believe me, Toff? You think that you have repented and reformed, and that the same is impossible for others. You talk of my influence over Marie for evil. You have not thought of her influence over me for good!"

Talbot drew a deep breath.

"If you are in earnest, Professor, I am no enemy of yours," he said. "If you mean that, it will make Marie happy, and it will make me your friend, and I will do anything in my power to help you. We were comrades once in evil, and I would gladly be your friend again in honesty; but—"

"But you do not trust me?"

"No," said Talbot bluntly.

"Then you are wrong, for I am in earnest," said the cracksmen quietly. "For Marie's sake, if for no other reason, I have thrown the past behind, even as you have done, Toff. I did not believe in your repentance at first; but I cannot help believing in it now, since you chose poverty and hunger rather than return to the old ways. I did my best to compel you to leave St. Jim's, and come back to the gang. I failed. I am glad now that I failed!"

Talbot knitted his brows.

"If I could believe you!" he muttered. "I should like to believe you, Heaven knows! It is never too late to mend, and you are comparatively a young man yet; with a long life before you, if you choose to make the best of it!"

"Not so long as you may think," said the cracksmen. "In a few weeks' time I may be a dead man!"

"How? Why?"

John Rivers laughed softly.

"You do not understand? Yet it is easy enough to see. In these days there is always a way open to a man who wishes to redeem the past, and is willing to pay the price. But I must see Marie once more before I go, for in a few weeks I may be lying dead in the trenches in Belgium!"

Talbot gave a violent start.

"You!" he breathed.

"Why not? I am under military age—under the limit, I mean—I am strong, and I am not a coward," said Rivers carelessly. "True, they would not take me if they knew

that I have been a cracksmen and an outcast, but they will not know that. I shall put down my name as John Brown, and if I pass the medical examination—as I certainly shall—I shall be in training on Tuesday."

"As—as what?"

"Oh, I am not a snob, whatever else I may have been!" smiled John Rivers. "I had some experience in the Officers' Training Corps in the old days, but I cannot afford to be ambitious now. I shall be Private Brown!"

Talbot stared at him blankly. He knew the Professor's history—that he had been a University man, with good prospects before him, before he had taken the plunge that had led him into his evil way of life. The desire of a life of wealth and idleness had turned him into a criminal. Was it possible that the unscrupulous, hard-hearted criminal was in earnest, and that he was ready to redeem his evil past, even at the cost of his life?

"You—you mean it?" stammered Talbot.

"Of course I mean it," said Rivers. "Why should I tell you so if I did not mean it? But I must see Marie before I go. I shall have no chance when I am once with my unit. I know a little of soldiering, as you know, and I shall soon be considered fit for service, and the sooner the better. Out there I may redeem the past—may even get a commission in these days—who knows?—or a German bullet may save the police the trouble of hunting me down. I care little. It will be a good finish, and the bullet that makes an end of John Rivers may spare a better man!"

Talbot held out his hand impulsively. The one-time cracksmen grasped it.

"I believe you," said Talbot, "and I am glad. I hope you'll have good luck. And, of course, I shan't stand in your way now I know. Of course, you shall see Marie. If I had known—"

"That's all right. When can I see her?"

"To-day it is too late," said Talbot, wrinkling his brows thoughtfully, "and to-morrow Marie is going away with Mrs. Holmes for the whole day. Monday?"

The cracksmen nodded.

"I am free until Tuesday morning," he said.

"Good! You stay here?"

"Yes."

"Then I will write to you—"

"Monsieur Latour, at the Red Lion," said the cracksmen, with a smile. "I have to be careful. Mind, not a word—excepting to Marie, of course—not a word to your friends. They would not believe this—they would imagine it was some new trick. Not a word to anyone. Your promise!"

"I promise, of course," said Talbot.

He realised only too clearly that it would not do to let Tom Merry & Co. suspect that the Professor had come back. He could picture their utter disbelief if he told them that John Rivers had kept his pledge to give up his evil ways, and had resolved to enter the Army as a private.

To Tom Merry the Professor was simply the man who had plotted cunningly against his chum, who had almost succeeded in ruining him, and whom Tom still suspected of seeking to get the Toff back into his clutches. Once Tom knew that the cracksmen was there he would leave no stone unturned to hand him over to the police. Talbot knew that only too clearly.

He rose from the bench.

"I'll get back to the others now," said Talbot. "Wait a few minutes, and leave by another gate. You cannot be too careful."

"Right!"

They shook hands again, and Talbot went back the way he had come. John Rivers glanced about him carelessly, and moved away towards the end of the seats. There it was possible to vault into the enclosure where the "sixpenny" crowd stood.

In a few moments more he was out of the stand, and mingling in the crowd. John Rivers had had some experience of Tom Merry & Co., and he did not mean to leave anything to chance.

If they had missed their chum, and perhaps seen him in conversation with a Frenchman in the stand, it was only prudent for that Frenchman to disappear without risking a possible meeting with them.

Talbot, with a much lighter heart, made his way to the gate, to get round the enclosure and enter at the sixpenny gate again, to rejoin his chums.

But he was destined to rejoin them sooner than he anticipated.

As he passed out of the gate into the street there was a sharp exclamation.

"Here he is!"

It was Tom Merry's voice. Talbot stopped dead, his face turning very pale.

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A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

NEXT
WEDNESDAY:

"HERR SCHNEIDER'S SECRET!"

CHAPTER 7.
Chums Divided.

THE Terrible Three were there.

Tom Merry had lost no time after spotting Talbot in talk with the Frenchman in the grand stand.

The chums of the Shell had slipped quietly out of the crowd, and come round to the other gate to wait for Talbot to come out.

And as the Shell fellow, after his interview with the cracksmen, came out, he almost ran into Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther.

The Terrible Three were looking very grim. Talbot, with a sickening feeling at his heart, realised that they suspected. He tried to smile.

"Did you come to look for me?" he asked.

"Yes," said Tom curtly.

"Well, here I am," said Talbot, as cheerfully as he could. "Let's get back to the other fellows. We're missing the game!"

"Never mind the game," said Tom Merry. "What did you leave us for, Talbot?"

Talbot was silent.

"You said you had no friend here?"

"That was true," said Talbot, flushing.

"I don't doubt your word," said Tom drily. "You have no friend here—I know that. But you came here to meet somebody who was not a friend."

Talbot did not reply.

"I borrowed Gussy's glasses, and watched you in the stand," said Tom Merry deliberately. "You were talking with a chap who looked like a Frenchman. I have an idea that he is no more French than I am!"

"Tom!" muttered Talbot.

"And we want to know who it was," said Tom grimly. "His name, Talbot!"

"I—I can't tell you, Tom," said Talbot. "You—you've trusted me when nearly everybody else turned against me. Trust me a little further!"

"I trust you entirely," said Tom quietly. "But I don't trust John Rivers. He got you sacked from the school once, and it was just luck that helped us to beat him and clear you of the charge he fixed on you. He would do the same thing again if he could. If he has come back here he means mischief. He promised to go, and if he has broken his promise he's going to suffer for it!"

"Hear, hear!" murmured Lowther.

"Tom, I—I can't explain; but—but it's not as you think," stammered Talbot. "You say you trust me. Well, then—"

"Who was that Frenchman?" demanded Tom.

Talbot was silent. His heart was throbbing painfully. His promise to John Rivers held him silent; and he knew, too, that if he told the story, the chums of the Shell would not believe a word of it.

They would scoff at his simplicity in allowing himself to be deceived, as they would regard it. From their knowledge of the unscrupulous cracksmen, nothing else was to be expected.

"You need not answer," said Tom. "I know who it is well enough. I have seen him in more than one disguise. It is John Rivers—the Professor."

"Tom!"

"Come on, you fellows!" said Tom Merry, making a movement towards the gate.

Talbot sprang into his path.

"Tom, what are you going to do?"

"I am going to collar that scoundrel, and call on the police to arrest him," said Tom Merry.

"You—you mustn't! You can't! I—I tell you he—"

"You admit that it is John Rivers?"

"You know it is!" groaned Talbot. "But—but things have changed now. He has kept the promise he made to Dr. Holmes, I tell you—"

"Rubbish! Then why is he here?"

"He—he wishes to see Marie once more before he goes for good—"

Tom Merry's lip curled scornfully.

"Do you think we are likely to believe that?" he demanded wrathfully. "You may be ass enough to believe him. I don't!"

"Don't be an ass, Talbot!" said Manners. "He is a cunning rascal. He seems to have twisted you round his finger. He can't twist us!"

"He was told what to expect if he ever came back," said Lowther. "Now he's going to get it. Come on! If you don't want to lend a hand, Talbot, you can keep out of it."

"I—I tell you," panted Talbot, "you—you can't!"

"Rats!" said Tom Merry. "We can, and we will! And I tell you this, Talbot—we can trust you; but most fellows

would think that you were going back on your word, and getting in with that scoundrel again."

"Tom, you can't suspect—"

"I tell you what it looks like," said Tom Merry. "If you stand up for that villain, I don't know what I shall think."

Talbot drew himself up proudly.

"If you cannot trust me, you can let me alone," he said.

"After all, this is my business!"

"But it isn't your business," said Tom Merry coolly.

"When a dangerous criminal is wanted by the police it's everybody's business to help get him into limbo as quickly as possible. Why, we should be breaking the law if we didn't do our best to get him arrested. You can do as you like, but we're going to do our duty!"

Tom Merry strode on, and as Talbot did not move, he pushed him out of the way. Talbot looked for a moment as if he would hit out, but he knew it was useless. With a groan, he staggered against the wooden wall of the enclosure, his face deadly white, and despair in his eyes. The Terrible Three strode on determinedly. They paid for admission to the stand, and went among the seats, looking for the Frenchman.

But they looked in vain.

The bird had long flown. Once more the cunning of the cracksmen had saved him.

The Terrible Three spent ten minutes in scanning the faces in the stand. But it was only too clear that the man with the black beard had vanished.

"Stole away!" said Manners, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"While Talbot was delaying us at the gate!" muttered Lowther, with a grim look.

Tom Merry gritted his teeth.

"He's gone!" he said. "I suppose he got over among the crowd and slithered off while Talbot was talking to us. Come on!"

They went out in a decidedly bad humour.

Talbot was still standing where they had left him, with a white face. But his expression changed as they came out alone. He understood that John Rivers had made good his escape.

"Well, he has gone!" said Tom Merry bitterly.

"I am glad!" said Talbot.

"Glad! Glad that scoundrel has escaped!"

"You—you don't understand," muttered Talbot. "I tell you—"

Tom Merry gave him a hard look.

"No, I don't understand!" he said tartly. "I understand this much—that you are meeting your old pals, and trying to protect them. And I tell you plainly that I'm going to do everything I can to get that rascal arrested, whether you like it or not."

"I'm not going to quarrel with you, Tom," said Talbot, with an effort. "You've been too good a friend to me for that. But if you no longer have faith in me you can drop my friendship if you like, and have nothing more to do with me."

Talbot looked almost beseechingly at his chum as he spoke. It was Tom Merry who had been his best pal, who had stood by him when all others turned away, who had succeeded in clearing him from unjust suspicion and saving his honour. But Tom Merry's face was hard as iron now.

"Will you give me your word not to see that man again, and to denounce him if he should communicate with you?" demanded Tom.

"I cannot!"

"Mind what you're saying, Talbot, old man!" said Lowther anxiously. "That isn't much to ask of you; you've as good as promised that much, too."

"The circumstances have changed," said Talbot. "You would not believe me if I told you what that man intends—I mean, you would not believe that he has told me the truth. And if you knew his intentions it would be in your power to defeat him—to cause him to be arrested. And I have promised him—"

"You've been making him promises?" said Tom Merry bitterly. "After what you've been through at his hands, you're ass enough to trust him an inch!"

Talbot bit his lip.

"And you won't promise me what I ask?" said Tom, after a pause.

"I can't, Tom!"

"What do you think the Head would say, or Mr. Railton, if they knew you were having dealings with that man again?"

"I—I am not having dealings with him—"

"What do you call it, then?"

Talbot made a weary gesture, but he did not speak. What was the use of speaking when one could not explain? And if he did explain the juniors would not believe a word. He was in a false position, and he realised it miserably. The

Professor had formerly sought to injure him, and had been defeated by Tom Merry. Now that the man was trying to be decent at last it looked as if he was going to deprive the Toff of Tom's friendship. It was the irony of Fate.

"I asked you, Talbot, what do you think the Head would say?"

"You will not tell him?"

"I am to keep the secret for you, then?"

"Do as you like," said Talbot dully. "I ask nothing. Do as you like, Tom."

Without another word he walked away.

Tom Merry made a movement to follow him, but stopped. Talbot did not go back to the football-ground; he disappeared into the streets of the town.

"Well, my hat, this is a go!" said Monty Lowther.

"Dash it all, we're not going to quarrel with Talbot!" murmured Manners. "There won't be any good come of that, Tom."

Tom Merry bit his lip hard.

"It's come jolly near it!" he said. "If it wasn't for one consideration, I think I should quarrel with him. But I think I know why he is playing the fool like this. It's because that man is Miss Marie's father. Talbot is thinking of her, and running risks himself for her sake. But we've agreed what's going to be done, you fellows. If Talbot won't help himself, we're going to help him; and that scoundrel is going to prison if he comes near the school again. Whether Talbot likes it or not, I'm determined on that. Let's get back to the fellows now."

The Terrible Three returned to the sixpenny gate, and rejoined their chums in the crowd. The match was nearing its end. Talbot was not there.

The Toff had gone into the town, and his business there was to see Monsieur Latour at the Red Lion, and warn him that his disguise was known, and that Monsieur Latour had better disappear as quickly as possible. Fortunately, Tom Merry did not know that, or his anger would probably have reached breaking-point.

CHAPTER 8.

Very Successful Recruiting.

"B WAWO!"
"Well played!"
"Ooray!"

The League match was over. The Manchester team had won by two goals to one, and the crowd were giving the visitors an ovation. The Athletic had put up a good fight, but they had been outclassed, and though the defeat of the home team was a disappointment, the Abbotsford crowd showed that they were sportsmen.

People began to move towards the exits, or stood round in groups discussing the match, and smoking. Tom Merry & Co. had drawn together at a short distance from Mr. Railton. Troubled as Tom Merry was in his mind about Talbot, he did not forget the prime purpose for which he was there. The juniors, however, did not get too close to the Housemaster; they did not want him to suspect that they were there to look after him.

Mr. Railton had already begun to address the crowd, and at first he was stared at inquiringly, and then there were some hoots and some laughter. But, on the whole, the spectators seemed to be good-humoured and willing to give him a hearing. The British sense of fair play is generally pretty strongly developed in a football crowd.

"Gentlemen, will you allow me a few minutes? You are all interested in the war; you all know that your country is engaged in a terrible struggle for life and liberty. Lord Kitchener has said that he needs more men. I have come to make an appeal to you, as Britishers and sportsmen. Will you give me a hearing?"

"Ear, 'ear!" squeaked out a youth of about fourteen, who had a cigarette between his yellow teeth. "Will I do, guv'nor?"

There was a laugh, and the crowd gathered round good-humouredly.

"Give the gentleman a 'ear!" said a young man with a good-humoured face, who had a rule sticking out of the pocket of his cardigan jacket.

"Right you are, Benny!" said one of his friends. "Fair play's a jewel! Go ahead, sir, and tell us the latest noos."

"It is you young men I wish to speak to more particularly," said Mr. Railton genially. "You are just the men who are wanted. Now, you're footballers and sportsmen. You believe in backing up your team through thick and thin. Well, our team—England's team in khaki—are out there, facing odds of four or five to one. Who's going to back them up?"

"Ear, 'ear!"

"Chance for you, 'Erbert."

"Go it, 'Erbert!"

The young man addressed as 'Erbert grinned.

"I ain't allowed to go," he remarked. "I'm working at making boots for the troops, you fat'ead. They can't fight barefoot, I s'pose?"

"If you are helping in that way, you are doing your duty," said Mr. Railton. "Men must help at home as well as at the front. But you are not all making boots for our troops. Now, sir—he fixed his eyes on Benny—"may I ask you, as a friend, why you don't go?"

Fifty pairs of eyes turned on Benny, and he blushed. Benny was an athletic young man, and certainly looked as if he might give a good account of himself in the fighting-line. He blushed, and then he grinned.

"You arsk me as a friend why I don't go?" he repeated.

Mr. Railton nodded.

"Well, wot is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander," said Benny. "May I arsk you as a friend, sir, why you don't go?"

Mr. Railton jumped.

"I!" he ejaculated.

"Yes, w'y not?" said Benny, with a chuckle. "You ain't over thirty-eight—wot?"

"No, no; I am not thirty-eight yet certainly," said Mr. Railton, a little confused. "My age is thirty-six."

"Hover eighteen—wot?" said Benny.

"Yes, certainly!"

The crowd chuckled with glee. The humorous Benny was a hero at once. He realised that he had the advantage, and pressed it.

"Well, then, I arsk you as a friend why you don't go?" he said, with a wink to his friends. "You ain't lame?"

"N-no!"

"Nor blind?"

"Certainly not."

"In good 'ealth, hey?"

"Ye-es!"

"Then w'y don't you go?" persisted Benny, chuckling. "Ain't you ever 'eard that a man oughter practise wot he preaches, sir? I'm a carpenter, I am, and I get two quid a week. I lose 'arf that if I wolunteer. P'raps a gentleman like you, sir, don't know the value of a quid to a pore man? But there's 'eaps of pore men, sir, 'ave given up good jobs to go and fight the Germans, and I've been thinking it over myself. And I'll tell you wot I'll do, sir; I'll make a bargain with you. I'll go if you do."

The crowd yelled with laughter.

Tom Merry & Co. looked at one another with sickly expressions.

They had come there to help their Housemaster if his patriotic appeal to the crowd should lead to rough handling. But there did not seem to be any danger of that. The crowd were quite good-tempered, and probably quite as patriotic as the gentleman who had come to speak to them. Mr. Railton was looking very red and uncomfortable. The carpenter's words had struck home.

"Well," went on Benny, as his victim didn't speak, "I'm a respectful feller, sir, and I don't shove myself before my elders. I'm only twenty-four I am—and you, sir, are thirty-six. It's my place to foller you, and I knows my place; I was werry carefully brought up, sir. I'll foller you into the recruiting-office!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I am a schoolmaster," said Mr. Railton, feeling that he was called upon to defend himself, for the mockery of the crowd stung him to the quick. "It would be very difficult for me to be replaced—"

"And I'm a carpenter, and I've got a widow sister with two little kids at 'ome," said Benny. "You got anything as serious as that on your 'ands, sir?"

The Housemaster was dumb. Certainly his duties at St. Jim's were serious enough, and very onerous; but he could not say that they were as serious as Benny's.

"You don't seem to be in a 'urry to speak," remarked Benny. "Remember, sir, that a sportsman ought to back up his own team—our team in khaki, sir—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Railton breathed hard. He had never felt so ridiculous and humiliated in his life.

"I have had no training!" he stammered. "If I should apply for a commission I should be refused."

"Commission!" said Benny, quick to seize his advantage. "Was you recommending me to apply for an officer's job, sir?"

"No, no!"

"And can't you go as a private if I does?" demanded Benny. "Ain't there any privates wanted, may I arsk?"

"Oh, my 'at!" said 'Erbert. "Pile it on, Benny!"

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"Give the blooming toff a bit of your mind, Benny!" another friend encouraged the young man. "Who's he to come and jaw us, when he's going to skulk at 'ome 'imself?"

"A blessed coward!" said another voice. Mr. Railton turned crimson.

There had been a struggle going on in his mind—a bitter struggle. For he realised to the full the justice of the carpenter's words. He had come there to urge men to throw up their jobs, to take all the chances of war, of wounds, and of death, in their country's cause, and at the call of duty, and he had not even thought of offering himself. Why not?

His career doubtless was at stake, but his career was hardly so serious a matter as actual livelihood, which poor men were called upon to risk.

Indeed, he had much less to risk, for the loss of a leg or an arm was terribly serious to a worker who depended on his limbs for his daily bread; while to a schoolmaster the loss would be much less serious.

Look at it how he could, he realised that he had nothing to say. He had to accept this man's challenge, or own up before the mocking crowd as a Pharisee—as a man who urged others to go into danger while he remained at home in ease and comfort himself.

At that thought he blushed with shame.

To exchange his agreeable labours, his comfortable study, his hours of leisure, the books he loved, for the hardships of a private soldier's life—it was a sacrifice it was not easy to make.

Yet it was no greater sacrifice than he had come there to call upon these men to make—it was a smaller one.

He knew which way duty lay.

The crowd was beginning to look ugly now, as he gave no sign. He was silenced, but that was not enough. He had come there to preach to them, and he was not willing to practise what he preached, and they were naturally down on him.

"Yah! Hypocrite!" growled 'Erbert. "Why don't you go? Only poor men wanted—hey? Are you afraid of the Germans?"

"Knock his 'at off!"

"Kick him out!"

The crowd closed round the Housemaster. Tom Merry & Co. pushed their way forward. They were going to back their Housemaster if he needed help; but it was not with feelings of pride. For Benny's caustic words had struck home to them, too, and they were ashamed of their Housemaster.

"Oh, let the 'umbug go!" said Benny. "I've shown 'im up, anyway!"

Mr. Railton raised his head proudly.

"You have shown me up!" he said steadily. "You have shown me up in my own eyes, my young friend. What you have said is just and true. Believe me, I had thought that my duties in my school, my duty to my boys, came first; but it was perhaps only a selfish prompting. You are perfectly right—it is my duty to join as a private soldier, and I shall do so!"

"Wot!"

"Gammon!"

"Come on!"

"I shall show you that I am in earnest," said Mr. Railton. "Gentlemen, there is a recruiting-office open in this town. Who will follow me there and sign on with me?"

"You don't mean it?" gasped Benny.

"I mean it, on my honour, and I thank you for pointing out my duty to me," said Mr. Railton quietly. "My young friend, you have promised to enlist if I do."

"I'm a man of my word," said Benny.

"I'm with you, if you mean business."

"Come with me, then. Who else will come with me?" demanded Mr. Railton. "Who else here is willing to do his duty to his country and his King?"

There was a loud cheer. Where "preaching" was worse than useless, example was irresistible. A score of young fellows came pressing forward. Mr. Railton's face lighted up.

"I'm with you, sir!"

"Same here!"

"We'll follow you, sir!"

"Come on, then," said the Housemaster; and, amid ringing cheers, the Housemaster of St. Jim's led his recruits away.

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CHAPTER 9.

A Surprise for the School.

TOM MERRY & Co. stood dumbfounded. Railton—old Railton—the Housemaster of the School House—was going to enlist! Old Railton was going into Kitchener's Army as a private soldier!

It was almost incredible.

But the pride of the juniors in their Housemaster was unbounded now.

"My only hat!" gasped Tom Merry, at last. "Isn't he splendid? Isn't he a brick?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Private Railton!" grinned Blake. "Oh, my hat!"

"More than your giddy Housemaster would do, Figgy!" chuckled Digby.

"My Housemaster's too old," said Figgins. "Old Ratty is fifty, if he's a day. I don't see how Railton could have done anything else, unless he was going to own up as a funk and a humbug. Still, it's ripping of him."

"Yes, rather."

"It's topping," said Tom Merry. "But, by Jove, what will the Head say? And what shall we do without Railton? They'll be giving us a new Housemaster. We shall miss old Railton."

"Still, he ought to go," said Blake seriously. "Every man who's fit ought to go—at least, when he's unmarried. There's no doubt he ought to go; but it didn't seem to have occurred to him till friend Benny pointed it out. But it's never too late to mend. His recruiting expedition has turned out better than he expected."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove, this will be a surprise for the school!" chuckled Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Let's get back, deah boys, and tell the fellows, and give old Wailton a weception when he comes in."

"Good egg!"

The juniors left the football ground. They could imagine what a surprise it would be for St. Jim's, and they were anxious to get back with the news.

"Where's Talbot?" asked Kangaroo.

"I don't know," said Tom. "He went into the town. I dare say he'll come back by himself."

"Hallo, here he is!" said Mannors, a few minutes later. Talbot was waiting for his friends at the place where they had put up their bicycles.

He did not look at the Terrible Three.

"Oh, heah you are, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus. "You missed a wathah wippin' scene, old chap. Old Wailton's gone to enlist."

"Railton!" ejaculated Talbot.

"Yaas, wathah! He's goin' as a pwivate Tommy Atkins. Who'd have thought it?"

"I thought of it," said Talbot quietly. "I wondered why he didn't go; but it would not have been quite respectful to say so. I'm glad he's decided to do the right thing. I suppose he hadn't thought of it before."

"Well, it is wathah surpwin', you know," said D'Arcy.

"He is givin' up a big salawy and a good position to go as a pwivate soldier."

"A good many working men are giving up trades they spent years in learning, and may come back unable to follow their trades," said Talbot. "Mr. Railton, at least, will find his position open for him when he comes back."

"Yaas," said Arthur Augustus thoughtfully. "I suppose he isn't weally givin' up so much as that man Benny. Still, it's wippin' of him to go. We're goin' to give him an ovation when he comes back."

And the juniors pedalled away to St. Jim's in great spirits. They were very proud of their Housemaster now. They covered the long ride to St. Jim's at a great rate.

The old school was reached as the winter evening was coming on. Tom Merry & Co. wheeled in their bicycles, and then hurried to spread the great news. Figgins & Co. took it into the New House, and Tom Merry & Co. soon spread it over the School House.

The surprise of the St. Jim's fellows was great.

They could hardly imagine the Housemaster of the School House in khaki as a private soldier.

FOR NEXT WEEK:

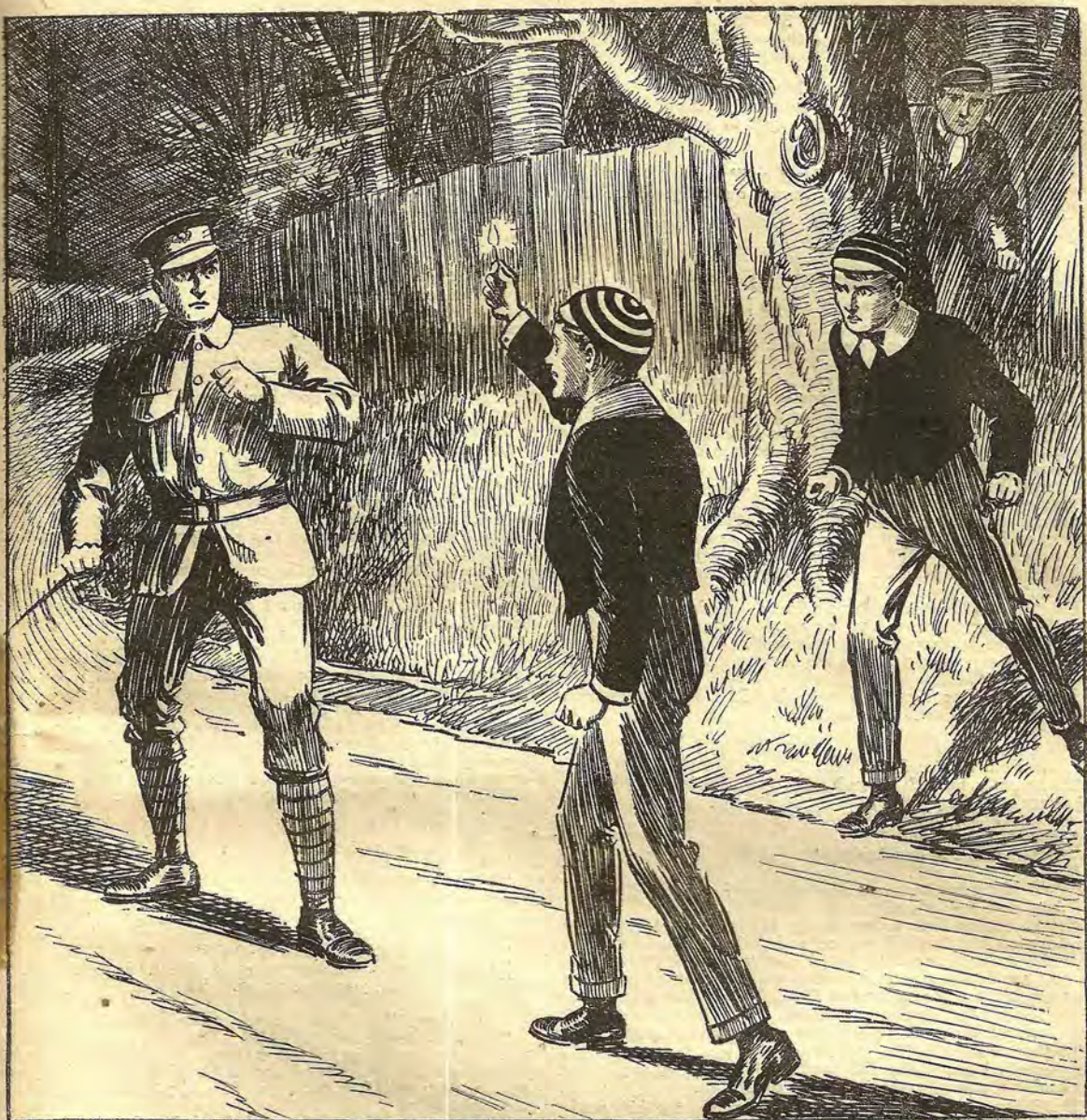
Herr Schneider's Secret!

Another Splendid
Long, Complete
Story of Talbot
and Tom Merry &
Co. at St. Jim's.

—By—

MARTIN CLIFFORD.

Order in Advance.
PRICE ONE PENNY.



Tom Merry waited until the footsteps sounded close at hand. Then he struck the wax match. The man halted as the sudden light gleamed out in the darkness. One look at his face was enough. "Collar him!" In an instant John Rivers was struggling in the grasp of the Terrible Three. (See Chapter 13.)

But it was generally agreed that it was his duty to go, only a few fellows like Crooke and Mellish sneering and shrugging their shoulders.

There was a general wonder as to what the Head would say. If Mr. Railton left suddenly, it might be awkward for him. And they wondered whether he would approve of his Housemaster, an Oxford man and a scholar, joining the New Army as a private. Mellish of the Fourth said that it was a reflection on the school, and he was promptly collared by the indignant juniors, and his head was held under a flowing tap till he recanted and begged pardon for his statement.

Mr. Railton had not returned to the school yet, and all the fellows joined eagerly in Tom Merry's idea of giving him a tremendous reception when he came in. They did not mean to leave the Housemaster in any doubt as to what St. Jim's thought of his ripping conduct.

Tom Merry marched coolly into the study of Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, who was having tea with Darrel and Langton of the Sixth.

"News!" said Tom.

"Well?" said Kildare, looking at him.

"Mr. Railton has joined the Army."

"Don't be a young ass!"

"It's twue," chirruped Arthur Augustus from the passage. "Quite twue, Kildare, deah boy. He's goin' to be Pwivate Waitlon."

"If you're pulling my leg—" began Kildare sharply. "Honest Injun!" said Tom. "And we want the whole school to give him a reception when he comes in. 'Tain't every school that has a Housemaster in Kitchener's Army, is it? We want seniors as well as juniors to turn up. You'll come?"

"Look here, is this true?" exclaimed Darrel.

"Honour bright!"

"Well, my hat," said Kildare, whistling, "this takes the bun! Old Railton, M.A., as a private! My hat!"

"Why not?" demanded Tom Merry. "It's his duty, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, I suppose it is," said Kildare. "But it's a surprise all the same. Men in Mr. Railton's position don't always do their duty—not to that extent."

"That's why we want to give him a thumping reception," said Tom Merry. "He ought to know what the school thinks of him."

"Heah, heah!" came from the passage.

"Hurray for Railton!" came a shout from the dusky quadrangle, where the juniors were already gathering in force to wait for the Housemaster.

Kildare jumped up, his eyes glistening. "Come on, you chaps!" he exclaimed. "If old Railton is really playing up in this way he ought to be chaired round the quad. Come on!"

"Hurray!"

"That's wight, deah boys! Come on!"

And nearly all St. Jim's had turned out to greet Private Railton when he came in.

CHAPTER 10. "Private Railton!"

MR. RAILTON came in at the gates of St. Jim's with a thoughtful expression on his face.
The die was cast now.

He had put down his name, and he had had the satisfaction of seeing a score or more of young fellows following his example, putting down theirs after it. He had been told by a surprised recruiting-officer when and where he was to go for his medical examination. The die was cast. The old, pleasant life at St. Jim's would be over in a few days, and he would be among the new recruits, drilling and training, preparing to take his place in the shell-swept trenches of Belgium. His old duties would be in other hands; his new and more imperative duty called him to serve his country in the hour of peril. He was wondering a little uneasily how the Head would take it. But, however the Head took it, his duty was clear.

He started a little as he came across the dusky quad. Lights were gleaming there—a score or more of juniors were armed with Chinese lanterns and electric torches. And in the flare of light he saw nearly all the school collected, from the Sixth to the Second.

There was a roar as he appeared. It dawned upon him that they had been waiting for him.

"Here he is!"

"Hurray!"

"Good old Railton!"

There was a formidable rush, and the School House master was surrounded by yelling, cheering fellows.

"Bwavo! Huwway!"

"Hip, hip, hurray!"

"Cheers for Tommy Atkins!"

"Hip, hip, hurray!"

"Shoulder high!" roared Mulvaney major of the Sixth.

"My boys—" ejaculated Mr. Railton.

But he had no time to say more. He was grasped by three or four sturdy Sixth-Formers, and hoisted shoulder high. Round him the crowd thronged and surged. Digby blew fiercely on his mouth-organ a tune which he fondly imagined to resemble the "Conquering Hero." Herries drove fear-some blasts out of his celebrated cornet. Other fellows waved lanterns and Union Jacks. It was a tremendous ovation.

In the terrific din Mr. Railton's voice was drowned. He was marched round the old quad in the midst of the wildly enthusiastic crowd, amid deafening cheers.

Dr. Holmes, the Head of St. Jim's, came to his study window and opened it, and looked out into the quadrangle in amazement.

"What is this uproar?" he exclaimed.

"This way!" yelled Tom Merry.

And the procession marched towards the Head's window.

Dr. Holmes almost fell down at the sight of Mr. Railton mounted on the shoulders of Kildare and Darrel, unable to escape.

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed the Head. "Mr. Railton! What—what does this mean?"

"Pwivate Wailton, sir!" chirruped Arthur Augustus.

"Hurray for Private Railton!"

"Pray put me down!" exclaimed the Housemaster, struggling. "I shall really be angry. Kildare, I beg of you—"

"Right-ho, sir—march!" said Kildare.

They marched again, taking the blushing Housemaster to the steps of the School House. The astonished Head followed out of his study, and came to the door to meet them. Never had Dr. Holmes beheld such an extraordinary sight in the old quadrangle of St. Jim's.

Mr. Railton, gasping for breath, was deposited on the steps on the School House, and stood there panting, while thunderous cheers rang out from the St. Jim's fellows.

"Whatever does this mean?" exclaimed the Head.

"I suppose it is an oration of some sort," said Mr. THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 364.

Railton, half smiling and half vexed. "I really do not know how the boys know anything about it. I intended to acquaint you with the matter first, sir, of course. I have felt it my duty to offer my services for the new Army!"

"Mr. Railton!" exclaimed the Head.

"Hooray!" roared the juniors.

"But—but as you have had no training, Mr. Railton, you will surely not be able to obtain a commission—not at once, at all events," said the Head, in astonishment.

"No, sir; that would be impossible. I did not think it would be consistent with my duty to wait till I could get a commission. I have therefore joined as a private!"

"Mr. Railton!"

"Pwivate Wailton! Hooway!"

"I hope, sir, that you will not blame me," said the Housemaster anxiously. "I went to the football-ground, as you know, to seek recruits, and one of them asked me very plainly why I did not become a recruit myself. It was the first time, sir, that my duty appeared plain in my own eyes, and I could not hesitate. I could not, without being a poltroon, shrink from the duty I have urged upon others. I hope, sir, that I have your consent?"

"My dear Railton," exclaimed the Head, "I cannot say how much I approve of your conduct. It is a surprise, but a most welcome and pleasant one!"

And the good old doctor shook hands with the Housemaster, amid another burst of cheering from the St. Jim's fellows.

Then the two masters went into the Head's study, and the door closed on them, and the ovation was at an end.

But the matter remained the sole topic of discussion that evening.

"Private Railton" was the one subject for conversation.

Tom Merry, in the excitement of greeting Private Railton, had forgotten all about Talbot of the Shell; but he remembered him when the Terrible Three went to their study for a belated tea.

Talbot was to have had tea in Tom Merry's study that evening; but, after the happenings at Abbotsford, the chums of the Shell wondered whether he would come.

He did not come. As a matter of fact, Talbot had forgotten tea. While the Terrible Three were sitting down to their late meal in the study, Talbot had gone quietly in the dusk into the Head's garden. He waited there, pacing up and down the frosty path for a long time, till he heard a light step from the direction of the sanatorium. He turned to see Marie.

"Well?" said Marie eagerly.

"I met him," said Talbot.

"And—and—"

"I have good news for you, Marie," said the Toff, in a low voice. "You were right, and I was wrong. Your father is keeping his promise!"

Marie's face lighted up with joy.

"Oh, Toff, I am so glad—so glad!"

"I don't know whether you will like to hear the rest," said Talbot; "but you must know. The Professor has joined the Army!"

"The Army!" exclaimed Marie, with wide-open eyes.

"Yes. He is going to fight for England, Marie—the best way he can make up for other things he has done. I tried to join when I was turned out of St. Jim's; but I was too young—they wouldn't take me. Dear, your father is doing the right thing!"

"I know it, Toff; and I am glad—glad! But"—the girl's voice faltered—"the danger—the fearful danger!"

"Someone must face the danger, dear, unless we are to be conquered by the Germans," said Talbot.

"My Housemaster has joined to-day as a private. Courage, my dear girl! Think of the others whose fathers are there, in the fighting-line. You are only one among thousands. And we must hope that he will have good luck. He is doing right, Marie and I would go with him if I were old enough. It is sickening—sickening—to stay idle at home while those brave fellows are fighting for us! What wouldn't I give to be a few years older!" said the Toff, with a sigh.

"You would leave me without a friend?" said Marie.

"Yes, dear, I would, if they'd take me," said Talbot, with a slight smile. "But they won't—there's no such luck. Your father is lucky to get taken. I can't understand any man holding back at a time like this. I can't understand the slackers who won't go when they have a chance!"

"I must see him, Toff," said Marie. "I know—I know he is doing right—he is doing his duty! I know it; but I must see him before he goes!"

"That is why he came; and I wronged him in my thoughts, Marie. I know where he is, and I shall arrange it. But you understand we must be careful. Some of the fellows have found out that he was at Abbotsford to-day, and if he is seen—"

Marie shivered.

"Toff, it would break my heart!"

"I shall take care, Marie," said Talbot reassuringly.

"Leave it to me, and I will manage it!"

The girl pressed his hand.

"I must go," she said. "But one word more—you parted friends, then?"

"Good friends," said Talbot.

"Oh, I am so glad!"

Talbot walked away to the School House when the girl left him. Marie's happiness made him happy too; and the girl was happy to know that her father was on the right path at last, though she feared the danger that would be his lot. But as he came back into the School House Talbot was moody and troubled.

He was on bad terms with his best chums, and that was a weight on his mind. But, more than that, he knew Tom Merry's intentions—he knew that the chums of the Shell were on the watch, and that if they could find John Rivers they would have no mercy upon him.

And the meeting between Marie and her father would be fraught with danger for the reformed cracksmen. Talbot had plenty of food for thought. All his old bitterness towards the Professor had vanished now. He believed in his reformation and in his desire to atone for the past; and, believing that, he felt that he was bound to help him. But every step he took exposed him to the suspicion of his chums; and the Toff realised, with a heavy heart, that in doing what now seemed to him his duty he was risking losing for ever what he cared for more than almost anything in the world—the friendship of Tom Merry.

CHAPTER 11.

The Peacemaker.

"I SUPPOSE I had better speak a word!"

Arthur Augustus made that remark, in a thoughtful sort of way. It was Monday, and morning lessons were over. The chums of Study No. 6 were sauntering in the quadrangle, when Arthur Augustus thus unbosomed himself.

"Hallo!" said Blake. "Another word in season, Gussy?"

"Yaas."

"What has Railton been doing now?" chuckled Blake.

"Wats! It isn't Wailton! I quite approve of Wailton's conduct!"

"What a relief to him, if he only knew!" said Blake. "He's been looking rather thoughtful since Saturday, Gussy. Perhaps that's what he's worrying about!"

"Pway don't be an ass, deah boy. I am thinkin' of those Shell boundahs. There is somethin' up between Talbot and his fwends!"

"Oh, rot!"

"I wequest you not to chawactewise my remarks as wot, Blake. I noticed yestaday that the Tewwible Three and Talbot did not go for their usual Sunday walk togethah. Tom Mewwy and Mannahs and Lowthah went out by themselves, and Talbot mooched about!"

"I dare say he wanted to speak to Miss Marie," yawned Blake. "He seems to take up all her spare time. No chance for any other chap to get in a word edgeways!"

"And this mornin' I noticed that he avoided them in the quad," pursued Arthur Augustus; "and he has been lookin' vewy down in the mouth, you know. The young duffahs have been quawwellin' about somethin', I pwesume, and that is where I come in. A fellow of tact and judgment is wanted when fwends fall out!"

"Blessed are the peacemakers!" yawned Digby.

"Weally, Dig, it is wathah a good thing to be a peacemakah," said Arthur Augustus. "It would be widiculous to leave those youngstahs at loggahheads when a word in season might put the mattah quite wight!"

"Might make it worse," suggested Blake. "Third parties chipping in generally make matters worse, you know!"

Arthur Augustus shook his head.

"Not when a fellow has weally plenty of tact and judgment," he replied. "A fellow who can be welied upon to be weally tactful and delicate, you know, is a boon and a blessin' in a case like that!"

"Yes; but where are you going to find such a fellow?" asked Blake argumentatively.

"Weally, Blake, there is such a fellow pwesent at this moment," said Arthur Augustus, with a great deal of dignity.

"You flatter me, Gussy!" said Blake amiably.

"I was not alludin' to you, Blake."

"Oh, you mean Dig?"

"I do not mean Dig!"

"Oh, you're the blessed peacemaker, then, Herries?"

"I did not mean Hewwies."

"Then who the deuce did you mean?" demanded Blake.

"I was weferin' to myself, you ass!"

"But you described a fellow who could be relied upon to be tactful and delicate, and show plenty of judgment!" said Blake, in astonishment.

"I wefuse to discuss the mattah with you, Blake, if you decline to be sewious," said Arthur Augustus; and he walked away with his noble nose in the air, leaving his chums chuckling.

Arthur Augustus did not allow the grass to grow under his feet. Having decided that there was something wrong between Talbot and his friends, and that he was the fellow to set it right, he looked for Talbot at once to begin with him. He found the Shell fellow by himself in the quad, with a moody look on his brow, and his hands thrust deep into his pockets.

"Feelin' down—what?" asked Arthur Augustus, with an amiable smile.

Talbot started and looked at him. He smiled faintly.

"Yes—no—why?" he said, a little confusedly.

"You've been wovin' with youah fwends," said Arthur Augustus, wagging an admonitory forefinger at the Shell fellow. "Don't blush, deah boy. It's all wight. I know all about it."

"What! You know—" stammered Talbot. He recovered himself at once. "Rubbish! You don't know anything about it, you ass!"

"Ahem! I mean, I have wemarked that you are on bad terms, you know," said Arthur Augustus. "Now, I am goin' to make peace between you. First of all, tell me fwankly what you have been quarrellin' about."

"We have not quarrelled!" said Talbot, a little testily.

"Wubbish! Pway confide in me, deah boy. You may wegard me," said Arthur Augustus, "as—as an uncle."

"Fathead!"

"Ahem! Now, I weally want to set this mattah wight, you know," said the swell of St. Jim's. "When you youngstahs fall out about nothin', all that is needed is for a fellow of tact and judgment to say a few words to put the mattah wight. That's what I am goin' to do. Pway don't walk away while I am talkin' to you, Talbot. Now, tell me all about it."

"Oh, don't bother," said Talbot.

"Bai Jove! I must chawactewise that as a wude wemark, Talbot, considewin' that I am actin' as a disintewested fwend and peacemakah."

"Gussy, old chap, you're a good little ass, but I'd rather you didn't bother," said Talbot. And he walked away.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy jammed his eyeglass into his eye, and looked after him, with a frown. Talbot wasn't taking his well-meant intervention in what he considered a proper spirit. D'Arcy shook his head sadly.

"I am afraid I must wegard Talbot as a wathah obstinate beast," he murmured. "Howevah, I will tackle Tom Mewwy."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy discovered the Terrible Three looking on at the footer practice and chatting together. He tackled them at once.

"Now, what's the mattah, deah boys?"

Tom Merry stared.

"Matter with what? The footer?"

"Certainly not. There is somethin' up between you fellows and Talbot, and I am goin' to set it wight," explained D'Arcy. Manners and Lowther grinned, and Tom Merry frowned. The rift in the lute was evidently becoming common knowledge.

"You may confide the whole mattah to me, and wely upon my tact and judgment," said Arthur Augustus encouragingly.

"Oh, rats!" said Tom Merry.

"Weally, Tom Merry, that is not the weply I expected of you. Pway make a clean bweast of it, and twust to me to see it put wight. Now, what have you to say?"

"Nothing, ass."

"I wegard you as an obstinate idiot, Tom Mewwy. Mannahs, I appeal to you not to let this wot go any furthah when it can be set wight by a fellow with a little tact and judgment. Now, out with it!"

"Bow-wow!" said Manners.

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"Gussy, old man, you're as good as gold," said Monty Lowther. "This is just what we might have expected of you. Fools rush in where angels fear to tread."

"Weally, Lowthah, that is not a nice way of puttin' it. Howevah, as you appeal to have more sense than these duffahs, pway tell me all about it."

"Certainly!" said Lowther blandly.

Tom Merry gave him a warning look.

"Don't be an ass, Monty."

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"Pway dwy up, Tom Mewwy, and leave it to Lowthah. Lowthah is doin' quite wight to confide the whole mattah to me," said Arthur Augustus severely. "Pway go on, Lowthah."

"Right," said Lowther. "You won't repeat what I tell you, of course."

"Certainly not! Honah bwight, deah boy! You may speak to me as if I were your fathah," said Arthur Augustus.

Tom Merry and Manners gurgled, but Monty Lowther remained quite grave. He nodded his head in the most solemn manner.

"You see, we're not telling everybody, Gussy. It's a secret that we couldn't confide to the whole school. You'll be awfully careful to keep it dark?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"You won't whisper a word to a single person—or even a married person?"

"Certainly not, Lowthah!"

"Swear!" said Lowther earnestly.

"Bai Jove! I nevah swear, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, shocked. "Weally, Lowthah, I am surprised at you!"

"Swear to keep the deadly secret—I mean, ass, swear by the bones of your aunt's sisters—I mean, your ancestors—that not a word shall pass thy lips!"

"If you are goin' to be funny, Lowthah—"

"Sober as a judge," said Lowther. "How can I tell you the dread secret unless you swear? Swear to keep the secret, and I'll tell you what Talbot has done."

"Vewy well. I sweah!"

"Good! Approach while I whisper it," murmured Lowther. "Walls have ears, you know."

"But we are not neeah any wall at the present moment, Lowthah."

Lowther looked round him with an air of exaggerated caution. He looked to north, and south, and east, and west. His expression was one of owl-like seriousness. Arthur Augustus was on tenterhooks of curiosity. He had never dreamed that the matter was so serious as all this.

"Go on, Lowthah," he breathed.

"Listen!" said Lowther, in a stage whisper. "Lend me your ears! We—we—I'm going to tell you all."

"Yaas."

"We—we—" Lowther hesitated. "You're quite sure you won't repeat this?"

"Yaas, yaas."

"Then here goes!" said Lowther, in a thrilling whisper.

"We don't like the way he does his back hair!"

Arthur Augustus jumped.

The Terrible Three, chuckling, walked away, leaving the swell of St. Jim's rooted to the ground with astonishment and indignation. It was several moments before Arthur Augustus recovered his voice after receiving that thrilling communication.

"You uttah ass!" he shrieked. "Lowthah, you thumpin' idiot—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly, fwabjous ass! You funnay idiot—"

"Hallo!" said Blake, coming along with Herries and Digby. "Wherefore this sudden waxiness, Gussy? Have you made peace?"

"The thumpin' ass! The silly duffah! The—the—" Arthur Augustus gasped. "Bai Jove, I'll give the sillay idiot a fearful thwashin'!"

"Here, hold on!" exclaimed Blake, seizing his indignant chum as he was about to rush after the humorist of the Shell. "That isn't the way to make peace. You can't make peace by giving a chap a fearful thrashing."

"Welease me, you ass! I am going—"

"No, you're not!" chuckled Blake, linking his arm firmly with D'Arcy's. "You're staying. If you can't make peace without getting into a fight, you're not going to start in business as a peacemaker at all."

"Welease me, I tell you! I—"

"Take his other arm, Dig."

"What-ho!" chuckled Digby.

"I am goin' to thwash—"

"You're going for a little walk!" grinned Blake. "Come on!"

"I wefuse—"

"Never mind, you're coming all the same." And, as Arthur Augustus's arms were held in an iron grip, he had to go, and Blake and Digby did not release him till the dinner-bell rang, and they marched him into the dining-room.

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CHAPTER 12.

Danger Ahead.

TALBOT saw little of his chums during the next two or three days.

They were divided now, and the Toff had a miserable feeling that the breach was widening, and that perhaps it would never be closed.

After the scene at Abbotsford Athletic Ground they had hardly spoken to one another. Tom Merry was angry, and he felt like the prophet of old, that he did well to be angry. After all that had happened Talbot had resumed his connection with the cracksman. Talbot could not deny that. Tom Merry believed that he was acting in good faith, certainly, that he trusted to John Rivers' promise of reform, and that he was influenced by his regard for Marie. But that did not excuse him, and, unless Talbot gave the captain of the Shell the pledge he had asked of him, it was not likely that they would be friends again.

Neither of them, at the time, had realised that the trouble would lead to a breach of their friendship; but it had inevitably done so. There was a bar between them now, and they could not speak to one another without a sense of discomfort, and so they avoided speaking at all.

Talbot had been so chummy with the Terrible Three that the break between them was much remarked upon at first; but after a day or two the fellows ceased to comment upon it. Talbot ceased dropping into Tom Merry's study, and was not seen walking with the Terrible Three, that was all.

Talbot, indeed, had a good many matters to think of, as well as his breach with his old chums. The question of the cracksman's meeting with his daughter had to be considered. He felt that Tom Merry was suspicious, and that he was on the look-out, and that John Rivers would be doubly in danger now if he came near the school. And so the meeting had been put off. Rivers had left Abbotsford on Saturday. Monsieur Latour had disappeared for good. The new recruit was in training now, and his next visit had to be left till he could get leave of absence. Now the one-time cracksman was marching and drilling in the 2nd Battalion of the Loamshire Regiment at Aldershot.

Talbot wondered whether Tom would be satisfied of the cracksman's reformation if he should see the man in khaki; but his promise to Rivers kept his tongue silent. The cracksman had held him to his promise to keep the secret. For if it had been known he would have been at the mercy of the juniors who had so much cause to dislike and distrust him, and a word sent to his commanding officer would have caused his instant arrest and expulsion from the ranks of the New Army; the training-ground would have been exchanged for the convict prison. John Rivers did not intend to risk that, and so he held Talbot to his word not to reveal what he had done. And so long as that secret was kept, all the Terrible Three knew was that Talbot was protecting the man who had plotted to drag him back into crime—the man who had been his evil genius. And, naturally enough, they could not help feeling bitter about it.

Talbot did not utter a word to Marie on the subject of his estrangement from his chums. It was for her sake that he had brought this upon himself, but he would not distress her by letting her know the trouble she had unconsciously brought into his life. And he found some comfort in Marie's happiness, for the girl was happy now to know that her father had definitely broken with the past, and was leading a new life, following manfully and honestly the path of duty.

And there was another matter to trouble and distress the Toff. Mr. Railton, having passed his medical examination, and been accepted as a recruit, was passing his last days at St. Jim's before joining his regiment. And when Talbot learned the name of that regiment he received a shock. He heard a group of juniors discussing it in the common-room one evening. Talbot was doing a Latin exercise, with his book on his knees, when Kangaroo of the Shell came in with the announcement.

"It's settled, you chaps," said the Cornstalk. "Railton's joining his regiment to-morrow morning. He'll be coming back once more, I hear, to say good-bye to us all; but till then we sha'n't see anything of the old chap."

"What's the regiment?" asked Tom Merry.

"The Loamshires."

Talbot's book fell from his knees to the floor, and he started violently. For that was the regiment John Rivers had joined, and with whom he was now in training at Aldershot.

"The Loamshires!" exclaimed Talbot involuntarily.

Kangaroo nodded.

"Yes. Second Battalion Loamshire Regiment," he said. "He's going down to Aldershot to-night, I hear— Why, what's the matter with you, Talbot?"

The Cornstalk looked curiously at Talbot's face, which had

become suddenly pale. Talbot made an effort to recover himself.

"N-nothing," he stammered. "You are sure Mr. Railton is joining the Loamshires?"

"Yes. It's no secret."

Talbot picked up his book, and strolled out of the common-room, leaving the juniors looking after him in surprise.

"What the dickens is the matter with Talbot?" said Noble.

"He turned as white as a sheet."

"Blessed if I know," said Tom Merry shortly. "I don't understand Talbot at all lately."

Talbot went out into the dusk of the quad with his temples throbbing.

John Rivers, under the name of John Brown, was a private in the Second Battalion of the Loamshires, now in training at Aldershot. Mr. Railton was going into the same battalion as a private.

The Housemaster, of course, knew Rivers perfectly well. He had come into close contact with him on more than one occasion. He was almost certain to meet him—quite certain to recognise him if he met him. What would happen then, when he found the crackman, a criminal and a fugitive from justice, posing as a soldier in the ranks? The denunciation of the wretched man would follow at once. Mr. Railton would conclude, of course, that it was some new, criminal design that had led Rivers there. He could hardly think anything else.

Talbot pressed his hands to his burning brow.

"What can I do?" he muttered. "What shall I do? Poor Marie!"

His first thought was to send a warning to "Private Brown," and he made a few strides towards the gates. But he choked himself. What use was a warning? Rivers could not avoid the meeting save by flight. And flight was desertion! Desertion would be followed by search, arrest, and the discovery of his true identity. And it would be a crime—a new crime, instead of atonement for the past!

Talbot paced the quadrangle in anguish of mind. He shuddered at the thought of Marie making the discovery that the St. Jim's Housemaster was a fellow-ranker with her criminal father. Yet she must know soon. The name of Mr. Railton's regiment would soon be known to all. And then she would be in a state of uneasiness and terror until the blow fell. And it must fall!

What could he do?

The Toff groaned in anguish of spirit.

There was nothing he could do. He had to wait—wait till the catastrophe came. Well he remembered, from his own experience, that it is not easy to close the door on the past. John Rivers had set his face to a new path, but it was to be closed to him. He was to be denied the opportunity of redeeming the past. The way of the transgressor is hard. The past had to be paid for, and the price was heavy.

What was to be done? The Toff could think of nothing. He was still pacing miserably under the dusky shadow of the elms, when Mr. Railton came out of the School House, with a bag in his hand, and a crowd round him to see him off. Talbot understood. The Housemaster was starting for Aldershot. With dull eyes he watched them go down to the gates, and heard the cheer that followed the Housemaster recruit on his way. He went into the School House with a heavy heart.

He felt that he must send a warning to the Professor—to put him on his guard, at least. The natural cunning of the crackman might devise some way of avoiding the encounter—of escaping recognition. If he should seek to escape it by deserting—But Talbot felt that he could not leave Rivers to be taken by surprise. Forewarned was forearmed, at least, and the crackman would be on the alert if he knew what to expect. That much, at least, the Toff felt that he must do.

In his study he wrote a brief letter, and addressed it to Private Brown, No. 757, 2nd Battalion Loamshire Regiment, Aldershot. He hurried out into the quad to post it in the school letter-box. The evening collection was gone. The letter would not be taken till the morning. It was doubtful if the Professor would get it before the following night. But it was all that Talbot could do, and he dropped the letter into the box, and turned away with a sigh.

Three juniors who were sprinting round the quad almost ran into him as he turned away from the letter-box.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Tom Merry's voice.

"Talbot!" exclaimed Lowther, peering at the Shell fellow in the gloom.

"Yes," said Talbot, flushing. "I—I've been posting a letter."

"Oh!" said Tom Merry.

Talbot walked away towards the house with burning cheeks. The Terrible Three looked after him, and Tom Merry's face grew very grim. Talbot's confusion had been evident enough.

The chums of the Shell could not help noticing it. And it was not difficult for them to guess to whom that letter had been written. The Toff had few acquaintances outside the walls of St. Jim's, excepting the acquaintances of his early days.

"This is growing rather thick," muttered Lowther. "He was as red as a giddy beetroot. I can't help suspecting—"

Tom Merry smiled bitterly.

"It's not a suspicion, it's a certainty!" he snapped. "That letter is to the Professor. I haven't the slightest doubt about that. It's really too bad! It would serve him right if we went straight to the Head and made him get the letter out."

"Can't do that," said Manners, with a shake of the head.

"No, I know we can't. But I'm getting fed-up with this!" said Tom Merry. "That rascal is getting Talbot into his clutches again somehow. It's got to end. He's got to go where he belongs—to prison. Talbot's writing to him shows that he's hanging about still, or intends to come, at least. And if he does"—Tom Merry clenched his hands—"he sha'n't get away again!"

"But—but we can't watch Talbot," said Lowther uneasily.

Tom Merry's eyes flashed.

"He has no right to force us to. But that man sha'n't escape if he comes near St. Jim's again, that's settled. If Talbot won't do the right thing, we'll do it for him."

And Tom Merry strode away with knitted brows, his mind fully made up.

CHAPTER 13.

Caught!

"LETTER for you, Talbot!"

Morning lessons were over on the following day. Levison of the Fourth called Talbot's attention to a letter sticking in the rack. Levison was looking a little curious; he had noticed that the postmark on the letter was Aldershot.

"Friend of yours in the Army?" he asked.

"Thanks," said Talbot; and without replying to the question, he took the letter and walked away, leaving Levison staring.

The hand was disguised, but he knew that it was from the Professor. He went out into the quadrangle to read it. He passed the Terrible Three with the letter in his hand, and observed the bitter smile that crossed Tom Merry's lips at the sight of it. Talbot flushed, and passed on without a word.

His own letter was on its way to Aldershot; but, of course, the Professor could not have received it yet. He opened the letter under the elms, and read it eagerly. There were but a few lines:

"I have leave Friday, and can get to Rylcombe by half-past six. You must manage the rest for me. At seven o'clock I will be waiting at the old barn near the stile.

"JOHN BROWN."

Talbot crushed the letter in his hand. The next day was Friday. Talbot understood what was required of him. He was to take Marie to the rendezvous. Would the Professor come, he wondered, after receiving the letter of warning? At all events, Talbot had to keep the appointment. He took the first opportunity of speaking with Marie, and he found the girl looking uneasy and troubled.

"You have heard about Mr. Railton?" she asked.

Talbot nodded.

"He will recognise my father if he sees him," said Marie, in an agitated voice. "Toff, what is to be done?"

"I have written to warn him to be on his guard," said Talbot. "I can think of nothing else, Marie."

The girl clasped her hands.

"There is only one way. But if he should desert, Toff, it would be horrible! He cannot do that!"

"I hope he will not," said Talbot. "It is possible, in such a crowd of men, Mr. Railton may not recognise him. We must hope for the best. Read this letter."

"You will take me there?" said Marie, when she had read her father's letter.

"Yes. Will you get out about half-past six?" said Talbot. "It would be better for us not to go together. I will be waiting in the lane."

"But—" Marie looked startled. "No one—no one suspects anything, Toff? You have not told—"

Talbot shook his head.

"I have not told anything," he said. "But we cannot be too careful."

"Very well."

The rest of that day was a torment to Talbot. He thought incessantly of Mr. Railton and the Professor. That day they were both training in the same battalion at Aldershot.

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Probably they would not meet at once. It might be days, even weeks, before they came in contact. But the recognition must come sooner or later. What would the Professor do—throw every consideration but safety to the winds and desert? That would be his strong temptation, and if he yielded to it, it meant the end of his new career, a return to his old paths, with a new crime added to his black record.

Talbot found it hard to share the feelings of pride of the other fellows in their Housemaster for having joined the ranks. He could not help wishing that Mr. Railton were still Housemaster of the School House.

Talbot's deep despondency did not escape the eyes of his old chums, and they drew their own conclusions from it, and their anger increased against the crackman, who was undoubtedly the cause of it.

The next day, after lessons, it was necessary for Talbot to get a pass out of gates. The gates were closed at dark. Kildare, the genial captain of St. Jim's, gave him a pass out readily enough; there was no difficulty on that score. But Talbot felt that it was necessary to get out without attracting the attention of his friends. It needed very little to put the Terrible Three on the track. He was at tea in his study, with Gore and Skimpole, when Jack Blake looked in with a smiling face.

"Good news!" said Blake cheerily.

"Germans licked?" asked Gore.

"Blow the Germans!" said Blake. "Old Railton's coming this evening, and he's coming in khaki. I had it from Kildare. The Head told Kildare. Fancy old Railton in khaki! It may be the only time he'll get off, so we're going to give him a reception. We don't know exactly when Railton will get here, and we want to be ready. Come on, Talbot!"

Talbot almost groaned. It seemed as if his bad luck would have no end.

"We're going to illuminate the quad," said Blake. "Glyn has got a lot of electric lights and things among that rubbish in his study; and we're putting up coloured lanterns over the gates."

"Good!" said Gore. "I'll come and lend a hand! Come on, Talbot!"

Talbot rose, and followed them. He hoped that he would have an opportunity of slipping out quietly. It was close on time now for him to go. But he found a crowd of juniors at the gates, and Tom Merry & Co. were busy fastening up the coloured lanterns which were to greet the Housemaster in khaki with unaccustomed brilliance.

Bernard Glyn, the inventive genius of the Shell, was master of the ceremonies, and the preparations were going forward under his direction in great style. Taggles had been induced to set the gates wide open, ready for the triumphal reception of the khaki-clad Housemaster.

"By Jove, this will be ripping!" said Glyn, with great satisfaction. "All you chaps lend a hand—there's lots to be done. Where are you off to, Talbot?"

Talbot had gone out of the gates.

He affected not to hear the Liverpool lad's question, and hurried on in the gloom.

The Terrible Three exchanged glances, and Tom Merry jumped down off the ladder he was mounted on.

He stepped out into the road, and Manners and Lowther followed him. Tom Merry's face was hard and set. Unheeding the calls of the other fellows, he started for Rylcombe—the direction Talbot had taken—and Manners and Lowther hurried after him.

Tom Merry broke into a run. Talbot had disappeared for several minutes in the gloom of the winter evening. Their footsteps rang sharply on the frostbound road as they ran. But they did not overtake Talbot. The lights of the village came in sight ahead of them, and they paused. There was no sign of the Toff on the road. Tom Merry uttered an exclamation of anger.

"He must have gone by one of the footpaths," said Manners.

"More likely heard us after him, and dodged out of sight," said Tom Merry bitterly.

As a matter of fact, that was exactly what had happened. The ringing of their feet on the hard road had warned Talbot, and he had darted through a gap in the hedge, realising that his chums were after him. There he had watched them pass, with beating heart and troubled face. Then he came out into the road again to wait for Marie.

The Terrible Three stood looking down the road towards the glimmering lights of Rylcombe. They were off the track, and it seemed useless to search for Talbot.

Whether he had taken one of the footpaths off the lane, or whether he had deliberately dodged them, it did not seem much use looking for him in the dark.

Tom Merry clenched his teeth with anger. That the Toff had gone to meet John Rivers he was assured, and it was an

opportunity that might never recur for laying hands on the crackman and ridding their chum of him for ever.

They stood for some minutes in doubt.

"Well, what's to be done?" asked Monty Lowther at last. "No good staying here."

Tom Merry did not reply. His eyes were fixed on the lighted village street ahead of them. A man had come into sight, hurrying out into the dark lane—a man in khaki and the peaked cap of a soldier.

Lowther uttered an exclamation as he followed Tom Merry's look.

"Railton, I suppose," he said. "We'll trot back with him, Tom. We want an excuse for being out of gates."

Tom Merry did not answer. The figure was still in sight, advancing towards them. The new-comer could not see the juniors, who were far out of the radius of light from the street. Lowther caught Tom's arm.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded. "What are you staring at the man like that for, Tom?"

"That isn't Railton," said Tom. "He's not nearly so big as Railton."

"He's in khaki. There's not many soldiers about here —"

"I've seen him before," went on Tom, unheeding. "I know his walk, and I caught sight of his face in the light. Get into cover here, and spot him as he goes by! I'll strike a vesta when he's close."

"But—but why—"

"I believe that man is the man we want!"

"My hat! Not—not—"

"You know his cunning in disguising himself. Perhaps he's put on khaki for that reason. But his face isn't made-up—if I'm right. Get into cover, and when I show a light jump on him if he's our man."

"Oh, all right! But—"

"Shush!"

The three juniors drew into the deep shadow of the trees beside the road. The man in khaki came on unsuspectingly. He walked with the steady swing of a soldier. Tom Merry's heart was beating hard. There was a conviction in his mind that this was the man he sought—in a new and unexpected cunning guise. He waited, hardly breathing, till the footsteps sounded close at hand. Then he struck the wax match.

The man halted as the sudden light gleamed out in the darkness. One look at his face was enough.

"Collar him!"

In an instant John Rivers was struggling in the grasp of the Terrible Three.

CHAPTER 14.

Two Men in Khaki.

"MARIE! Thank goodness you've come!" Talbot came out of the shadow of the hedge as Marie came down the road, muffled in her cloak against the bitter wind.

"You've been waiting, Toff?"

"Only a few minutes. It isn't that. But—but some of the fellows are down the road—they suspect something, and they mustn't see us!" exclaimed Talbot hastily.

Marie drew a panting breath.

"They suspect—that—my father—"

"I'm afraid so."

"Then—then he is in danger—"

"It's too late to stop him coming now," said Talbot. "His train was in long ago. Let's get to the barn. We turn off at the stile yonder."

He seized Marie's hand and hurried her on, looking anxiously down the road in the direction of the village. From the gloom ahead of them there came a sudden uproar—a shout, then trampling feet, panting voices, and a heavy fall.

Marie stopped, her face pale with terror.

"Toff, is that—"

Talbot groaned.

"Come on!" he said.

They hurried down the shadowy road. They almost stumbled into a struggling heap of figures. The man in khaki was resisting desperately, but the three Shell fellows were too many for him.

John Rivers was on his back in the road, and Tom Merry was kneeling on his chest. Lowther held his wrists in a grasp of iron. Manners was seeking to bind them with a twisted handkerchief. The crackman was still resisting, but his struggles were growing feebler.

"Got him!" said Manners. "One more knot! Now he's safe—the villain!"

Marie gave a cry:

"Father!"

The Terrible Three spun round. John Rivers staggered to his feet, his hands bound, and still in the grip of the juniors. Marie ran forward.

"Father!"

The girl clung to him.

"They shall not take you, father! Tom Merry, you will not—you will not!"

"Take her away, Talbot!" muttered Tom.

"But I will not go!" exclaimed Marie, weeping. "He is my father! And he has kept his word. You can see that he is a soldier now!"

"A new trick!" said Tom.

"It isn't a trick," said Talbot heavily. "He is a soldier in the Leamshire Regiment. That is why I helped him."

"A new trick, I tell you!" snapped Tom Merry. "Do you think I'm going to believe that?"

"I knew you wouldn't," said Talbot hopelessly. "I can't expect you to. But I believe him."

"More fool you!" said Tom. "I knew that he was twisting you round his finger with some lie or other. So that's the latest, is it? But if he can deceive you, he can't deceive me. He has broken his word in coming back here, and he's going to pay for it."

"He came back to see me, to say good-bye for the last time!" sobbed Marie.

"It's true!" said Talbot wretchedly.

John Rivers drew himself from his daughter's clinging hands. His face was very pale.

"I should not have come," he said. "Don't, Marie—don't! It serves me right. I've got to pay for what I've done. Take her away, Toff."

"Marie!" muttered Talbot, catching her hand.

"Toff, you won't desert him—you won't let them take him—"

"Talbot can do nothing, Miss Marie," said Tom Merry quietly. "I'm sorry for this—more sorry than I can say. You ought not to be here. I'd do anything I could for you—short of letting loose a dangerous criminal. You have no right to ask that—"

Tom Merry broke off. Marie was sobbing convulsively, and the juniors were looking utterly discomfited. The arrival of the cracksman's daughter on the scene changed the aspect of affairs at once. Yet to yield to her pleading—to let the man go—as they had done before, with what results! It was not to be thought of. Yet to drag him away to prison under his daughter's eyes—it was not easy!

Talbot made a movement forward.

"I can't have this, you fellows!" he said huskily. "You must let him go!"

"Stop!"

It was a sharp, sudden voice, as a stalwart figure in khaki came striding up.

The juniors recognised Mr. Railton's voice. Marie gave a moan of despair. It was all over now. The juniors she might have hoped to move, but the Housemaster never. She clung to her father, sobbing.

Tom Merry and Talbot dropped their hands at once, the Toff with a hopeless look of misery. He, like Marie, had given up hope now.

Mr. Railton stood looking at them in the gloom.

"What is this?" he exclaimed. "Whom have you there?"

"John Rivers, the cracksman!" said Tom Merry quietly.

"What?" Mr. Railton peered at the face of the man in khaki. "John Rivers! I have come opportunely, I think!"

The Housemaster fixed a stern look upon the cracksman, as he recognised the khaki.

Private Railton had been on his way to St. Jim's when he came upon the scene in the lane, and he had arrived just in time to prevent Talbot and Tom Merry from closing in conflict. But his coming brought despair to Marie's heart. She had given up hope now.

"Miss Marie, you should not be here," said Mr. Railton gently.

The girl sobbed.

"Go, my girl!" said the cracksman. "You can see it is all up! I deserve it, and I've got to go through with it."

"I am glad you recognise that, at all events!" said Mr. Railton sternly. "You have added to your list ofascalities by this abuse of the King's uniform! How dare you! You wear that garb, of all others!"

"I wear it because it is mine," said Rivers, lifting his head proudly. "Since I have worn this uniform I have done nothing to disgrace it. And, Heaven helping me, I never would disgrace it. But I do not expect you to believe me."

"You can hardly expect your word to be taken," said Mr. Railton. "Do you mean to tell me that you are entitled to wear those clothes—that you have joined the Army?"

"Yes."

"It is true," said Talbot. "It is easy to prove it, sir. You can see his number; he can show you his papers—"

"But—but what does it mean?" exclaimed the Housemaster. "What new crime are you planning, with the assistance of the King's uniform?"

"None!" said the cracksman. "What I am planning you would not believe, so it is useless for me to tell you."

"Tell me, all the same," said Mr. Railton, with a change in his voice.

The cracksman shrugged his shoulders.

"I am planning, then, to redeem what I have done in the past by serving my country. That is all I have to say."

There was a ring of sincerity in the man's voice.

Monty Lowther and Manners released their grasp upon him involuntarily.

Tom Merry stared at him hard. Even he, good reasons as he had for distrusting the rascal, began to believe.

Mr. Railton was silent for some moments.

"Heaven forbid that I should prevent you, if that is really your intention!" he said at last. "You have enlisted, I have no doubt of that now. But how can I believe that you mean honestly—even that you will not desert now that you are known—"

"I can prove that!"

"And I can prove it," said Talbot. "For as soon as I knew that you were joining the same battalion, sir, I wrote to warn him."

"You did, Talbot?"

"I did, sir! I believed in him," said Talbot quietly. "And if he had chosen to desert and seek his own safety he has had ample time since I wrote."

There was a long pause. Tom Merry made a sign to Lowther and Manners, and the three juniors moved quietly away. The matter was in Mr. Railton's hands now, and their presence was not needed. They disappeared in the direction of the school, content to leave it to the Housemaster.

Marie turned her pale face, streaming with tears, towards Mr. Railton.

"You will give him a chance, sir?" she pleaded. "He has kept his word. He came back only to bid me good-bye. Talbot knows."

John Rivers stood silent. His fate was trembling in the balance. He did not speak; but as he looked at his daughter a tear rolled down his hard cheek.

Mr. Railton saw it, and his voice was softer as he spoke again.

"If you are in earnest, Rivers, you shall have a chance. For your daughter's sake, and for your own sake, I will be silent if you do your duty. But remember you will be my fellow-soldier; and if you fail to play the game, then Heaven have mercy on you! I will have none!"

"If I fail to play the game now send me to the convict prison—I shall deserve it!" said John Rivers quietly. "As Heaven is my witness, I have taken this uniform in good faith, and I will not dishonour it."

"So be it! Release him, Talbot. At nine o'clock, Rivers, I take the train to return to camp. You will be at the station?"

"I will be there!"

Mr. Railton held out his hand, and the cracksman grasped it. Then the Housemaster strode on towards St. Jim's.

Tom Merry & Co. were waiting in the quad for the Housemaster in khaki. The reception that was given to Mr. Railton was simply tremendous. Although Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had been unable to carry out his great idea of a "bwass band," the juniors of St. Jim's succeeded in making a considerable amount of noise without it.

And when Private Railton's brief visit was over the whole school turned out to see him off, and the smiling gentleman in khaki was followed on his way by thunderous cheers.

But the juniors did not know that at the station the Housemaster recruit was joined by another man in khaki. John Rivers had kept faith; and he was to prove later, in many a deadly field, that in putting on the King's uniform he had thrown behind him everything that was unworthy of it.

When Talbot came into his study he found the Terrible Three waiting for him there. It was an awkward meeting. But Tom Merry came straight to the point in his frank way. He held out his hand.

Talbot grasped it—and nothing was said.

But in that hand-grip all bitterness was banished, and their friendship was cemented once more; and from that hour the Toff was on the old footing with his old chums.

THE END.

(Another grand tale of the chums of St. Jim's will be published in next Wednesday's "GEM" Library. Order in advance at your newsagents, and make sure of getting it!)

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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 of Private Cole, who makes a cowardly attempt on Bob's life. Captain Lascelles, a ne'er-do-well cousin of Bob's, discovers the attempt, and uses his knowledge to make Cole do Bob an injury. Lascelles accuses his cousin of stealing a diamond ring, and also insults his dead father. Bob forthwith knocks the officer down, but escapes punishment owing to the adjutant's intervention. Alf Payne, a new recruit, surprises everybody by claiming Lascelles as an old friend; and Bob suspects that his cousin is in the man's power, and he determines to find a solution to the mystery. An assault-at-arms is arranged between the Die Hards and the Speckled Greys. Each regiment gains equal points, and the last contest—a boxing match between Bob Hall and Kemble, of the Greys—will decide between the regiments. Bob is disconcerted by seeing that Lascelles is the referee, and makes a bad start. The Greys think he will be defeated. But they are mistaken.

(Now go on with the story.)

Bob Wins the Fight.

Bob, however, was quickly on his feet. He fell into position again, and as Kemble led with his left, the lad cross-counteried, and got home. His opponent managed to keep on his legs, and, meeting Bob as he rushed in, they clinched, broke away, came together again, and in-fighting followed, amidst the cheers of their supporters. Like all good boxers, this was Bob's strong point, and the fight at close quarters became deadly.

Again and again the lad strove to hook Kemble under the chin, but his antagonist well deserved the reputation that Gladew had given him, and, though Bob did all he knew, yet he was unable to keep his arms inside his opponent's.

"Time!"

The lad walked to his corner, and was sponged down. He was badly shaken by his fall, but as he rested the crowd of faces before him grew out more sharply, and his breath came more easily, whilst his limbs grew stronger.

Around on the packed seats he could hear a rolling murmur; there was no shouting or cheering. The Die Hards had taken heart once more, and the Speckled Greys had begun to realise that the contest was by no means at an end.

"Time!"

Again the rasping voice jarred on Bob's nerves, but without giving himself time to think about Lascelles, he walked quickly to the middle of the ring, put up his hands, feinted, and then dashed at Kemble. The latter ducked, and as Bob's fist shot over his shoulder, Kemble stepped forward and delivered a tremendous body blow with all his weight behind his arms.

The lad gasped, staggered back, went pale to the lips, and stood on the defensive. Kemble followed up, and Bob nimbly dodged to one side, and caught his antagonist a tremendous clip on the ear; but he was unable to follow up his advantage. His sight was failing, his limbs were trembling; that last blow had all but felled him, and Kemble, swiftly turning, struck him again full from the shoulder, and the lad fell with a thud.

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He lay still but perfectly conscious. The moments fled, and Kemble stood over him, and yet he did not move. He knew that his only chance was to get back his breath. Would it never come easily? Could he never regain his strength? Ah, he was feeling stronger! Now he would stake all on a knock-out blow.

"Time!"

A roar of delight followed from the Speckled Greys as Bob struggled to his feet. Hamshaw and half a dozen other officers sprang excitedly towards Lascelles.

"No, no!" the adjutant thundered. "The fight is not over yet; your watch is wrong, Captain Lascelles! Our man is coming up to the scratch, with twenty seconds to spare!"

"I'm timekeeper!" Lascelles yelled. "There's—"

"Hamshaw is right!" the colonel of the Speckled Greys shouted chivalrously. "Fair play before all else! We've all been keeping the time, and we're all agreed!"

"Fair play—fair play!"

Like the gallant chaps they were, the Speckled Greys joined with the Die Hards in the cry, and Lascelles bowed before the storm. He nodded for the contest to continue, and again Bob and his adversary faced one another.

There was a quick rally, an extraordinary exchange of clever sparring; then Bob, fighting like one demented, sprang forward, and hit straight from the shoulder, found his opponent's chin, and Kemble, with a dull cry, fell backwards, and lay still. He had been knocked out when victory seemed within his grasp.

For five long minutes the Die Hards cheered and cheered. Then Colonel Dixie raised his hand for silence.

"Comrades, we've won, and I'm glad to say so," he began, "for we leave Aldershot in a few days. We're off from Old England to other garrisons in the Empire, and wherever we go may we meet with as good fellows as our old friends the gallant Speckled Greys!"

"That means—" Bob began, turning to Dent.

"It means that we're going to see the world!" Dent shouted back. "Hurrah!"

How Bob Frustrated a Villain's Crime.

All was commotion alongside the Government siding at Aldershot. Cavalry chargers were being led, coaxed, or driven into a hundred horse-boxes. The ground was littered with privates' kits, officers' luggage, mess-cases, carriages, traps, and motors. Civilians and soldiers, officers and men, rushed hither and thither, shaking hands with old friends, bidding adieu to old comrades, or by word or example hastening on the final preparations of entraining; whilst a band close at hand played soul-stirring music, and many tried by jest and laughter to hide the pangs of separation from those they were leaving behind.

The engine whistled shrilly, the last stack of luggage was swept off the ground by two score hands and disappeared into the train, men sprang into the carriages, the doors were closed, from every window heads protruded and caps were waved, and amidst ringing cheers, and to the strains of "Auld Lang Syne," the train slowly moved away, carrying the Die Hards out of Aldershot. They were gone, the bright and merry fellows, whose memory would long linger after them, and it was with a strange touch of loneliness that those still left on the empty siding walked slowly away, back to

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their daily work, feeling that their lives had lost something that they would have liked to retain.

The train swung along, a chorus of song rising from every carriage and startling the toilers in the adjacent fields. Along the iron road men paused and grinned and waved their hats in farewell. The Die Hards answered with a hearty cheer ere the train once again disappeared into a cutting, or swept through a station, or thundered over a bridge. All had a kindly thought and a pleasant smile for the manly, eager soldiers of the King. Their high spirits were infectious, and the old felt young again as they saw their sunny faces.

The train slowed down, shrieking its shrill warning. It rocked over a dozen points, glided out through a mass of bricks and mortar on to the water's edge, where the blue waves danced in the sunlight, and then the huge hull of a troopship rose into view but a few yards distant, and the train, with breaks hard on, came to a sudden stop.

Like a swarm of ants, the Die Hards were out on to the wharf, and in ten seconds all was bustle and excitement. Here, again, was another band come to welcome the departing regiment; a crowd of eager sightseers were with difficulty kept back by a cordon of police; officers in naval uniform grinned a friendly welcome from the quarter-deck; nimble tars raced along the white decks of the leviathan; donkey-engines rattled and spluttered; horses were hoisted over the vessel's side, and disappeared into its capacious depths; luggage was swung into the holds; carbines were passed from hand to hand and lodged in their racks; and the men, turning in single file, clanked in their spurs over the gangway, and were guided by the petty officers to their quarters.

A shrill whistle, the tinkling of a bell, a splash, a shiver, a kick of the screw, and the Die Hards, from deck and rigging, from porthole and counter, waved their caps frantically, and cheered and sang in answer to the lusty cries of goodwill from those ashore as the vessel glided from the wharf, and the houses and spires seemed to recede, and the blue water stretched out farther and farther between the departing soldiers and the shores of dear Old England. They were off! The Die Hards were on the way to Ireland. From thence they would journey farther afield.

The day passed, and evening closed in. Hammocks were slung, and all hands made arrangements to settle down for the night. Bob was numbered off for the guard, made up of fifty men, and divided up into four reliefs, each man going on sentry for two hours, and having six hours' rest at a spell. A wind had sprung up in the choppy Channel, and the big ship was rolling heavily as the lad mounted the companion ladder and was marched to his post.

The beacons from the shore had long since faded away, and around Bob, as he stood with the wind whistling in the cordage above, were nothing but the cold, dark, tumbling waves. On the vessel all was silent, except for the rumbling of the engine and the thud of the screw. Like a living thing the huge troopship shivered from stem to stern as it wrestled with the heaving billows, and Bob, gazing out into the night, stood alert and silent, inhaling the strong sea air.

Suddenly he drew himself to attention. A footstep was approaching. Probably the lance-sergeant going on his rounds, the lad thought. But the footfall ceased; there was a pause, and then Bob heard a whispered conversation abaft the skylight where he stood. The wind was blowing over the bow, and the voices were carried to the spot where the lad was doing sentry.

"Garn! Not so much of it!" a man growled hoarsely; and Bob seemed to remember the voice. "I'm game to run on the straight, but I'm not easily fooled, so just you drop it. I'll stay in the regiment, I tell yer; and as long as you—"

"Five hundred pounds, Payne! You can have that if you sign the paper and clear out!" another man replied; and Bob started, for he knew the speaker. "Why, it will set you up for life!"

"Na, na, Sammy; ye don't get rid of me sa easy, now as I've found you again!" he scoffed. "I ain't no mug, an' when I've struck a reg'lar gold-mine I sit tight, you bet! Don't try any soft sawder with me, old pard! You did me down in the old days; but I've found you again, and you'll have to pay handsome afore we're quits. Five hundred quid! Bah! I wouldn't agree if ye named five thousand!"

"You have a long memory. It's years now since you and I parted, and—"

"Yes. An' what have those years been like to me? You've had the fun, and I've had to pay! I've waited for this time, Captain Lascelles, an' now I'm going to get back what I lost. I'll haunt ye until you settles up—yes, and if ye dally too long I'll split on ye, so I will! I'll tell—"

"Hush, you fool!" Lascelles cried agonisingly. "Someone may hear. There are hundreds on this ship, and—"

Payne chuckled mirthlessly. "Let 'em! What do I care?" he growled. "I've nothing to lose by telling what I know. If young Bob Hall—"

Lascelles muttered an oath.

"Dare to tell him, and—"

"And what?" Payne interjected wrathfully. "Don't you threaten me! The boot's on the other foot now, I reckon. Ye've got to come off yer peg, or I'll turn against ye. Young Hall ain't a bad chap, and—"

"I'll pay you well if you do as I asked you the other day," Lascelles whispered eagerly. Bob, where he stood, could hear the tense ring in the villain's utterance. "When you've done that I'll—"

"Na, na! That game ain't in my line," Payne jeered. "Much you'd care what happened to me after. Perhaps you'd be the first to turn on me, so that you get us both out in your path at the one stroke. See here, I give you a month from to-day to get the money, since you say you can't lay your hands on it at once. One month, mind, then you pay over ten thousand pounds! If you—"

"I can't. What you ask is absurd!" Lascelles interjected. "I've told you I couldn't lay my hands on as much as that to save my life. I'm in debt, and the trustees won't advance me a penny. Have sense, man—"

"Yah! I know that way of talking; I've heard it before!" Payne scoffed coarsely. "Ye was always a good hand at explaining how ye couldn't part up. Well, I'll not have any more of it. I stick to what I said. One month, mind, no longer. Now, I'm going to turn in, for afore long the guard will be relieved, an' I don't mean to be caught here."

Bob heard the patter of retreating footsteps, a pause, a low growl, a short scuffle; then a cry of terror, followed by a splash.

"Help! Help!"

The cry arose on the waves even as the door leading from the companion-way to the ladder closed with a bang.

"Help! Help!"

Now it arose abreast with the ship's counter, whilst the wind whistled piercingly, and the cordage flapped, and the cruel billows leaped and flung their spume against the ship's strong rigs. There was blackness everywhere, up in the heavens, and out on the deep, and a human being, tossed about like a cork, was struggling despairingly in the grip of the raging sea.

The lad raised his carbine to his shoulder.

Bang!

Like magic the ship was galvanised into life. From fore and aft, from poop and troop-deck, sailors and soldiers tumbled up on deck. They scattered and spread over the ship, and the first to reach Bob was Baxter, the sergeant of the guard.

"Man overboard!" Bob yelled.

"Where?"

"There!"

The lad flung off his coat, pointed astern, seized a lifebuoy, rushed to the ship's counter, and flung the lifebuoy out to sea. Underneath where he stood the huge screw thrashed under the water into foam; one blow from those cruel blades and a man's life would be gone. The lad, despite the terrible risk he ran, climbed on to the rail, pressed his heels against the hard wood, jumped forward with hands extended, raced down through the air, and splashed head foremost into the fathomless sea. Down and down he went, the water gripping him with bands of ice; and when at last he shot to the surface again a torrent of spray smacked his face, and he was covered in a huge wave before he could strike out.

He rose again, and swam away from the ship as hard as he was able. The wind was with him, and the waves were racing astern. He saw the lifebuoy, seized it, and again swam desperately. He heard a cry, but, for aught he could detect, it might be the piping of a sea-gull, and far behind now the lights of the troopship twinkled dimly, and the waves tossed and spun in ever-lengthening space.

At last!

A black form bobbed up thirty yards away, and for an instant a hand clutched the air frantically. Bob swam desperately, reached the spot he had noted, saw nothing, however, and struggled to tread water. He was flung on his back and sank, borne down again in the gale, and when he managed to raise his head above the waves once more, he could see naught of the drowning man. He struck out, trusting that luck might guide him.

Half a dozen seagulls rose from the crest of the billows, where they had been madly circling, and soared away with cries of startled surprise as the lad drew near. Something black seemed to rise up a yard away. Bob clutched frantically. To his intense relief he seized a coat. His search was over. He had found that for which he had risked his life.

In Disgrace Again.

"Payne!"

Bob gasped as he saw the livid face and noticed the closed eyes. He passed the lifebuoy under the limp arm, then

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gripped Payne by the coat-collar with one hand, and strove to keep himself afloat with the other. Half blinded by the spray, tossed up and down on the waves, the plucky lad struggled desperately to hold on to the unconscious private. Gazing backwards, he saw the troopship a full mile away. To swim that distance would be impossible after the tremendous exertions he had gone through; all he could do was to keep Payne afloat whilst strength lasted, in the hope that some assistance might arrive in time.

But help was nearer than he anticipated. Hardly had he left the safety of the vessel when the bell clanged from the bridge to the engine-room, and the screw stopped. As Baxter rushed back along the deck after Bob had sprung to the rescue, he saw a dozen tars climbing into the jolly-boat as it hung suspended from the davits. A dozen more were holding on to the sheets.

"Let go!"

The rope rattled through the blocks, the boat shot down to the waves, the hooks were cast off, a dozen oars slapped the water together, a young midshipman put the helm hard aport, and the boat shot off from the ship's side, whilst the huge troopship sped along under the tremendous momentum she still carried.

Up and over the mighty billows and down into the trough the boat rose and fell; the middy, gazing ahead, and bobbing to give the stroke, kept his keen eyes glued on the tumbling waters; every strong back was put into every steady stroke, and even as Bob had relinquished hope, and had resolved to go down sooner than forsake Payne, a loud cheer broke upon his ear, and a young voice hailed him:

"Bravo, there! Hold on a moment longer!"

An arm shot out and gripped Payne's shoulder. Bob, still clinging to him, was dragged alongside the boat to the stern. Tugging with all their strength, a couple of sailors hauled the senseless trooper aboard, whilst the middy caught the lad by the arm. As Payne's unconscious figure fell in a heap at the bottom, eager hands shot out and clutched Bob, and, exhausted, gasping, but otherwise none the worse for his splendid act of heroism, the gallant young soldier was dragged from certain death back to safety again.

A loud cheer burst from six hundred throats as the boat came alongside the troopship, and the crowd of excited sailors and soldiers leaning over the taffrail saw that the rescue had succeeded. Willing hands carried Payne away hurriedly to the hospital, and the Die Hards broke into round after round of applause as Bob stumbled on to the deck, faint and pallid, but strong enough to grin his thanks at the heartiness of his reception. Dent and Hosty, by right of old comradeship, summarily pushed their way forward, gripped him by the arms, and started to lead him away.

"Hold on there! Halt!"

The colonel and Hamshaw had seized the troopers and swung them round.

"Your hand, my lad!" the colonel cried to Bob. "You've shown you're a fine fellow, and I'm proud to have you in the regiment! By George, I was afraid we'd seen the last of you! This was indeed a wild night to go after a man overboard!"

Every officer, except Lascelles, stepped forward and warmly shook the lad by the hand. He tried to thank them, but the reaction of the excitement and danger was now setting in; he felt dizzy and faint; he lurched forward, steadied himself, gave a short laugh, then a cry, and, pitching forward, he would have fallen had not Dent caught him in the nick of time.

"He's in a faint!" the colonel shouted. "Send for the doctor! Carry him off to his bunk! What fools we've been; we might have known he was played out! Hurry up, there—hurry up!"

Bob awoke to find himself in a comfortable cabin, with the doctor bending over him. The latter held a medicine-glass in his hand.

"Drink that!" he ordered.

The lad obeyed the command, then stretched himself luxuriously in the warm bed and fell asleep. When he awoke again, daylight was streaming in through the open porthole, all was bustle on deck, and he could hear the rattle of the engines as the horses and baggage were being unshipped. He jumped out of the bunk, feeling strong and fit again, and made haste to dress and go on deck.

"Hallo, Hall! Glad to see you up and about! Feeling better—eh?"

Sergeant Baxter had popped his head into the cabin and was grinning joyfully.

"Oh, yes; I'm all right now! Where are we, anyhow?"

"In Kingstown Harbour, six miles from Dublin, they tell me. If every place is as fine as this we're in luck!"

"How's Payne?"

"Not up to much. The doc had a rough time; he thought

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he'd never get him round. You've to come along to the colonel. He wants to see you."

Bob followed Baxter to the colonel's cabin, where Hamshaw also was seated.

"Glad to see you looking so well, my lad!" the colonel began. "Now, can you tell me how it was that Payne fell overboard? He had no right to be on deck."

"I was on sentry-go when I heard the splash, sir," the lad replied. "I didn't see Payne fall over. I only heard his cry; then I fired my carbine and went after him. I'm afraid I can't tell you much."

The colonel grinned.

"I s'pose not," he assented. "Still, it's a matter that must be inquired into. Come along to the hospital ward. The doctor tells me that Payne is well enough to be cross-questioned."

The officers led the way, and Bob followed reluctantly. Payne was sitting up in his bunk looking very ill and weak. An odd look came into his eyes when he saw Bob entering the cabin. The lad started as he recognised Lascelles standing by the trooper.

"Ah, I'm glad to see you're better!" the colonel remarked, nodding to Payne. "If it wasn't for this plucky chap here you'd have been drowned for certain. You owe your life to him," he went on. "Now, I want to know how it was you fell overboard. Why did you come on deck when you should have been below? Did anyone send you a message?"

Payne shuffled uncomfortably, shot one swift glance at Lascelles, and then looked at Bob.

"I went up to speak to Trooper Hall!" he mumbled.

"What! Trooper Hall was on duty! Did the Sergeant of the Guard send you to him? But, of course, that's impossible! Why—"

"Trooper Hall and I are chums, sir, and I thought I'd like to get out of the troop-deck and have a breath of fresh air. I meant no harm, and—"

"And how was it you fell overboard?"

"A wave came along and swept me off my feet, sir, and—"

"That's nonsense!" Hamshaw cut in. "The night was rough, but the decks weren't swept by the waves. The troopship is too big for that sort of thing, except when it's blowing a reg'lar gale. The captain thinks you must either have been fooling in the rigging and have overbalanced yourself, or else—"

"Trooper Hall, were you speaking to Trooper Payne when on sentry-go?" the colonel rapped out, turning to Bob.

"No, sir!" the lad replied hotly.

"There! I didn't believe you'd do that sort of thing! Why can't you speak the truth?" the C.O. continued angrily, facing Payne again. "You've admitted that you broke the rules, and there can't be any reason why you should want to hide anything. How was it you fell overboard?"

"I dunno!" Payne stammered.

"You don't know! What rot! I tell you, my man, you won't gain much by behaving like an idiot! Trooper Hall, can you give us any explanation?"

"I heard the splash and a cry for help, and then I gave the alarm," Bob replied.

"Did you hear anything before the splash?"

Bob hesitated.

"It's rather curious that both Hall and Payne should be behaving so mysteriously, sir," Lascelles remarked softly. "I've just been talking to Payne, and he's gone on the same way with me as he's doing now. If I might make a suggestion, sir, I think that this is a matter that should be fully investigated. There's something behind it all."

Bob stared in amazement at the villain, who had everything to gain by silence. Lascelles returned the look with a challenge in his eyes, and the lad was filled with wonder. Lascelles was coolly staking his reputation, possibly his freedom, on the challenge, for were Bob to be believed if he told all he knew, the ruffianly captain could be indicted for attempted murder. Yet Lascelles did not wince. Evidently he had astounding nerve and consummate assurance.

"What can they be hiding?" the colonel cried. "Yet, perhaps you're right. Answer my question, Trooper Hall. Did you hear anything before the splash?"

"Yes, sir, I did."

"What?"

"I heard a couple of men talking together abaft the skylight where I was standing."

"What were they saying?"

Lascelles went pale, but his glittering eyes were still fixed defiantly on the lad.

"They were having a dispute, sir. Then I heard a scuffle and a cry for help."

The C.O. and the adjutant gazed in astonishment at one another as the lad spoke. There was a moment's tense silence, in which Bob could hear Payne's breath coming in dry gasps.

"Then you think there was foul play?" the colonel suggested. "You think that Payne did not fall overboard accidentally?"

"I think he was thrown overboard, sir."

"Heavens! Do you hear what he says, Hamshaw?" the colonel shouted. "Payne, can this be true? Had you a quarrel with anyone, and were you flung off the ship? Why don't you tell us what happened, man? Why should you want to conceal such an infamous crime which nearly cost you your life?"

Payne did not reply. He grinned doggedly.

"Do you know with whom Payne was quarrelling?" the colonel continued, turning again to Bob.

"Yes, sir, I do."

Lascalles went livid. Then a hot blush swept away the yellow hue on his cheeks. He moved a step forward in company with the colonel and Hamshaw, as if eager to hear more. Anyone beholding him would have thought that, like his brother-officers, he was only stirred by a righteous indignation and anxious to have a villain exposed.

"Who was the scoundrel?"

The colonel asked the question huskily.

For some moments Bob did not reply. He knew that were he to name Lascalles his statement would only be received with scorn and contempt. Who would believe that an officer and a gentleman would be guilty of so terrible a crime? The lad realised that Lascalles could turn the tables. He would point out that Bob bore a grudge against him for the quarrel they had had, and, moreover, it was evident now that Payne was resolved to side with Lascalles, and would affirm that the latter was his assailant.

"I don't like to state the name, sir," Bob replied.

"Don't like! That's not the way to talk to me, sir!" the colonel thundered. "I order you to give the villain's name! Don't dare—"

"Payne could tell you if he wished, sir," the lad made haste to explain. "It's he who was assaulted and nearly drowned."

"I'm asking you!" the C.O. rapped out.

"I'm sorry I must decline, sir."

The colonel's face grew purple. He gazed at Bob as if he would flog him to the floor. He coughed and gasped. Then suddenly he wheeled round.

"I'll give you time to think over your position!" he growled. "If you don't speak out I'll know how to deal with you. Come along, Hamshaw, I want to speak to you!"

The colonel and the adjutant left the cabin, followed by Lascalles. Bob turned and looked at Payne.

"Why don't you tell?" he cried.

"So you overheard us last night?" Payne grinned. "Can't you guess that I've been squared? I'm sorry for you, though, for you saved my life, Hall, and I'm not ungrateful, though I can't do anything at present. Perhaps before long, though, I'll be able to do you a good turn. I don't love that cur Lascalles any more than you do, but a chap must look after himself, though—and there! I'll say no more."

The Cunning of Lascalles.

The heavy luggage had gone by rail to Dublin, and the regiment was forming up on the Victoria Quay. From the railway-station, from the yachts in the wide harbour, cheer broke on cheer as the Die Hards swung round, the band playing a stirring march, and took the road to the Irish metropolis. A splendid sight the gallant soldiers made, with nodding plumes and coal-black chargers, as, forming into column troops, they wound along the magnificent bay.

It was the night of a great ball. From the four corners of Ireland the aristocracy of the country were flocking to pay homage to the King in the person of his representative. Carriages rolled through the entrance of the large courtyard, and officers and officials, peers and commoners, ladies of rank and fashion pressed in an ever-increasing throng up the splendid stairway and into the sumptuous reception-rooms. In St. Patrick's Hall stood the Viceroy and his consort, receiving their guests, who filed before the dais on which they stood, and Bob Hall, standing on duty by the door, watched the splendid scene and listened to the swelling music.

With sword drawn the lad made a splendid picture of athletic strength and smartness, and many were the flattering remarks his appearance evoked. With grave face and alert, he stood to attention, and so interested was he in the moving panorama of splendour that he did not notice an old gentleman approaching, walking by the side of a young lady. The gentleman, attired in Court dress, wore many decorations, and walked with dignity.

"Ah, there's Captain Lascalles!" the lady cried, and Bob involuntarily turned his head.

Lascalles, in the gorgeous mess uniform of the Die Hards, was approaching the door at which Bob stood guard.

"How do, Lascalles?" the old gentleman cried. "I'm

glad to see— Why! Bless my life! Miriam, look there—look there!"

The old gentleman staggered back, pointing a quivering forefinger at Bob. The lady scanned the lad's face eagerly, and he, in turn, gazed in astonishment at the twain. The old gentleman, with eyes alight with wonder and hesitancy, advanced with outstretched hands, and clutched the lad by the shoulder.

"Your name?" he gasped.

"Bob Hall, sir! I'm not supposed to speak, though, when I'm on duty!"

"I'm right! I felt certain I couldn't be mistaken!" the old gentleman cried. "Miriam, don't you see the resemblance to the portrait in this soldier's face? Bless my life, this is a most extraordinary discovery! Lascalles, you're in the lad's regiment. You can—"

Lascalles' face had blanched the colour of ivory. He shot a glance of scowling malice at Bob, who still stood in perplexed amazement. The captain's voice, harsh in suppressed bitterness, startled the lad back to his senses.

"Ah, yes! The trooper! He's in my regiment, as you say, and I know all about him. It's a most extraordinary resemblance, and so it struck me at the time I first saw him. He's not the man you think, though, Lord John. I made every inquiry, and found out all about him! A bad lot—a very bad lot! One of the worst soldiers we've ever had to deal with, and likely, before long, to be drummed out! Take no notice of him, Lord John. He's a pushing, cheeky, common fellow, and would only be a nuisance if you encouraged him."

Lascalles had taken the old gentleman by the arm, and was gently but firmly leading him away as he spoke. The lady looked back over her shoulder, and there was an expression half of regret and half of fear in her eyes.

"Is he as bad as that, Captain Lascalles?" she said sorrowfully. "He doesn't look as if he would commit crime! I'm awfully sorry that—"

The voices died away, and Bob, pale and trembling in every limb, rested against the wall for support. Indignation, shame, passion struggled for the mastery in his wildly-beating heart. He longed to dash forward and strike his traducer to the floor, he longed to proclaim his innocence of the foul accusations Lascalles wantonly and maliciously had invented for his own vile purposes, he longed to prove to the whole of that gathering of honourable men and women, and especially to the old gentleman and the sympathetic young lady, that he was not as his villainous cousin had so grossly portrayed him—that he was a man with a clean record and chivalrous instincts.

But his duty as a soldier was paramount. Even as he stood like a statue, a splendid figure in his handsome uniform, the lad saw that he had become the subject of gossip in the exalted circle of the Viceroy. The old gentleman whom Lascalles had addressed as Lord John was engaged in conversation with the representative of the King, and was talking eagerly and volubly.

The Viceroy, with a face of curiosity, turned frequently and scrutinised Bob, who felt a hot wave of anger sweep over him as the ladies of the Viceregal circle lifted their lorgnettes, eyed him as if he was the waxwork figure of a criminal, and whispered together with many shrugs of their shoulders.

The lad bit his lip and set his teeth, and vowed that the time would come when, face to face, he would get even with the callous scoundrel who had subjected him to such uncalculated and bitter mortification.

The band began to play a dreamy waltz, and on the instant the room was filled with happy dancers, gliding to and fro and in and out in an enchanting maze. As if in a fairy scene the music rose and fell; above, a hundred lights cast down a chastened light, and uniforms of red and purple and white and gold, and dresses of every hue, shone with a brilliant mingling of colour, and diamonds flashed from coronet and tiara and pendant in a scintillating blaze of glory.

There was a shriek, and up amongst the ravishing colours of beauty an ugly, dull, red light shot its venomous tongue. Smoke, grey and grimy, rose over the heads of the dancers; the crowd swayed, then wailed, and rushed, panic-stricken, towards the door. Terror was stamped on every charming face; amazement, hesitation, bewilderment lined the strong features of the men. The music ceased abruptly; a long-drawn cry of despair re-echoed through the brilliant ball-room where, but a second before, gaiety and happiness had shined in radiant splendour; death had stalked grimly into the banquet of life, prepared to claim its victims.

(A further instalment of this ripping serial next Wednesday. Order your copy of "THE GEM LIBRARY" to-day!)

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UNIVERSITY MICROFILMS



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A Series of Letters of Enthralling Interest received direct from Corporal Charles, of his Majesty's—th Dragoons, who is an old reader of "The Gem" Library, and is now on active service on the Continent with the British Expeditionary Force.

(Exclusive to "The Gem" Library.)

No. 17.—

DUELS IN THE AIR.



After what I've been telling you about the work of our squadron of the King's Dragoons—as fine a lot of lads as ever were in the saddle—you'll not be surprised to hear that we've been sent back, a few at a time, for a few days' leave at a rest centre.

I think we deserved it. What with the slush and the snow and the freezing nights—the enemy are quite a secondary consideration—our poor old nags as well as ourselves were worn out.

We can bustle about and keep ourselves warm, can endure cheerfully any hardship, but it comes rough on the horses, good old faithful creatures, which are either slipping about the frosty, shell-holed roads, ploughing through rivers of icy mud, or shivering in some draughty, shot-riddled shed.

As I sit here, a beautiful starlight night, freezing hard, with so little wind that my candle burns steadily out in the open as I write, I look down on a scene that no artist could properly paint.

Encamped on the hillside, the white tents making a fine splash of colour against the brown slopes, are the most extraordinary medley of troops you could imagine.

Quite near me are a troop of French cuirassiers, with their glistening breastplates and lances, that they know so well how to handle. Close by are a detachment of the London Scottish, making merry with the lads of a British howitzer battery.

Further away are a company of Sikhs—the brave little brown chaps, the very sight of whom gives the Germans a bad attack of colic. They made me smile this afternoon as they endeavoured to carry on a conversation with some of the African Spahis—a picturesque crowd, in their long red robes and turbans.

With them, too, are Zouaves, and in other parts of the camp Gurkhas, Belgians, French infantry and cavalry, and, of course, a preponderating number of Tommies, representing almost every branch of the British Army.

Now and then each section, squatting round a camp-fire, or gathered together in one of the ruined houses, have a "sing-song." You can imagine the medley of sound as the Indians chant at the same time as a merry crowd of French infantry rattle out one of the Paris music-hall songs. Dear old Tommy, meanwhile, is keeping himself warm, hopping about in couples in a brave attempt to perform the tango; whilst voices, mouth-organs, and even thin paper and combs, provide the band that drowns all other noises in the effort to produce rag-time.

My word, it is a rag! You'd have had sore ribs for a week if you'd seen, as I have, two dignified-looking Bengal Lancers—brown boys, of course, with patriarchal beards—endeavouring to imitate Tommy doing the tango!

No one, as he surveys this merry scene, would think mad Kaiser Bill's hosts of grey-garbed barbarians were only a few miles away, until the tramping of feet announces the arrival of the remnants of an English line battalion, a limping column of bearded, muddy, torn figures, slouching with utter fatigue, with wool caps instead of helmets, sombre-looking in their khaki, but heroes every man of them.

I want to make no comparisons with our gallant Allies, but my own experience shows that Tommy Atkins is king of all fighting-men. What is the cold, the awful strain, the terrible sights he sees about him, the knowledge that his pals have been stricken down beside him, to such a hero?

Even when he is exhausted and worn out, they have to drag him out of the trenches. A day's rest, and he is

laughing and singing with the rest of the merry boys, only anxious to get fit as quickly as possible, and to take his place again in the firing-line.

My stay has been marked already by two remarkable events. One was a thrilling air duel between a German Taube aeroplane and a French biplane. The other was a most amusing paperchase, when a crowd of us went out in pursuit of the "Kaiser."

I'd better deal with the paperchase first. It was real fun, and the genius who thought of it—a young subaltern—deserves one of Kaiser Bill's iron crosses.

The race was only open to cavalymen. For the Kaiser we chose a gunner of the Horse Artillery, who possessed a mighty fierce moustache, a la Bill's, and we fixed him up with a Uhlan helmet adorned with a field-marshal's paper plumes, a big wooden sword, and a row or two of tin tickets as medals.

He was supposed to have been dropped from an aeroplane on the way to Calais. We should find some of his "scraps of paper," otherwise torn-up treaties, as a trail. The prize for his capture was an iron cross, and we were warned that any of us who incapacitated his horse or himself for service would be court-martialled.

There was a big crowd at the meet to see us off. I shall never forget that merry time. We had a lovely gallop of a couple of miles or so before we picked up the trail. By this time we were separated into little groups. In one brook as I drew near I saw three officers and their chargers swimming and struggling in the water.

Others faked the jump, and went on through a gate. Only two or three of us cleared the water and got hot on the track of our quarry, the sight of whom made us rock in the saddles with laughter. Kaiser Bill was riding a piebald charger with an immense iron cross tied to its tail.

However, the gunner just got home—a matter of yards, after we'd chased him round for about eight miles. And it was while we were still laughing over the affair that the aeroplanes swept up through the clear sky, and did an extra turn for the amusement and exhilaration of us all.

The German Taube was the first to make its appearance. Humming like a factory of gas-engines, it swept over our heads at a great height.

Well aware that if we kept still we should not be seen, as only moving troops can be observed from aeroplanes, we waited to see what the visitor would do. It was a waste of ammunition to fire at the Taube. Not even an anti-aircraft gun would have reached it.

A few seconds later a big biplane, evidently a Frenchie, soared up and over our heads. The German instantly wheeled round, and, pursued by the biplane, swept over towards the enemy's lines.

They were flying in the direction of the sun, now brilliant, and we were unable to follow them with our eyes.

Yet before five minutes had elapsed, they were back again, the biplane chasing the smaller Taube like a hawk after a pigeon. Both were flying at full speed. It was an intensely dramatic and exciting sight.

Gradually the Frenchman soared up till he was a hundred feet above the Taube. He was also gaining on him with every whirr of the propeller.

The two were apparently firing at one another, though we heard no sound of shots, or saw no smoke from their

(Continued on page iii. of cover.)

guis, but could only guess what was happening by the switchback manoeuvres of the duellists.

Finding probably that the target of a man, three-quarters hidden by the armoured seat, was too small and too uncertain, the French aviator dived straight down, passed under the Taube, and fired at the square head's motor.

So splendid and plucky was the manoeuvre that even we looking on were deceived. We all halloed "Oh!" thinking that the Frenchie had been hit, and was coming down.

Instead of that, his shot struck the spirit tank of the Taube, for instantly a cloud of yellow smoke marked its track. In vain the German tried to get back to the safety of his own lines. His motor had stopped, and all he could do was to volplane down about a mile or so beyond our camp, to which we galloped, led overhead by the biplane.

We were in time to see three of the Kaiser's pets leap out of the smoking ruins, and make a dash for it. Goodness only knows what they thought of doing. To get back to their own territory they would have had to cross the fighting area where we and our allies were giving their lot ginger.

Anyway, as the biplane sank to earth, they pulled up and fired at the two aviators, who coolly stepped out. But they were no better marksmen than they were fliers. The Frenchies levelled their revolvers, and the enemy dropped like stones.

The Taube was a burning heap when we reached it, and a few yards away lay the three German aviators, who would never fly again.

There was an amusing scene here yesterday. Where we're stationed was once a fair-sized agricultural town, but now it is a heap of ruins, thanks to the German Jack Johnsons, and there are scarcely any Belgian peasants left.

Judge of our surprise one morning to see a stout old woman, a refugee, driving three cows before her.

Excitement rose high at once, and for this reason. It meant milk. Such a luxury we hadn't tasted for weeks. Before you could say Jackie Robinson, scores of Tommies, with petrol cans, pails, any old thing that would hold liquid, had surrounded the ancient dame, shouting out "Milk-o!" for all they were worth.

Old Mother Hubbard, the Tommies called her, because of her peculiar pointed chin, and her keen old blue eyes.

Well, the old soul was a bit terrified at first. She had left the town when the Germans had been driving forward to get to Paris, and now had returned, thinking the coast was clear again. She didn't quite understand what our lads were after till someone explained.

Then she did a roaring trade. She camped down then and there and milked her herd, surrounded by at least a hundred of our lads. They paid her regulation price—twopence a pint. She must have made a very good thing out of it.

And our lads were more than content. It meant a greater variety of diet for the next two or three days. Some even went to the luxury of making custards and milk-puddings.

Old Mother Hubbard was installed in her old quarters. The roof was off the barn, which had been occupied by some of our lads, but they not only willingly obtained new quarters, but they helped the old dame to block up the shell holes in the walls, and to make the place homelike.

She'd lost three sons in the war, so that the poor old soul deserved to enjoy a little prosperity. To the rest camp she also brought many a blessing.

It was in the town where we are now that a crafty old peasant saved his pig—a fine white, fat old sow—in an amusing manner from the Germans when they swept through in their attempt to get to Paris.

Germans, especially the officers, are very fond of roast pork; perhaps it's because they're such hogs themselves.

Well, they spotted the old peasant's pig, and ordered him to take it along to a certain spot to be handed over to their commissariat for turning into the coveted roast pork and crackling. The old man loved his porker. It was the only thing left to him.

He determined to sell his life rather than part with the fat porker, and he set his crafty old brain to work. The next day one of the Kaiser's bullies came to the cottage. He was after the pork.

The lower rooms being empty, he tramped upstairs. The old peasant was down on his knees beside the bed, upon which lay a body, with sheet covering the head. Round the room were lighted candles.

The bully felt uneasy and fingered the chin-strap of his helmet.

"What are you doing there?" he demanded.

"Only praying for the soul of one who is dearer to me than life itself, Excellency," mumbled the old man.

And the square head pulled off his helmet, believing that the peasant was mourning the loss of a relative. He never dreamed that it was the fat old sow who was lying there. Anyway, the dish of roast pork never found its way into the officers' mess.

(A further stirring letter from Corporal Charles will appear next Wednesday. Order your copy in advance.)

THIS WEEK'S CHAT.

The Editor's Personal Column.

For Next Wednesday—

"HERR SCHNEIDER'S SECRET!"

By Martin Clifford.

Our next grand, long, complete story of St. Jim's chronicles the continuation of the feud between Herr Schneider, the unpopular German master, and his scholars. Mr. Railton, having left his post at St. Jim's to answer his country's call, the herr finds ample opportunity to come down heavily on his charges. At length a new master arrives, and the juniors confidently look to this individual to side with them against the German tyrant. Unfortunately, however, the new-comer proves to be a rank outsider, and, incidentally, a very dangerous foe to the British nation. He comes to the school under false colours, and the German master is "in the know"; but at length the impostor is successfully thwarted in his treacherous designs, thanks to the timely unfolding of

"HERR SCHNEIDER'S SECRET!"

THE "GEM" EXCHANGE CIRCLE.

Particulars of the various "Gem" Leagues which have been formed throughout the Empire are now to hand, and I have great pleasure in publishing on this page the names of two of the more important organisations which exist for the welfare of these journals and the mutual benefit of their readers.

Perhaps the finest club of its kind is the "Gem" Exchange Circle, whose founder, Mr. Herbert W. Henbest, has laid down the pen for the sword, and gone forth to play his part in paving the way for the triumphant march into Berlin.

One cannot help being struck by the splendid spirit of enthusiasm which makes itself apparent in the club's details, very kindly sent to me by the youthful secretary:

"The 'Gem' Exchange Circle was formed through the medium of the 'Gem' Library by Mr. H. W. Henbest in 1912, and it primarily consisted of only six members, including the founder. By strenuous and untiring efforts on the part of Mr. Henbest and the enthusiastic support of his five friends, this number gradually increased, and further members were enrolled by the still greater perseverance of the founder.

"Visible signs of success were shown when the number of overseas members advanced, and the able originator of the 'Exchange' then formed a magazine, which was entitled 'Our Stamp Opinion.' All the members joined in making the magazine an interesting and instructive periodical, and it has been the cause of enlisting several new members, who have proved their value to the club by their unsparing devotion to its welfare.

"The 'Gem' Exchange Circle is now one of the recognised stamp exchange clubs of Great Britain, and includes many able philatelists in its ranks, which now number seventy members.

"This number is divided amongst the different countries and continents as follows:

Great Britain	37
America	10
Australasia	10
Asia	9
Europe	3
Africa	1

Total 70

"Under an able president, and with an enthusiastic band of members, the Exchange bids fair to become a lasting success, which will be doubly assured by the enrolment of new members, who will always be given a hearty welcome."

Truly, the principals of the "Gem" Exchange Circle have every reason to feel proud of their splendid achievement, and I have no doubt that a still further increase of membership is imminent. This is by no means the first time I have had occasion to commend this worthy concern and its founder, and I sincerely trust that the Exchange will be far-reaching in its influence, and will attain a world-wide popularity.

The address of the hard-working secretary is:

MR. F. B. BARTLETT,
82, Harcourt Road,
Sheffield.

and intending members, when writing to Mr. Bartlett, should enclose a stamped envelope for their reply.

THE EDITOR.

A Cash Prize for Every Contributor to this Page.



Our Weekly Prize Page.

LOOK OUT FOR YOUR WINNING STORYETTE.

THE REASON.

Tommy: "Do you know why the boy stood on the burning deck, pa?"

Father: "No idea, my son. Why was it?"

Tommy: "I know, pa. It was because it was too warm to sit down."—Sent in by Patrick Hughes, Lisburn, Ireland.

DIFFERENT ENTIRELY.

Visitor (to Tommy, who has upset a bottle of ink on the new carpet): "Never mind, my boy, there's no use in crying over spilt milk."

Tommy: "Course not! Any duffer knows that! All you've got to do is to call in the cat, and she'll lick it up. But it don't happen to be milk, and it's mother who'll do the licking."—Sent in by Frank Lovell, Clifton, Bristol.

MISUNDERSTOOD.

An inspector who was examining a class said: "How many threepenny-pieces are there in a shilling?" Silence reigned, and none of the scholars seemed to know. "Here," he said to a little girl, "run to the nearest shop and ask the shopkeeper to let you have some threepenny-pieces for this shilling."

About a quarter of an hour elapsed, and at last the girl came back, clasp in her hand a strongly-smelling parcel.

"Please, sir," she said, "they didn't have no threepenny pieces, so I got six twopennies."—Sent in by J. Geach, South Norwood.

ALL THE SAME.

"Here you are, porter!" sang out a passenger, leaning out of the carriage window. "Here is sixpence for you!"

The porter was just going to take the coin when he caught sight of the managing director of the line looking on.

"We are not allowed to take tips, sir," he said virtuously, "but if you'll chuck the tanner on the platform I'll see it don't get lost."—Sent in by J. W. Hill, Wigan, Lancs.

MIND YOUR STOPS!

Monday had been spent by little Tommy in helping his mother with the family washing, so that when he rolled up the next morning, he took with him a note written by his father, explaining his absence. It ran:

"Please excuse Tommy, he was not at skool yesterday, as his mother was washing his father."—Sent in by E. T. Gane, Custom House, E.

FORCE OF HABIT.

There is a story of a man who resolved to give up drinking, and went to a temperance lecturer to draw him up an affidavit to that effect. The document was drawn, read, and proved. The party held up his hand and murmured the usual promise. The paper was then properly sealed and delivered.

"What's to pay?" asked the pledge-taker.

"To pay—to pay!" exclaimed the lecturer. "Nothing, of course!—This is a labour of love."

"Nothing to pay!" returned the grateful but forgetful pledge-taker. "Well, that's handsome! Let's go and have a drink!"—Sent in by David Dickinson, Blackpool.

AN EYE ON HIM.

The bored youth turned to his dinner partner with a yawn. "Who's that strange-looking man over there who stares at me so much?" he inquired.

"Oh, that's Professor Brainpan, the famous expert on insanity!" she replied.—Sent in by E. Butler, Goodmayes, Essex.

SOME SPEED.

An American was waiting for a train at Bedford when his curiosity was aroused by a company of soldiers forming into line along the platform and standing smartly at attention.

Soon an engine drawing one coach rushed through the station at sixty miles an hour. The sergeant then marched the company off.

Wondering somewhat, the traveller buttonholed one of the soldiers, named Murphy.

"Say, was there some eminent person on board that train?" he asked.

"There was that!" replied Murphy. "Did ye see that feller hanging out of the window with the notebook in his hand? It was the battalion tailor measuring us for our new uniforms."—Sent in by L. H. Christie, Montreal, Canada.

INDISPENSABLE.

"Ernie Little," demanded the teacher, "what is that you are playing with?"

Ernie made no reply, but the class sneak was ready with information.

"Please, teacher," he said, "it's some string he's got."

"Bring it here," was the command.

So the offending string was thrown into the fire. There was no more trouble with Ernie until his time came to read.

Then, instead of standing up, he made no other sign than silently letting two big tears drop with a splash on his desk.

"Why don't you stand up and go on with your reading?" asked the teacher.

"Please, mum," whispered Ernie. "I can't stand. The string you took from me kept my trousers up!"—Sent in by Edgar Hughes, Ton Pentre, South Wales.

UNPERTURBED.

The Game Warden of Colorado was walking in the mountains when he met a hunter with his gun. The warden artfully suggested that the district they were in was a very good one for shooting.

"It is that," said the hunter proudly. "I killed one of the finest bucks yesterday I have ever seen. He weighed over two hundred pounds."

As it was the season when game may not be shot without subjecting the hunter to a heavy fine, the game-warden thought he had an easy capture.

"Do you know who you are talking to?" he said. "I am the Chief Game Warden of Colorado."

The offending hunter was not perturbed in the least, and, without hesitation, he retorted:

"And do you know who you are talking to? I am the biggest liar in the whole State of Colorado!"—Sent in by D. Gottlieb, London, E.

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.