

FRIENDS OR FOES?

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



TALBOT'S TEMPER TRIED!

(A Dramatic Scene in the Magnificent Long, Complete School Tale in this issue.)



THIS WEEK'S CHAT

Whom to Write to — — — — —
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For Next Wednesday :

"LEVISON ON THE WAR-PATH!"

By Martin Clifford.

Levison's impish spite plays a big part in the splendid story which appears next week. In the last story published that queer mixture of good and evil, Ernest Levison, showed up in better guise than usual. But when he is dealing with Tom Merry & Co. he has no such compunctions as restrain him where Talbot is concerned. Turned down by Tom in his capacity of Editor of "Tom Merry's Weekly," Levison resolves to get into that journal by hook or by crook—a spiteful limerick about Mr. Ratcliff, the Housemaster of the New House, which he has evolved. He plans to give that ill-tempered gentleman the biggest possible amount of annoyance while fixing the blame for it all upon Tom Merry and his chums. How this is done will be read in the story itself. To go into details here would only be to detract from the treat in store for my readers next week. For the yarn is equal to Mr. Clifford's very best, and that is very high praise indeed. No one who reads it is likely to forget for a long time the audacity and slimmess of

"LEVISON ON THE WAR-PATH!"

NEXT WEEK'S "MAGNET."

I suppose there must be a few readers of this paper who do not read the "Magnet" regularly—though I don't know why? To them I want to give a word of advice. Do not fail to get this week's issue, for if you do you will miss a story in which some of your favourites are closely concerned. The chief part of the action of "For D'Arcy's Sake" takes place at the country seat of Lord Eastwood, the Hon. A. A. D'Arcy's father, though the yarn starts at Greyfriars, and the great Gussy himself, Jack Blake, Herries, Digby, and the Terrible Three all play parts in it. So get this week's "Magnet" without fail, and next week's and the week after that if you think it worth while—as I believe you will.

A MISSING READER.

Charles Stanley Gibson, if he sees this, is urgently asked to write to his brother and sister at 56, Jermyn Street, Kirkstall Road, Leeds, to which address they have removed since he left. They are very anxious about him, and think that the best chance of getting into touch with him again is through the companion papers, of which he was an ardent reader. I trust this notice will be the means of bringing about the desired end.

A MOTHER'S THANKS.

Some few weeks ago I told in these columns the sad story of a reader who, already blinded in one eye through an accident, has now lost the sight of the other by another mischance in no sense due to any fault of his own? I asked that readers should write and cheer him up, and I am very glad indeed to hear from the lad's mother that letters have simply poured in. It shows how keen is the sympathy of my chums with a comrade in misfortune. But Mrs. Jordan is in some difficulty owing to the very heartiness of the response. She is quite unable to answer all the letters, though she has done her best, not wishing to seem unthankful. I have told her that I am sure that those who wrote will understand, and that I would thank them in her name and that of her boy through these pages for their kindness, which has helped in no small degree to lighten what must have been otherwise weary hours to our unlucky little friend. Don't stop writing because you get no reply. He cannot answer, you know, and his mother has many other things to do. And

when writing in future, if you would like an answer, enclose a stamped and addressed envelope. This will make it easier for the boy's mother in more than one way. I am sure that you will all understand, and that you will not grudge the small sum involved.

NOTICES.

Football.

Neptune Athletic F.C. (average age 16) want matches. S. W. district preferred. Hon. Sec., P. Alexander, 401, Battersea Park Road, S.W.
 Avondale F.C. (Balham) want fixtures. Hon. Sec., R. Quarendon, 15, Tantallon Road, Balham, S.W.
 Clarendon F.C. (average age 14-15) want home and away matches within four-mile radius of Acton. Hon. Sec., Geo. Gray, 3, Cowper Road, Acton, W.
 Albert Mark, 161, Beechcroft Road, Upper Tooting, S.W., is forming a footer club, and will be glad to hear from any readers in his neighbourhood who would care to join.
 P. Marron, 11, St. Peter's Road, Mile End, E., is forming a footer club, and will be glad to hear from a few players, age about 14. Would also like to hear from teams who can arrange matches.
 Gosport Wesleyan F.C. (average age 16-17) want home and away matches. Hon. Sec., S. Kent, 13, Brune Terrace, Gosport.

Correspondence, Leagues, &c.

T. W. Titcomb, 15, Dover Street, Swindon, wants more members for his Wiltshire "Gem" and "Magnet" League, and would also like to hear from someone willing to act as secretary.
 John Wray, 48, Skipton Road, Ilkley, Yorks, wants more members for his league, one object of which is the sending of the companion papers to the men at the Front.
 Alec. G. Naylor, 31, Central Road, West Didsbury, Manchester, would be glad to correspond with readers with a view to the starting of an amateur magazine.
 A. W. Smith, 72, High Street, Clapham, S.W., would like to correspond with readers interested in stamp collecting.
 Two lads, aged 15, wish to join athletic or sports club in Bristol. Write A. Cooney, 142, Whiteladies Road, Bristol.

Back Numbers &c., Wanted.

Private T. Richardson, 3883, 11 Platoon, C Co., 1/20 London Regt., B.E.F., France, will be grateful for back numbers of "Gem" and "Magnet."
 Private T. Jennings, 1651, 7th Co. Pioneers, 19th Batt. N. F., B.E.F., France, would welcome back numbers of the companion papers.
 Private T. J. Vickery, 14862, Machine Gun Section, 20th Middlesex Regt., B.E.F., France, would welcome back numbers of the companion papers.
 By F. Longstaff, 16, Marlborough Hill, St. John's Wood, N.W.—Nos. 101, 222, 301, 304, 324, and 406 of the "Gem." Double price offered.
 Private H. Christie, 13886, 9th Batt. K.O.R.L. Regt., Ghain Tufioha Camp, Malta, would be glad to have back numbers of the companion papers.
 By R. Wells, c.o. A. V. W. McKurdo, 32, High Street, Dumfries—More members for his club, which sends back numbers to the K.O.S.B., or papers from non-members.
 H. E. Grainger, 72, Prestbury Road, Macclesfield, wants more members for his Imperial Correspondence Club, also someone prepared to act as secretary and someone as editor. Stamped and addressed envelope, please.

Your Editor

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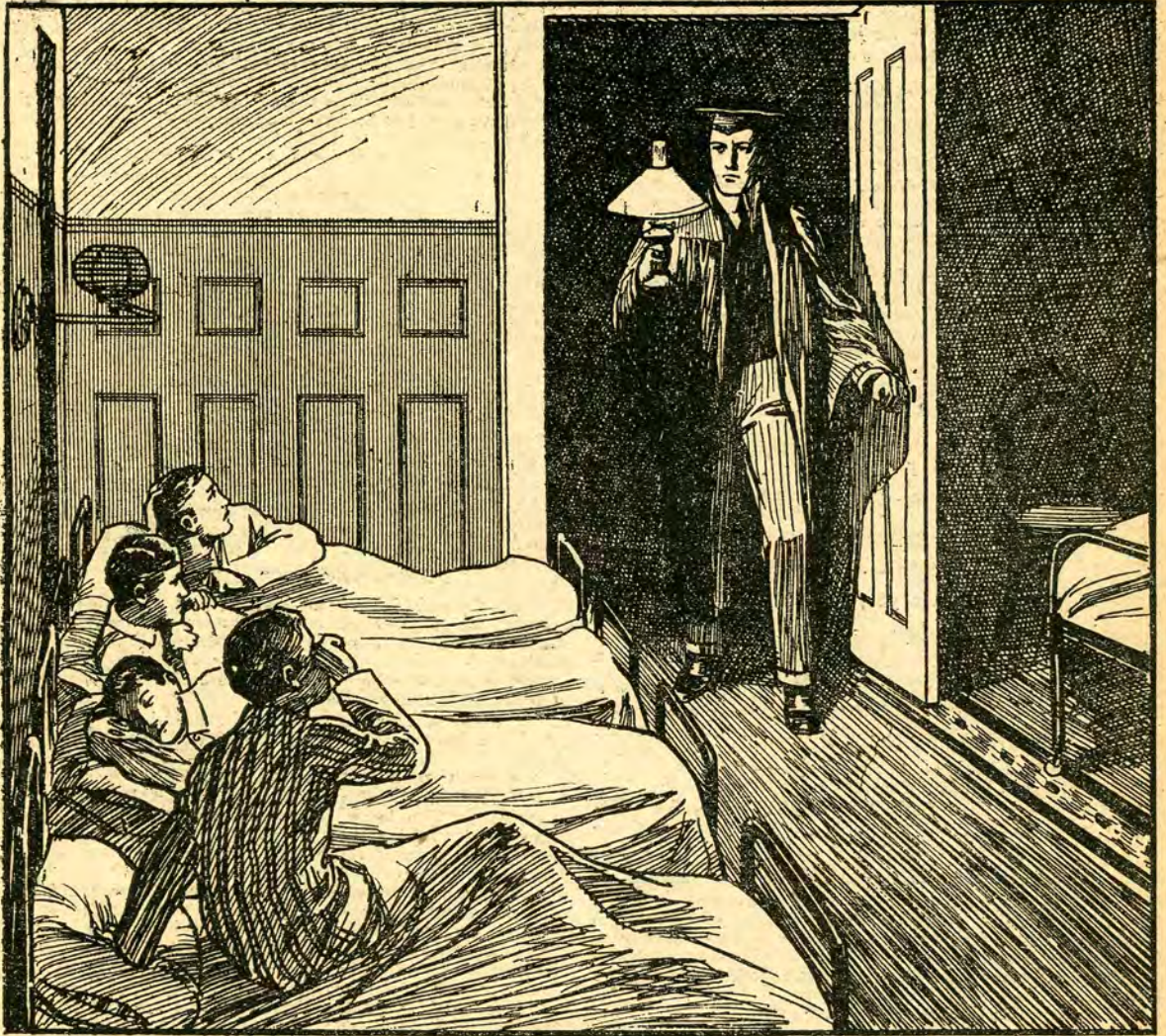


COMPLETE STORIES
FOR ALL, AND EVERY
STORY A GEM!

FRIENDS OR FOES?

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.



The door opened. Mr. Railton stood there, lamp in hand, looking into the dormitory. Tom Merry sat up in bed, rubbing his eyes. "What the dickens—ah! Mr. Railton?" he exclaimed. (See Chapter 12.)

CHAPTER 1.

Cousins and Foes.

"TALK of angels," remarked Monty Lowther, "and you hear the rustle of their giddy wings. Only Crooke isn't precisely an angel!"

Four juniors of the Shell at St. Jim's were lying in the deep grass by the shining Ryll, enjoying a comfortable slack after cricket.

Tom Merry and Manners and Talbot had made good scores against the New House, and they felt entitled to a rest.

Monty Lowther had scored a duck's egg to Fatty Wynn's bowling, but, as Lowther pointed out, it was the only duck's egg scored in the match, so he was really more distinguished than the others.

The Terrible Three had been talking cricket—Tom Merry and Manners chiefly discussing Lowther's brilliant score. Talbot of the Shell spoke little, and seemed to be in a thoughtful mood. And when Tom Merry asked him the subject of his meditations, he replied briefly:

"Crooke!"

Next Wednesday.

"LEVISON ON THE WAR-PATH!" AND "CORNSTALK BOB!"

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"Your blessed cousin!" yawned Manners. "I don't want to be disrespectful to your merry relations, Talbot, old fellow; but Croke can go and eat coke! He had a bet on the House match; the worm—excuse me! I saw him settling up with Levison afterwards."

"He backed the wrong horse," chortled Monty Lowther. "He thought the New House was going to win—"

"Natural enough, after your score," remarked Tom Merry. "If Talbot hadn't pulled the game out of the fire—"

"Oh, bow-wow!" said Lowther. "My score was unique, at any rate. But what's the matter with Croke, Talbot? Has he been trying to borrow money of you?"

Talbot laughed.

"No. Croke has plenty of money—more than I have. My uncle's home again now. He's training the recruits at Abbotsford, and I expect he'll come to St. Jim's soon to see us both. It's rather rotten for me to be on such bad terms with Croke. Colonel Lyndon would like to see us friends."

Lowther shook his head.

"My dear chap, I really can't approve of your making friends with Croke! He really isn't fit company for an innocent youth like you. Besides, he's got a new pal—I've heard so, at all events. Not a chap you would pull with."

"Who is it?" asked Talbot.

"Lodgey, the billiard sharper at the Green Man," grinned Lowther. "He's a new-comer in this neighbourhood, and Croke and Levison made his acquaintance at once. Birds of a feather, you know."

Talbot's brow clouded.

There were footprints in the grass of the towing-path, and the juniors glanced lazily round. A junior in a straw hat was coming from the direction of the school, and then Monty Lowther made his remarks concerning angels and the rustle of their wings. For it was George Gerald Croke, of the Shell, who was coming up the towing-path.

He glanced at the four fellows in the grass as he came along, and scowled. The sight of Tom Merry & Co. was enough to make Croke scowl. The black sheep of St. Jim's was on the worst of terms with the cheery Co.

"Hallo!" said Monty Lowther affably. "Just speaking about you, Croke."

"You might have minded your own business," suggested Croke.

"But you're such a fascinating subject of conversation," explained Lowther. "So sorry you lost your quid to Levison over the House match!"

"If they'd all batted like you, I should have won it," said Croke.

"Got you there, Monty!" grinned Manners.

"Never mind; as you're a betting chap, Croke, I'm open to take a bet with you," said Lowther, unmoved.

Croke stared.

"Hallo! Are the good little Georgies turning over a new leaf?" he asked sarcastically. "Well, I'll take you on. What's the bet?"

"I'll bet you a thick ear to a pink eye—"

"You silly ass!" roared Croke.

"That you'll be sorry for calling on Mr. Lodgey this afternoon," pursued Lowther. "In fact, I'll give you the odds—two thick ears to one pink eye."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Croke scowled, and tramped on up the path. At a short distance was the garden gate of that ill-favoured inn, the Green Man, which Lowther sagely guessed was Croke's destination. And Lowther was probably right in surmising that Croke would regret his visit. It was very probable that he would leave most of his spare change in Mr. Lodgey's possession.

Talbot sat up in the grass.

"Croke!" he called out.

His cousin did not turn his head.

"He won't stop for you, Talbot," said Tom Merry. "Let him rip!"

"I—I think I'd better speak to him," said Talbot, with a troubled look. "He can't know what that man Lodgey is like if he's chummed with him."

"Know anything about him?" asked Tom.

"I've met him."

"Met him!" exclaimed Tom, in astonishment.

"Yes, if it's the same man, and I expect it is," Talbot coloured deeply. "It was in the old days, before I came to St. Jim's."

"Oh!" said Tom uncomfortably. "I see!"

Talbot rose to his feet.

"I'll speak to Croke," he said. "It can't do any harm, if it doesn't do any good."

Without waiting for his chums to reply, Talbot followed quickly on the track of Gerald Croke. The Terrible Three exchanged glances.

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"Talbot's an ass," growled Manners. "What's the good of jawing to that outsider?"

"Oh, it will do Croke good!" said Lowther. "They're sure to have a row, and Croke will get his nose punched. That will be all to the good."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Talbot hurried after Croke. The black sheep of the Shell was close to the gate when Talbot overtook him. A man with a hard, coarse face, was leaning on the gate, looking out over the towing-path and the river, and he had waved his hand to Croke. Talbot did not notice him.

"Croke!" he exclaimed breathlessly.

The Shell fellow faced round angrily.

"What are you following me for?" he snapped.

"Only a word—"

"You know I don't want any words with you," said Croke sourly. "Still, if you want to come into the Green Man, you can come. It's really more in your line than mine, considering what you used to be."

Talbot flushed.

"I don't want to come there," he said. "You know that. I want to give you a word of warning—"

Croke burst into a laugh.

"You can keep your sermons till I ask for them!" he said.

"I don't mean that. It's about time that man—" Talbot made a gesture towards the man at the gate, who was staring at him curiously. "If you are going to see that man, Lodgey—"

"Suppose I am?" sneered Croke. "Are you going to tell my uncle, and get me into a row?"

"You know I'm not. I want to tell you that I know that man—"

"Old friend of yours, perhaps?" sneered Croke.

"An old acquaintance," said Talbot quietly. "You seem to think he's a common sharper; but, as a matter of fact, he is very much worse. He is the associate of criminals of all kinds."

"Yes, he would be, if he's an old acquaintance of yours," assented Croke coolly.

Talbot bit his lip.

"He's a dangerous man to know," he said. "I don't mean that he'll merely swindle you—that's certain anyway; but you won't find it easy to get rid of him if you want to. He is an utter scoundrel, and he has been wanted by the police."

"Well, so have you!" jeered Croke. "But I'm expected to be civil to you, all the same. I don't see much to choose between you."

Talbot clenched his hand hard. But he held his anger in check. He had not come there to quarrel with Croke.

"Very well, I've nothing more to say," he said. "I thought I ought to speak, knowing that man as I do. If you'd let me, Croke, I'd like to be better friends with you. Uncle Lyndon would like it."

"I'm not looking for a reformed criminal as a pal, thanks. And you can't spoof me, even if you can spoof that silly old fool."

"Are you speaking of Colonel Lyndon?"

"Yes, the old duffer," said Croke, enjoying Talbot's expression. "You know you've spoofed him—you're spoofing him now! You're after his money—the money that would have come to me if you hadn't turned up. I suppose you're getting a yarn ready for him when he comes to the school. Well, he may hear something from me, too—when I get a chance of catching you out! You're currying favour with him for his money, and if you were sure he'd made his will in your favour, you'd be jolly glad to hear that the Germans had bowled him over—Let go, you cad!"

Croke struggled savagely as Talbot's grasp fell on him.

"You hound!" panted Talbot. "You lie—and you know that you lie!"

"Let me go!" yelled Croke, shaken like a rat by a terrier in the grasp of the sturdy Shell fellow. "You rotter, let me go! Lodgey—Lodgey, lend a hand!"

The man at the gate had come out on the towing-path. He ran to Croke's aid, and grasped Talbot by the shoulders.

"And off that young gentleman!" he exclaimed.

Talbot's eyes gleamed. His left shot out, and caught Lodgey on the point of the chin. Lodgey let him go quite suddenly. The blow swept him backwards, and he crashed down on the grass on his back.

"Ow!" he gasped. "Oh! Ow!"

Talbot released Croke. He looked for a moment as if he meant to knock him down across his precious friend, and Croke backed away. But Talbot restrained himself. He thrust his hands deep into his pockets, and strode off.

His face was deeply clouded as he rejoined the Terrible Three. They looked at him curiously. The trees had hidden from their sight what had happened at the inn gate. But they heard Mr. Lodgey's howl.



Mr. Linton came striding in among the forms. Crooke became aware of him as the Form-master towered over the desk. He looked up, closing his book hastily. (See Chapter 6.)

"Well," said Lowther cheerily, "what's the news from the seat of war?"

"Oh, rot!" said Talbot. "You fellows coming in? It's past tea-time."

"Any old thing," yawned Manners.

The chums of the Shell sauntered down the towing-path to the school. Talbot's handsome face remained clouded, and his chums did not question him.

CHAPTER 2. A Precious Pair!

"MY 'at!"

Mr. Lodgey sat upon the grass and gasped. He was glad to see that Talbot had gone. The weedy, unfit rascal was no match for the sturdy young junior of St. Jim's, and that one drive had been quite enough for him. He blinked at Crooke.

"Bit of a corf-drop, that young gent!" said Mr. Lodgey, caressing his chin.

"Hang him!" muttered Crooke.

Mr. Lodgey rose to his feet, and they entered the garden of the inn together. The sharper was still rubbing his chin.

"What might that young gent's name be, Master-Crooke?" he asked. "I've seen him before somewhere. Schoolmate of yours—wot?"

"He's in my Form at St. Jim's," said Crooke.

"Yes, I reckoned so from his clobber. If it wasn't impossible, I should think he was a cove I used to know—once upon a time."

"It's not impossible," said Crooke, with a sneer. "He's

told me he knows you. His name's Talbot—at least, he's called Talbot."

"Never 'card the name. Knows me, does he?" said Mr. Lodgey.

"He used to be called the Toff."

The sharper jumped.

"The Toff? That's the Toff?"

"Yes. You know him now?"

"I thought I knew his chivvy," said Mr. Lodgey, in a state of great bewilderment. "But what is the Toff doing in a school like yours, Master Crooke? If he's the Toff I know, the police want him—bad!"

Crooke grunted.

"No chance of that. He's reformed."

"My eye!"

"And it seems to be genuine," growled Crooke. "I suppose he knows which side his bread's buttered. He was one of a gang of cracksmen once, according to what I've heard. He could crack any safe in the kingdom, and when he chucked it up, they were keen to have him back."

"That's 'im," said Mr. Lodgey; "that's the Toff!"

His eyes glittered, and he rubbed his chin again.

"The peelers would like to see him," he remarked. "I reckon I'll make him sorry for punching a fellow!"

Crooke shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"No chance of that. He got the King's pardon long ago."

"My 'at! The Toff was always a deep one," said Mr. Lodgey admiringly. "That lets him out. But you mean to say they let a cove like that into your school?"

"Oh, he can soft-sawder anybody!" said Crooke scornfully. "The Head's quite fond of him, all the fellows like him, though they know what he's been. He pitches a yarn about

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having been brought up among rascals, and chucking it up as soon as he had a chance."

"A wfully deep card, the Toff," murmured Mr. Lodgey.

"And it turns out that he's the nephew of a big gun—my own uncle," snarled Crooke. "It seems to be proved, too; and Colonel Lyndon is as taken with him as everybody is. Hardly anybody at the school is down on him, excepting me."

"And you're his cousin?"

"Well, I can't help that. I'm not proud of the connection," enquired Crooke. "I'd like to see him break out, and get kicked out of school. But there's no chance of that; he's too deep. He's got plenty of tin now, too; my uncle makes him an allowance, and I believe he's down in the old fool's will—for the money that ought to come to me, by rights! He's cut me out there."

Mr. Lodgey grinned. Looking at Crooke and looking at Talbot, he was not surprised that the Toff had found more favour in the eyes of Colonel Lyndon.

Crooke scowled, reading easily enough the rascal's thought.

"That's 'ard on you, Master Crooke. But if the Toff should break out again some time, you'll 'ave him down."

"No chance of that; he's too deep."

Mr. Lodgey rubbed his chin again.

"You'd like to see him come a cropper?" he asked.

"I'd give a year's pocket-money to see it!" growled Crooke. "But there's nothing doing."

"You might be able to help him—that way."

Crooke stared.

"Eh! What do you mean?"

"If the Toff won't play his old tricks," said Mr. Lodgey, in a low voice, "he might be made to seem to."

"Nothing doing! Do you mean I might bag something and plant it on him? Too jolly risky, for one thing, and he's deep enough to wriggle out of it, for another. He was under suspicion more than once, owing to his past, but he always wriggled out of it."

"There's more'n one way of killin' a cat, Master Crooke. If I could 'elp you work the raffle, what would you say?"

Crooke's eyes gleamed.

"If you could, I'd stand you a fiver, Lodgey! More than that, too. It would be worth a lot to me if he could be shown up in his true colours, it would mean the finish of him with my uncle. That means that the colonel's money would come to me—and he may get knocked over any day in Flanders."

Mr. Lodgey looked curiously at Crooke. He was wondering whether the kingdom held a more callous young scoundrel than this well-dressed young fellow from the big school.

"But it can't be done," went on Crooke. "There was a chap at St. Jim's who went to the bad, and tried to fix it on Talbot; but it was a failure. He has old Harry's own luck!"

"But you'd work it if you could, Master Crooke?"

"Of course I would. I should be justified in showing him up in his true colours. I know jolly well he's spoofing—just playing this game because it pays him."

"It might be did," said Mr. Lodgey meditatively. "I owe him one, and I always pays my debts—that kind! And you'd be a wealthy man some day, Master Crooke, if that upstart was out of your way?"

"I shall be wealthy, anyway," said Crooke arrogantly. "My father's rich. But it would mean five or six thousand a year when I come of age, if Talbot doesn't cut me out with my uncle."

"That's a lot of money," said Mr. Lodgey. "And a generous gent like you wouldn't forget an old friend who'd been useful to him?"

Crooke nodded. It occurred to him that this unscrupulous rascal—little better than a criminal, as he knew—might be of use in his scheming against his cousin.

Crooke had thought over the matter many times, but there seemed no way of accomplishing what he desired. More than once he had striven to bring about Talbot's disgrace with his uncle, but the Toff's luck had never failed. But it did not occur to him that if he placed himself in the rascal's power, by entering into a shady scheme with him, he would find Mr. Lodgey exceedingly hard to get rid of afterwards. He was not aware that schemes of unending blackmail were already floating in Mr. Lodgey's crafty brain.

"I reckon it might be worked," said Mr. Lodgey, after some thought. "What terms are you on with the Toff, Master Crooke? Bad, I reckon."

"Of course."

"You could make friends with him—he'd let you?"

"He'd be only too glad," said Crooke contemptuously. "My old fool of an uncle wants to see us friends, and it suits Talbot to play up to him."

"And if you were friends with him, you could ask him to do you a little favour?" said Mr. Lodgey.

Crooke stared.

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"I suppose I could," he said. "What in thunder are you driving at, Lodgey?"

"I remember the Toff was a good-natured cove in the old days," said Mr. Lodgey reflectively. "I didn't know him more'n middlin' well, but I noticed that. He'd give his last shillin' to a beggar—often did, as I know. He'd do anybody a good turn. By gum, it could be worked! If you could make up your mind to make friends with the cheeky young 'ound, Master Crooke, and arter that you asks him a big favour, 'cause you're in a fearful scrape, and then he does it, and—the chopper comes down, and he's caught! By gum!"

"What on earth do you mean?" asked Crooke impatiently.

"I mean that the Toff will be sorry he knocked Jim Lodgey down, if you foller my advice, Master Crooke! Come indoors. 'Tain't safe talkin' 'ere. We can 'ave a little chat over a smoke."

"Righto!"

Crooke followed the dingy rascal up the path, and they entered the house. There Mr. Lodgey further outlined the scheme that had come into his fertile brain, while Crooke smoked cigarettes and listened, with wide-open eyes. Mr. Lodgey watched the junior's face carefully as he unfolded his plans, ready to back out at a sign of disgust, disapproval, or horror. But there were no signs of anything of the kind in Crooke's hard, callous face. He listened eagerly, drinking in every word.

"By gad!" he exclaimed, when Lodgey had finished.

"By gad! What an idea!"

"And safe as houses!" grinned Mr. Lodgey.

Crooke chuckled.

"Safe enough!" he said. "Even if it failed, there's nothing to hurt me. And I don't see how it could fail!"

Mr. Lodgey rubbed his dirty hands. And he rubbed his chin, where a blue bruise was forming under the stubble. Mr. Lodgey had his own little debt to pay, and he was prepared to pay it with interest.

"Then it's a go!" smiled Mr. Lodgey.

"Yes, rather!"

"An' now, wot do you say to a 'undred up, Master Crooke?"

"Good!"

The hundred up cost George Gerald Crooke a sovereign, though he was close on winning when Mr. Lodgey ran him out, and Mr. Lodgey agreed that his luck was cruel. But Crooke was not thinking of the sovereign as he left the Green Man, and strode home by the towing-path. He was thinking of the cunning scheme which was to bring to his feet the fellow who had never harmed him, but whom he persisted in regarding as an enemy and rival. And Mr. Lodgey had pleasant reflections, too, as he stared from the window after Crooke. He was thinking how much that arrogant young blackguard would be worth to him, when they shared a guilty secret that Crooke could not afford to have revealed!

CHAPTER 3. A Friend in Need.

"TALBOT here?"

Levison of the Fourth looked into Talbot's study in the Shell passage.

Gore and Skimpole were at tea there.

"No," said Gore. "I think he's having tea with Tom Merry."

"My dear Levison," said Skimpole, blinking benevolently at the black sheep of the Fourth, "pray come in! I think I can be of some assistance to you!"

Levison stared.

"You!" he ejaculated.

"Yes, my dear fellow! Do come in!"

"How the dickens do you know what I want to see Talbot for?" growled Levison.

Gore grinned.

"Hard up?" he asked. "Have the geegees come in eleventh and twelfth?"

"Something like that," said Levison coolly. "But I haven't come here to borrow of you, Gore!"

"Not much use if you did!" said Gore, with a shrug of the shoulders. "I've advised you to chuck up playing the fool, often enough. I've done it, and you can do it!"

"Oh, rats! Look here, Skimmy, if you mean business—"

Skimpole nodded. The expression on the good Skimmy's face was very earnest and benevolent.

"I gather, Levison, that you are in money difficulties?" he said.

"Exactly! Broke to the wide!"

"I have heard, Levison, that you have formed a decidedly disreputable acquaintance. You and Crooke—"

"Go hon!"

"You have visited this disreputable person at the Green Man and elsewhere, and by this time you probably owe him money."

"You're a thought-reader, Skimpy!" said Levison sarcastically. "But the question is: How much can you shell out?"

"My dear Levison, my object is to be of assistance to you!"

"Can you stand three quid?"

"What?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Gore.

"My dear Gore, there is no occasion for laughter. Levison, my dear fellow, I cannot assist you in a pecuniary way, but I hope to be of great assistance to you by speaking a word in season."

"You silly, thumping ass!" howled Levison.

Skimpole blinked at him in surprise.

"Pray, do not let your angry passions rise, Levison! My object is to assist you by pointing out that you are treading the downward path, and—"

Slam!

Levison was gone. Skimpole blinked at the door; then he blinked at Gore, who was chuckling.

"My dear Gore, have I said anything to make Levison angry?" he asked. "I am sure that my intentions were most friendly. I fully intended to point out to him the error of his ways, and perhaps save him from proceeding recklessly upon the downward path, but he appears to have misapprehended my object!"

"Fathead!" said Gore politely.

But Skimpole still looked puzzled. He could not see what there was for Levison to be angry about.

Levison was hanging about the passage with a moody brow. He could hear cheery voices from No. 10, where the Terrible Three, and Kangaroo and Talbot, were at tea. He did not care to interrupt the tea-party, and he waited for Talbot to come out. Crooke came along the passage with his study-mate, Racke. Both of them grinned as they passed Levison.

Crooke and Levison were pals, in a way. Their tastes were very similar. They were often together in shady adventures. But Crooke was rich, and Levison was poor, and in that way there was a great gulf between them. When Levison was hard up, as in the present instance, it was not much use his applying to Crooke for a loan. Crooke did not believe in helping a lame dog over a stile.

As a matter of fact, Levison had tried already to borrow of Crooke and Racke, and they had cheerfully told him to go and eat coke. Friendship did not go to that length with the black sheep of the School House. If Levison landed himself in a scrape, he might get out of it without the assistance of his pals.

Levison scowled, as Crooke and Racke went grinning into their study. After a few moments' hesitation he followed them.

"Did I ask you to tea?" said Crooke sarcastically.

"I haven't come for your dashed tea!" growled Levison. Hardened young rascal as he was in many respects, Levison was sensitive, and the overbearing patronage of his rich pal got on his nerves. His feeling towards his pal was sometimes very near hatred. "I asked you to-day, Crooke, if you'd let me have three quid till the end of the week."

"Till the end of the century, you mean!" said Crooke humorously.

"I could settle up this time."

"You didn't settle up last time."

"You mean that you won't do it?" growled Levison.

"Of course I won't! I can't afford to pay your debts as well as my own. Mine have been pretty heavy lately. Ask Racke!"

"Better not," grinned Racke. "I should have to refuse!"

"You couldn't lend me three quid for a few days?" said Levison, eyeing the new junior. "And you're rolling in money!"

"Well, you're not going to roll in my money, at all events," said Racke coolly. "Like your cheek to ask, if you want my opinion!"

"I don't know that I'd care to touch your money," sneered Levison. "I'm not a particular chap, but war-profits are rather too dirty for me to touch. What puzzles me is why your pater hasn't been sent to prison yet!"

And with that friendly remark Levison quitted the study, leaving Racke scowling and Crooke grinning.

With a gloomy face, Levison loitered about the passage till the door of Tom Merry's study opened, and Talbot and Kangaroo came out. Kangaroo went up the passage to his own study, and Talbot came towards Levison. He gave the Fourth-Former a friendly nod. Talbot was always civil

to Levison. He saw more good in the black sheep than the other fellows did.

"Got a minute to spare?" asked Levison.

Talbot stopped.

"Certainly!"

"I dare say you can guess what I'm going to ask you," said Levison, eyeing him. "You needn't tell me it's like my cheek. I know that! You're the only chap in the school who will lend me any tin. I've refused to let you lend me anything till now. You're the only chap I wouldn't stick for all I could get. Queer, isn't it?"

"You're quite welcome, if you're hard up, Levison. I'm better off than I used to be, too, and I'm in funds just now, as it happens."

"I don't want you to misunderstand me, though," said Levison quickly. "I'm not quite a rotter. Because you're willing to lend me money, I've made up my mind not to stick you for it. Only this time I can really let you have it back at the end of the week—honest Injun—if you think my 'honest Injun' is worth anything!"

"I take your word, of course!"

"You're about the only fellow in the School House who would," said Levison moodily. "And I suppose that's the reason why you're the only fellow I wouldn't spoof. I mean business!"

"How much?" asked Talbot quietly.

"Three quid."

"I can manage it."

"And you'll do it?"

"Yes."

"Blessed if I know why!" said Levison.

"You did me a good turn once."

"You've done me a dozen good turns since then," said Levison.

"Never mind that," said Talbot, with a smile. He had taken out his pocket-book, and he extracted three pound notes from it—all it contained in the way of money, as Levison could see.

"That clears you out, I suppose?" said the Fourth-Former uneasily.

"I've some change," said Talbot. "It's all right. I get my allowance on Saturday, too."

"You get a good allowance from Colonel Lyndon?"

"Yes. He is very good about everything."

"That would be knocked on the head if Crooke could work it. He won't leave a stone unturned to get you into trouble with your uncle. He's tried already."

Talbot's brow clouded.

"I know it," he said. "Never mind that. I don't think my uncle is likely to be prejudiced against me. Take the cash."

"You're an ass to lend it to me."

"You're a queer kind of borrower, I must say!" said Talbot, laughing. "It's all right. Take it!"

"But I really mean business this time. I can settle up," said Levison. "I wouldn't take your money otherwise. It's different with Crooke—not that the cad would be likely to lend me anything but a few bob. And you're lending me all your tin, without even asking where it's going."

"I'd rather not guess," said Talbot.

"You do guess, all the same!"

"I—I suppose so."

"And you don't even give me a sermon along with the oof."

"I don't think a sermon would be much use to you, Levison," said the Shell fellow quietly. "If you asked my advice, I'd give it. But you know what that would be without asking it."

"Yes, I know," Levison laughed. "Good advice is no good to me; I'm past praying for, you know. It's no good. I must have the excitement. And it's no good talking to me about the risk. I like the risk—I enjoy it. And it's no good telling me it's blackguardly and shady. I'm a shady blackguard, you know, and shall never be anything else. But—if I can ever do you a good turn, there's not much I would stop at to do it! That's honest Injun!"

And Levison walked away quickly, with the currency notes crumpled in his hand. Talbot looked after him curiously. Levison's nature was a strange mixture of good and evil, and the evil predominated. But the Toff's early life had made him tolerant of weakness in others, and he was not down on Levison. He knew, too, that his influence over the reckless fellow was good, and, though their ways were wide apart as the poles, he had a kind of friendship for the dingy blackguard of the Fourth. And to the Toff Levison showed his best side. False as he was, he was sincere with Talbot. Unscrupulous as he was in money matters, Talbot was the one fellow he would not swindle.

In his study Levison addressed a letter, and slipped the

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currency notes into it—a proceeding that was watched with great surprise by Trimble and Mellish and Lumley-Lumley, his study-mates. Levison had been trying to raise funds in his own study that afternoon in vain.

"Robbed a bank?" asked Mellish.

"No; I've robbed a pal," said Levison cheerfully, and he went out to post the letter—refraining from dropping it into the school letter-box, lest by chance the address should be observed.

CHAPTER 4.

Crooke Astonishes the Juniors.

"GOING down to cricket?"

It was after lessons the next day, and the Terrible Three and Talbot and several other fellows came out of the School House together in flannels.

Crooke of the Shell asked that question, much to the surprise of the cricketers. Crooke was not supposed to care anything about the game. He never attended even the compulsory practice if he could invent an excuse for shirking it.

"Yes," said Tom Merry. "Coming along, Crooke?"

"Yes, if I sha'n't be in the way."

"Not at all. Come on!" said the captain of the Shell.

"Poor old Crooke!" said Monty Lowther sympathetically.

"Eh? What do you mean?" exclaimed Crooke.

"So sorry you're ill!"

"Ill!" Crooke stared at the humorist of the Shell. "I'm not ill!"

"My mistake!" said Lowther gracefully. "I thought you must be. But if you're not ill or potty, why this thushness? Why are you taking up cricket instead of smoking behind the wood-shed? What's the matter with smokes all of a sudden?"

"You silly ass——"

"Oh, cheese it, Monty!" said Tom. "Keep the jokes for the family circle, old chap!"

"My dear chap, we must keep cheerful in war-time," said Lowther. "We must have our little jokes by hook or by Crooke."

"Oh, dear! Chuck it!"

Monty Lowther, quite pleased with his pun, walked on cheerfully. Crooke dropped behind with Talbot, much to Talbot's surprise. The cad of the Shell was looking very uncomfortable.

"I—I say, Talbot!" he blurted out suddenly.

Talbot looked at him.

"You—you spoke to me yesterday." Crooke's face was very red. "I—I answered you without thinking. I—I'm sorry for what I said."

"Oh!" ejaculated Talbot.

"I—I've been thinking it over," continued Crooke. "After all, old Lyndon—I mean uncle—has been out at the Front, and—and if it would please him to see us on better terms, it's rather rotten to keep on at loggerheads. If you meant what you said about our being better friends, I'm willing to meet you half-way."

Talbot's handsome face brightened.

"I meant every word," he said, "and I'm jolly glad to hear you say this, Crooke! Colonel Lyndon may come in any day now, as soon as he can get time from his duties at Abbotsford, and I know he would like to see us friends. And if you're thinking of taking up cricket——"

"I—I am," said Crooke.

"Then you can depend on me if I can help you in any way."

"I—I was going to ask you," said Crooke. "I'm a bit off colour at present, but I'd like to shape a bit better by the time the colonel comes. He wants to see me take up games, and all that. And—and I'm going to begin to-day. I don't see why Lowther should jeer at me because I'm taking up cricket!"

"That was only his joke," said Talbot quickly. "They'll be ready to back you up when they see you mean business."

"Well, I do mean business!"

"I'm glad we're going to be friends," said Talbot simply. "And, of course, you needn't be afraid of any sermons; your private affairs are no business of mine. But—if you'd let

me mention that again—I wish you'd think over what I told you about that man Lodgey. He is a dangerous man, to know."

"I've thought over it," said Crooke. "I've seen him for the last time. I hope you don't think I could be really friendly with a rank outsider like that. I—I had a letter from him to-day. I'm not going to answer it."

"For goodness' sake don't!" exclaimed Talbot anxiously. "If he got anything in your handwriting, he would have you under his thumb for good!"

Crooke started.

"By gad, I never thought of that!" he ejaculated sincerely enough. "I shall be jolly careful about that! That's a tip. Anyway, I'm not going to answer his letter."

"It was awfully risky getting a letter from him here," said Talbot. "It might have been opened. If a master saw it——"

"Yes, I know. I've put it in a safe place."

"Better burn it, I should say."

"I'll burn it when I go in," said Crooke. "It's in my study."

"Now, then, is Crooke going to bowl?" called out Monty Lowther. "Prepare to see your sticks go down, ye cripples!"

There was a laugh, and Crooke scowled. Monty Lowther tossed him the ball, and Crooke caught it clumsily. He went into the field.

"You fellows might go a bit easy with my cousin," said Talbot quietly. "Crooke means to do his best, and he ought to be encouraged, don't you think?"

Tom Merry whistled.

"Rather a new departure for Crooke!" he said. "But certainly he ought to be encouraged, if he's going to be decent. Have you made it up with him?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm glad."

"Same here," said Monty Lowther affably. "As that Indian chap at Greyfriars would say, the gladfulness is terrific. Crooke shall be taken up tenderly and treated with care. I only hope he won't brain me with that ball."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But Talbot's appeal was regarded, and the Shell fellows were very considerate to Crooke. If he wanted to be decent, even for a time, they were the fellows to encourage him in his surprising new departure. And Crooke seemed to be really doing his best. He was clumsy and out of practice, but he was not slacking. The fellows round Little Side were all interested, too. Crooke was so hopeless a slacker and shirker that it was surprising to see him exerting himself in any way. Levison of the Fourth arrived on Little Side—Levison was a slacker, too, where games were concerned, but he sometimes came down to see Talbot bat. He jumped at the sight of Crooke at the wickets.

"What the dickens is the game?" he said to Racke, who was looking on with a grin. "What's Crooke up to?"

"Playing cricket!" chuckled Racke. "The giddy leopard is changin' his spots. Gettin' ready to surprise his uncle when he comes, I suppose."

"Oh!" said Levison. "I knew it was some spoof. I suppose it's that. May mean a tip from the old boy if Crooke can make him think he's playing the game."

Levison watched the practice curiously. Talbot was coaching Crooke, and the cad of the Shell was receiving his good-natured instructions with great docility. And when the practice was over the cousins came off the field together and walked away to the School House, chatting amicably.

Levison stared after them blankly.

"The lion and lamb over again," grinned Racke. "They're friends now."

"Rot!" said Levison.

"Well, it looks like it."

Levison knitted his brows.

"Crooke hates Talbot as much as a Hun hates the truth," he said. "What in thunder is he playing that game for? He can't stand Talbot. Talbot doesn't talk geegees, he doesn't smoke, he doesn't blag—he doesn't do anything that Crooke can stand. What the merry dickens is the game?"

"Tip from nunky, I suppose."

Levison shook his head, and walked away very thoughtfully. Racke's explanation did not wholly account for the phenomenon, in his opinion. That Crooke was genuinely making it up Levison did not believe for one moment. He was of a suspicious turn of mind, and he knew Crooke. But what game was the cad of the Shell playing? What trick had he in view, thus assuming a friendship he did not feel? He had an axe to grind, Levison did not doubt that for a moment.

Levison joined Crooke in the Common-room that evening.

"What's the little game, Crooke?" he asked abruptly.

ANSWERS

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TUCK HAMPERS ARE GIVEN AWAY TO READERS OF THE "BOYS' FRIEND," 10.



There was a movement in the masses of old ivy under the shattered casement. The thick leaves and tendrils parted, and Levison of the Fourth emerged into view. (See Chapter 9.)

"Game?" repeated Croke.

"What are you spoofing Talbot for?"

"I've made it up with my cousin," said Croke calmly. "I think we've been enemies long enough—all about nothing, too."

"And you don't think he's cut you out of your uncle's will now—what?"

"I don't think about it at all."

"Oh, my hat!"

"I'm sorry I didn't make it up before," said Croke.

"Talbot was willing. And—and Uncle Lyndon would be pleased. Old Lyndon goes out fighting the Huns, you know—awfully dangerous bizney—might get bowled over any day. It's up to his nephew to—to meet his wishes, and all that."

"Yes. You had a bet on with Racke about old Lyndon getting bowled over in the Big Push, didn't you?"

"Oh, cheese it!" snapped Croke. "No business of yours, I suppose, my relations with my own cousin?"

"Well, it might be my business," said Levison deliberately.

"I don't see how you make that out."

"I'll explain. Talbot is a decent sort, and he's stood by me several times. Once he saved me from going right under. He did me a good turn yesterday, when my own pals wouldn't. I'm not going to see Talbot tricked, Croke. You've got some dirty trick up your sleeve, and I know it."

"Blessed if I know what you're driving at!" yawned Croke. "And Talbot won't thank you for meddling in his affairs, either!"

"Possibly not. But I'm rather a meddling chap," said Levison coolly. "Talbot's done me good turns—"

Croke burst into a laugh.

"What do you care for a chap who's done you good turns? Don't be funny!"

"Not a rap, as a rule; but I make an exception in Talbot's favour," said Levison, unmoved. "And if you're thinking of playing any dirty trick on Talbot, Croke, you're up against me, too."

Croke smiled sarcastically.

"If I'm going to lose the boon of your friendship, you may as well settle up the quid you owe me," he said.

"Never mind the quid. You can whistle for it. I've warned you."

"Oh, rats!"

"Look here, Croke—"

"Can't jaw now. I'm going to play chess with Talbot."

"With Talbot?" ejaculated Levison.

"Certainly!"

Levison drew a deep breath. He watched Croke and Talbot settle down at the chess-table. To all appearance the two were excellent friends now, and Talbot evidently had no suspicion that anything else was the case. So far as friendship was possible between two such dissimilar characters, Talbot was prepared to be friendly, and he did not doubt that it was the same with Croke. The Toff was keen, but he was not suspicious, and there did not seem to be any adequate motive to assign for spoof on Croke's part.

But Levison was not only keen, he was suspicious, too; and he knew the envy, malice, hatred, and all uncharitableness that ran riot in Croke's breast. Croke was playing a game—a troublesome game for him to play—which implied a strong motive, and Levison of the Fourth meant to know what that motive was.

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NEXT
WEDNESDAY: "LEVISON ON THE WAR-PATH!"

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

CHAPTER 5.

Levison is Puzzled.

BAI Jove, it's Cwooke!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth Form turned his eyeglass upon Croke in surprise. The cad of the Shell was a very infrequent visitor to Study No. 6.

Blake and Herries and Digby looked surprised, too.

"Hallo!" said Blake. "What's wanted?"

Croke hesitated in the doorway.

"I've looked in to borrow a book," he said.

Herries gave a grunt.

"We don't keep the 'Racing Calendar' in this study," he remarked.

"Nor 'Lucky Tips,' or the 'Tipster,' grinned Digby. "Try Levison's study."

Arthur Augustus looked reprovingly at his chums, as Croke scowled.

"Pway dwy up, deah boys! You know Cwooke has taken up cwicket. Pewwaps Cwooke wants to bowwow 'Cwicket for Beginnahs.' I shall be vevy pleased to lend it to him."

"Bow-wow!" said Blake.

"That is not a vevy intelligible remark, Blake! If you will excuse my mentionin' it, Cwooke, I am vevy glad to see you on good terms with old Talbot, and takin' up cwicket," said Arthur Augustus. "I congwatulate you!"

"Same here!" yawned Blake. "But what's the little game? It's rather late in the day, isn't it?"

"Bettah late than nevah, Blake. I should be vevy pleased to give you some coachin', Cwooke, if you are goin' to take the game seriously."

"Thanks, awfully!" said Croke, with a sarcastic grin. "But I don't want to become a county champion just yet."

"Weally, Cwooke—"

"I want you to lend me your 'Rivals and Chums,' if you will," said Croke. "I heard Tom Merry saying it was a good story. I'd like to read it."

"You are vevy welcome, deah boy. I shall be vevy pleased to lend it to you. Have you seen my 'Wivals and Chums,' Blake?"

"Lemme see! Was it that I used for cleaning the frying-pan?" said Blake thoughtfully.

"If you have used my 'Wivals and Chums' for cleanin' the fwyn'-pan, you uttah ass—"

"No; it was your article for the 'Weekly' I used," said Blake. "I remember now. Your blessed book is under the table, I think. I chucked it somewhere after I used the cover for a pen-wiper!"

"I wergad you as a slovenly beast, Blake, for usin' my book as a pen-wiper!" said Arthur Augustus indignantly. And the swell of St. Jim's dived under the study table and rescued the precious volume. It was considerably inky, but fortunately Blake had used only the cover as a pen-wiper. "Heah you are, Cwooke! I twust you will enjoy weadin' it. It is weally wippin'. I am sowvy to pwsent it to you in such a disgustin' state. Blake is wathah a slovenly wottah, you know."

"Thanks!" said Croke, and he left the study with the little volume in his hand.

"I am vevy glad to see this change in Cwooke," said Arthur Augustus, when he was gone. "So fah as I know, he has nevah shown any taste in the diwection of weally good literature befoah. He genewally weads wotten silly novels or wotten sportin' papahs. I twust, Blake, you were not speakin' seriously about my article for the 'Weekly.' I wufuse to have my litewawy work used for cleanin' out a beastly fwyn'-pan!"

"I used only half of it," said Blake. "You'll find the rest in the coal-locker. I was keepin' that for next time."

"You uttah ass!" shouted Arthur Augustus, while Herries and Digby chuckled. "That was a wippin' article on war economy!"

"Exactly! That's why I used it."

"Weally, Blake—"

"You said that in war-time not a single article should be wasted," said Blake argumentatively. "Well, I followed your advice. You can't say the article was wasted, when it was used for cleaning a frying-pan. Frying-pans must be cleaned."

"I was not weferrin' to that kind of article, you ass! When I said no article should be wasted, I meant an article, not an article."

"Very lucid, I must say," agreed Blake. "Still, as it hasn't been wasted, I don't see what you're grumbling at."

Arthur Augustus did not reply. He was ferretin' in the coal-locker for the remains of his article. When he had disinterred it, he proceeded to address remarks to Blake for the space of ten minutes without a rest.

When the chums of Study No. 6 came down to the
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Common-room after prep, Arthur Augustus glanced round for Croke. He was quite interested in Croke's new tastes, and wanted to know how he was getting on with "Rivals and Chums."

Croke was sprawling in an armchair, with the book open on his knees, when D'Arcy bore down on him.

"Like it, Cwooke?" asked Arthur Augustus, with a cordial manner he had never shown before to the cad of the Shell.

Croke suppressed a yawn.

"Oh, ripplin'!" he said.

"How fah have you got?"

"Oh, lemme see! Chapter two," yawned Croke.

"Bai Jove! You are holdin' it upside-down," said Arthur Augustus, in astonishment. "Can you wead a book upside-down, Cwooke?"

Croke hastily reversed the volume.

"Ahem! Nunno! I—I was just thinking about it," he said. "I'm a—rather slow reader, you know. I like to reflect on a thing I'm reading."

"Yaas, that's a vevy good ideah," said Arthur Augustus unsuspiciously. "When you have done with it, Cwooke, I will lend it to Levison. It will vevy likely do Levison good."

"Hallo! What's that about me?" said Levison, coming into the Common-room.

"I should like you to pewuse that stowy, when Cwooke has finished, deah boy. It is wathah good, especially for—ahem!—it contains a warnin' to fellahs who play the giddy goat, you know."

"Some goody-goody rot," yawned Levison.

"Not at all, Levison; it is wippin', and awfly excitin'. I wead the whole stowy at a single sittin'. There's a chap in it a bit like you; chap who goes out blaggin', you know, and wisks comin' to a bad end—"

"Silly ass!" said Levison politely.

"Weally, Levison!"

Arthur Augustus walked away with his noble nose in the air. Levison looked at the book, and then, very curiously, at George Gerald Croke.

"What the dickens are you reading that for?" he asked.

"It's not in your line. Looking for a warning of the perils of blaggin'?"

"Oh, it ain't so bad!" said Croke. "Talbot advised me to read it. He said it was good."

"So you're taking Talbot's advice?"

"Why not, now we're friends?" said Croke cheerfully.

Levison looked at him oddly, but made no reply. Levison had a letter in his hand, and he sat down to read it over again, with a wrinkle in his brow. Croke grinned as he watched his face.

"Another bookie dunning you?" he asked, with a chuckle.

"No. Letter from home," grunted Levison.

"If they've sent you a remittance, you can hand out that quid, you know," remarked Croke. "I could do with it."

"You can do without it for the present," said Levison coolly. "This isn't a remittance. It's news. My young brother's coming to St. Jim's."

"Anything like you?" grinned Croke.

Levison's face clouded.

"Rotten bother having a minor here," said Croke. "I'd make a row if the pater sent my young brother here, if I had one. Lucky I haven't. Manners has no end of trouble with his minor. How old is your specimen?"

"I suppose he'll go into the Third, if he comes," said Levison. "I—I had no idea they were going to send him here. I—I wish—"

"Write and tell 'em not to."

"No good. Besides, I—I'd like the kid here, in a way. He's a decent little chap."

"Nothing like his major, then?" said Croke, with a laugh.

"Oh, don't cackle! I—I wish— But what's the good of wishin'?" Levison shrugged his shoulders. "Franky will have to take me as he finds me. After all, he won't see much of me."

"Well, you're not exactly the chap to be worried by a minor," remarked Croke. "You won't have a painful senso of duty towards him like Manners—what?"

"Why shouldn't I?" exclaimed Levison angrily.

Croke stared at him.

"Oh, don't get your rag out! But if you have a senso of duty towards your minor, and want him to be brought up in the way he should go, I'll give you a tip—don't have anything to do with him. He might start followin' your shinin' example, you know." And Croke chortled.

Levison gave the cad of the Shell a savage look, but he rose and walked away without a word. Croke laughed. Levison was evidently in some trouble of mind about his minor's unexpected coming, and the amiable Croke found it rather amusing.

CHAPTER 6.

Danger Ahead!

"CROOKE!"

Mr. Linton's voice was sharp and angry.

It was morning, in the Shell Form-room.

The Shell were following Mr. Linton's lead in a tour into the classics, and Crooke had been called upon to construe.

Crooke did not seem to hear.

"Crooke!"

Several fellows glanced round at Crooke.

His occupation amazed them.

He had a book open under his desk, and was reading it—a trick the juniors sometimes played when their Form-master was not watchful. But a fellow who wasted his time that way was generally on the alert not to be caught out. Crooke did not seem at all on the alert.

He seemed to be immersed in the book, his eyes were glued to it, and he was blind and deaf to his surroundings. Mr. Linton's brow assumed a thunderous expression.

"Crooke!"

It was the third time he had repeated the name, and still Crooke did not look up. Talbot gave him an anxious look, but he was too far away to nudge his cousin. Tom Merry would have called his attention, but he also was too distant. Crooke seemed to be asking for trouble. Mr. Linton was a severe gentleman, and not at all the kind of master to be trifled with in this way.

"You ass, Crooke!" whispered Kangaroo. "Linton's calling you."

"Noble!"

"Ye-e-s, sir."

"You need not speak to Crooke."

"Nunno, sir," stammered Kangaroo.

Mr. Linton came striding in among the forms. Crooke became aware of him as the Form-master towered over the desk.

He looked up, closing his book hastily.

"Crooke!" thundered Mr. Linton.

"Yes, sir," stuttered Crooke.

"I have spoken to you three times."

"Oh!"

"Did you not hear me, Crooke?"

"N-n-no, sir."

"You were reading."

"I—I—I—"

"Give me that book."

"If you please, sir—"

"Give me that book at once!"

Crooke handed over the volume, with a red face. Most of the eyes in the Shell were upon him.

"You had the audacity to bring this book into the class-room, Crooke, and to read it during lessons?"

"I—I—I was interested in it, sir."

"Indeed! You were too interested in this book to be able to devote any attention to your lessons," said Mr. Linton sarcastically. "I approve of a taste for good literature, Crooke, at the proper season. The Form-room is not the place for reading. I shall lock up this book, and return it to you at the end of the term. You will take two hundred lines of Virgil."

"Yes, sir," faltered Crooke.

Mr. Linton rustled to his desk, and threw the offending book into it, with a frowning brow.

Then Crooke was called upon to construe, and, as usual, he construed in a way worthy of a fag in the Third. His lines increased to three hundred before he sat down again.

He looked sullen during the remainder of morning lessons.

"Hard lines!" said Talbot, joining him as the Shell left the Form-room. "You must have been pretty deep in that book."

"Lucky it wasn't the 'Lucky Tipster,'" grinned Monty Lowther. "What an escape for you, Crooke!"

"Well, it wasn't," snarled Crooke. "It was the book you recommended to me, Talbot. I borrowed it of D'Arcy yesterday, and I had to chuck it at bedtime."

"I'm glad you liked it," said Talbot. "But it was rather rash taking it into the Form-room. Linton isn't quite so sleepy as Mr. Lathom."

"Well, I got deep in it," muttered Crooke. "I—I say, did you notice whether Linton locked his desk?"

"No; but he always does," said Talbot.

"I—I suppose there's no chance—"

Talbot looked very grave.

"My dear chap, you couldn't think of getting the book out," he said. "That would be jolly serious. You can get another copy, too. There's sure to be another about the school somewhere."

"It isn't only that!" muttered Crooke. "Linton took me by surprise, and—but never mind. It's my own fault."

He walked away quickly, leaving Talbot in surprise. His last words seemed a little mysterious.

Crooke was looking very thoughtful at dinner. After dinner, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy bestowed an affable nod upon him in the passage.

"How do you like the book, dear boy?"

"Oh, ripping!" said Crooke. "You're not in a hurry for it, I suppose?"

"Not at all, dear boy. Only I am goin' to persuade Levison to wead it when you've finished. It will do him good."

"Oh, blow Levison!" said Crooke.

Talbot joined them.

"I'm sorry about your book, D'Arcy," he said. "I hope you didn't want it."

"Nothin' happened to my book, has it?" asked D'Arcy.

"Didn't Crooke tell you? It's locked up in Mr. Linton's desk."

"Bai Jove!"

"I—I was just going to mention it," said Crooke. "Linton caught me reading it in the Form-room this morning."

Arthur Augustus frowned.

"Weally, Crooke, that was wathah wotten, you know! It's wathah bad form to wead books in lesson-time."

"Oh, blow the book!" said Crooke. "It cost threepence, I believe. You can get a new one by sending fourpence to the publishers. I suppose it's all right if I stand you the fourpence?" He slid his hand into his pocket.

"Not at all, Cwooke. I do not want you to pay for it. Besides, as it is my book, I have no doubt Mr. Linton will return it to me if I ask him."

"Don't do that!" exclaimed Crooke, starting.

"Weally, it seems to me the pwopah thing to do. Mr. Linton does not want to keep my book locked up, I suppose?"

"He—he thought it was mine."

"Howevah, if I explain to him that it is mine, he will give it me, I suppose. He may ask me not to lend it to you, pewwaps."

"Look here, I'll get you a new copy, and you can let the matter drop," said Crooke irritably.

"Wats! Why should I not wequest Mr. Linton to hand me my pwopahty?"

Talbot looked at his cousin in surprise. He could not fathom why Crooke did not want Arthur Augustus to ask for the return of his volume.

"I—I'm sorry it's confiscated," said Crooke. "You might let the matter drop, D'Arcy. I'll get you a new one. Linton is ratty about it, and he'll come down heavier on me if he's bothered about the matter at all. You might let it drop when I ask you."

"Of course I will let it dwop, if you put it like that," said Arthur Augustus, in wonder. "I've finished with the book, and I don't suppose Levison would have wead it at my wequest, anyway. But pway don't talk about buyin' me a new one. I wefuse to entahtain the ideah at all!"

"All serene, then!"

"Wighto," said Arthur Augustus. And he walked off.

Crooke turned to Talbot.

"You've got me into a pretty fix," he said.

"I have!" exclaimed Talbot.

"Yes. It was through you I got that rotten book. Now all the fat's in the fire."

Talbot looked at him in astonishment.

"I don't quite see it," he said. "Lots of the fellows have had things locked up in Linton's desk. Gore's catapult is there at this minute, and so is Lowther's peashooter. What does it matter?"

"I've got to get that book somehow."

"If you're keen to finish it, you can easily get another copy."

"It isn't that. Hang the book," said Crooke irritably.

"Blow the book! It's what's in it!"

"I don't quite—"

"For goodness' sake don't let the fellows know I'm anxious about it," said Crooke. "Somebody would be sure to jaw. It's all right so long as Linton doesn't look at it. But if he did—"

"There's something in the book you don't want Mr. Linton to see?" asked Talbot, his face becoming very serious.

Crooke nodded.

"That's bad! Is it anything very serious?"

"A letter," growled Crooke.

"Mr. Linton wouldn't read your letter, Crooke, even if he found it there."

"He might! He might know the writing, for anything I know; or he might catch sight of the signature," muttered Crooke. "It wasn't in an envelope. I shoved it into the

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book to keep it out of sight, when Racke came into the study, just when I was reading it. It wouldn't do for that letter to be seen. It—it wasn't a letter from home, you understand."

Talbot knitted his brows.

"Crooke! You awful duffer! Was it—from—"

"Lodgey!" muttered Crooke.

"Great Scott!"

"If Linton sees it, the game's up for me," said Crooke, sullenly. "Goodness knows what I'm going to do. It means the sack. The silly idiot wrote a lot of stuff to me—mentioning about our game at the Green Man, and telling me he'd meet me on Saturday if I liked, to give me my revenge—and—and referring to horses, and—and other things. It's a clean show-up if that letter gets seen. And now it's locked up in Linton's desk. For goodness' sake, don't say a word about this, Talbot—not to Tom Merry, or anybody. You've said you were willing to be friendly. Well, I can trust you, can't I?"

"Of course. I shan't say a word to anybody," said Talbot quietly. "But this is an awful scrape, Crooke. What are you going to do?"

Crooke shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know! I've got to think it out. Ripping for old Lyndon to get the news that I'm sacked, while he's on leave from the Front. What?"

Talbot looked deeply troubled.

"It would be a nasty blow to him," he said.

"Oh, it's rotten. Just when I'd made up my mind to have nothing to do with that rotter again," muttered Crooke. "It always happens like that. You can't shake a thing off when you want to."

"What will you do?"

"What's the good of asking me? I don't know. It's your fault. Perhaps you can think of a way out of it for me!" snapped Crooke savagely. And he strode away before Talbot could reply.

CHAPTER 7.

Levison Wants to Know!

"PENNY for 'em, Talbot!"

Levison was going down to the gates after lessons that day, when he spotted Talbot in the quadrangle, under the elms.

The Shell fellow was alone, and there was a wrinkle of thought in his brow. Levison, for reasons of his own, had been keeping an eye on Talbot of late. He joined him at once under the leafy old elms.

"I—I was just thinking," said Talbot.

"You're not at cricket with the rest," said Levison, eyeing him curiously. "You generally lead the strenuous life. Taken to slacking in your old age?"

"Not exactly."

"And you won't accept a penny for your thoughts?"

"Not worth it," said Talbot.

"Which means that you want me to mind my own business," said Levison laughing. "Well, I can do that, as a rule. I don't care twopence about anybody's affairs but my own. And my own are looking up. I'm going to shear a sheep, and I think I'm going to shear a wolf! Ha, ha!"

"I suppose that means you are going to see that blackguard at the Green Man," said Talbot quietly. "Levison, old chap, I never shove advice on you, but I wish you'd think over it a bit!"

"Bless you, I've thought it over, and I'm looking forward to it. Besides, I'm nearly at the end of my tether, so far as blagging is concerned. In a week or two you'll see me in shining white, repentant."

"What does that mean?"

"I've got a minor coming."

"Oh!" said Talbot.

"And I've got to keep up appearances to him, somehow!" grinned Levison. "So this is almost my last chance of playing the giddy ox. I'm going to make hay while the sun shines. I'm really going to chuck it when my minor comes. Not what you'd expect of me, is it?"

"I'm glad to hear it!" said THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 449.

Talbot. "I wish you'd chuck it now, Levison! You're an ass to throw away your chances as you do! You're cleverer than half the fellows in the House, if you didn't let your brains run to waste. You could be a good cricketer if you liked. I've seen you play. You could do the same as Crooke has done."

Levison chuckled.

"I've done that often enough," he said. "I'm a more hardened spoofer than Crooke, if you come to that. As soon as it suits my game to spoof you can rely on me!"

"What do you mean? Crooke is not spoofing!" said Talbot sharply.

"Isn't he?" grinned Levison. "Well, I know him better than you do, and you'll find out. That's why I've stopped to speak to you when I'm due at the Green Man. You've got a big think on your mind."

"Well?"

"Is it anything to do with Crooke?"

Talbot was silent.

"You see I guessed it," said Levison. "What Crooke is spoofing you for I don't know; but it's brought you some kind of trouble already. That's why you're marching about here, thinking, instead of playing cricket. Isn't it so?"

Talbot's brow contracted.

"You're quite mistaken, Levison!"

"Will you say what you're worrying about, whatever it is, is nothing to do with Crooke?" asked Levison incredulously.

"I shall say nothing about it, Levison!"

"Exactly! Silence means consent."

"Nonsense!"

Levison shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose it's no use asking you what's the matter?" he inquired.

"There's nothing the matter with me!"

"Nothing at all?"

"Nothing!"

"Blessed if I quite catch on! Will you tell me what you were thinking about when I spoke to you?"

"No!" said Talbot abruptly.

"You think it's like my cheek to ask?" grinned Levison.

"Well, yes, it is, if you want me to be plain!"

"That's my way. But I'm not inquisitive this time. Crooke is playing a crooked game, and I'm up against him!"

"Crooke is doing nothing of the sort!" said Talbot angrily; "and if you're up against my cousin, Levison, you needn't tell me so!"

"Go it!" said Levison coolly. "You can slang me as much as you like. Why don't you call me a meddling cad, as Tom Merry would?"

"I believe you mean well," said Talbot; "but I'd really rather you didn't say anything to me about Crooke. I understood he was your friend, too."

"So he is—my dear pal, the kind of pal who leaves you in the lurch when you're in a scrape. Not that I blame him for that. I'd do as much for him. Look here, Talbot, you've just said I'm clever. Won't you tell me what it is and let me give you my opinion? I know there's something on your mind, and that it's in connection with Crooke."

"I wish—"

Talbot paused.

"You wish I'd mind my own business!" Levison finished for him.

"Well, yes."

"I'm not going to, all the same," said Levison coolly. "Then you won't tell me?"

"No."

"You're thinking out some giddy problem, and looking like a boiled owl, and it's in connection with Crooke," pursued Levison calmly. "You say you're not in trouble yourself, and your word's as good as gold. Has Crooke stuck some of his own troubles on your shoulders?"

"Really, Levison—"

"He can't be borrowing money of you—"

"Look here—"

"Is he in a scrape, and has he asked you to squeeze him out of it?" Levison watched Talbot's clouded face keenly. "That would account for his spoofing you about being friendly!"

"I don't want to quarrel with you, Levison," said Talbot,

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ONE PENNY.



"I suppose you know that I know the whole game now." Talbot's quiet, scornful voice cut like a lash, and Crooke shrank under it. "I nearly walked into the trap—very nearly! Why did you do it?" (See Chapter 12.)

compressing his lips. "You'd better say no more. I'm off!"

The Shell fellow walked away quickly. Levison's eyes glistened for a moment, and then he laughed and walked out at the gates.

"What the dickens is it?" he muttered. "He's as close as an oyster. Crooke has spoofed him, but he can't spoof me. What is he pretending to be friendly for, and what was Talbot worrying over? Crooke's planted some trouble on him—what? Ernest, my son, this is where you keep your eyes wide open. This is where you chip in and frustrate somebody's knavish tricks. Ha, ha! Quite in your line!"

And Levison laughed aloud as he went down the lane. Meanwhile, Talbot had gone into the School House. Levison's talk had disturbed him, in spite of himself. It was true enough. Crooke had laid a trouble on his shoulders; the scrape the cad of the Shell had fallen into was weighing on Talbot's mind. Crooke was in danger—in deadly danger of reaping the reward of his own rascality.

The Toff did not say to himself that it was no business of his; he felt it was his business. He had made friends with his cousin and he felt bound to help him out of that scrape if he could; all the more because Crooke had said that he was trying to reform and seemed to have given proof of it.

Talbot was thinking, too, of a bronzed old soldier home from the Front, and the blow it would be to him if his nephew were expelled in disgrace from the school. It was a problem for the Toff to think out—how Crooke was to be saved from the danger his own folly and rascality had led him into. Crooke himself seemed helpless in the matter, but what was to be done?

CHAPTER 8.

Shearing the Wolf!

"WERRY glad to see you, Master Levison!"

Mr. Lodgey spoke with great affability. Levison shook hands with him in the garden of the inn.

"Master Crooke all right—wot?" asked Mr.

Lodgey.

"Oh, blooming!" said Levison, laughing. "You haven't seen him lately?"

"Not lately, Master Levison. I 'ope to see him again," said Mr. Lodgey, looking curiously at the Fourth-Former of St. Jim's. "I rather thought he'd come with you to-day."

"Something else on," smiled Levison. "Crooke has taken to spoofing in his old age. At present he's on the reform tack."

"He, he, he!" cackled Mr. Lodgey.

"Of course it's only a game," said Levison. "He will be round again soon."

"What-ho!" said Mr. Lodgey, laughing. "I know he will. Young gentleman I admire very much, Master Crooke. Arter my own 'eart, he is."

"By the way, I've heard something about you, Lodgey."

Mr. Lodgey scowled.

"The Toff agin—what? He can't let a man alone—what?"

"You knew Talbot?" asked Levison curiously.

"I knew the Toff," growled Mr. Lodgey. "Precious young rascal he was in them days, him and old Captain Crow, his father, and Hookey Walker and the Professor, and the rest—a precious gang! I never knew what become of him arter Captain Crow was dead. You could have knocked me down

with a feather when I found 'im 'ere, settin' up as a school-boy! He, he! Ain't he robbed the safe yet?"

Levison's eyes glittered for a moment.
"Talbot's the straightest fellow in the school," he said.
"Yes, that's his game at present," said Mr. Lodgey. "It beats me, him being let into the school at all! Punching a fellow's face, too, as if a feller wasn't as good as him any day!"

"Punched your face, did he?" said Levison, laughing.
Mr. Lodgey rubbed his chin.
"P'raps he'll be sorry for it yet," he said. "I ain't the man to be punched and say nothin'! Not Jim Lodgey! Let him look out! He won't carry his 'ead so high arter I'm done with him!"

The hatred and spite in the man's coarse face struck Levison. It was evident that Lodgey was a bitter enemy of the reformed Toff. A swift suspicion shot into Levison's mind. That Crooke was spoofing Talbot with the intention of doing him harm he was sure. For the first time it came into his head that Mr. Lodgey had a hand in the matter, that the two enemies of the Toff had plotted together against him. Mr. Lodgey's threatening words seemed to hint as much.

"So you're in it, Lodgey?"
"In what, Master Levison?"
"In Crooke's little game."
"Has Master Crooke told you—" began Lodgey.
"Naturally, as I'm his pal and I back him up all along the line," said Levison calmly. "He has made friends with Talbot and taken him quite in."
"And the Toff don't suspect nothing?" said Mr. Lodgey curiously.

"Nothing at all."
"The Toff was always keen," smiled Mr. Lodgey; "but p'raps he ain't quite so sharp as Jim Lodgey."
Levison breathed hard. His suspicion was confirmed. Lodgey was in the plot, whatever it was, against Talbot!

But what was it? What did it all mean? He felt that he had to tread warily. Mr. Lodgey was too acute to give anything away.

"I rather think you and Crooke together will be too much for him," he said, smiling.
"You bet we will!" said Mr. Lodgey. "So Master Crooke told you? He's made friends with the Toff?"

"Oh, they're quite chums now!"
"Ha, ha! And he's done the trick?"
Levison paused.

He had no idea what the trick in question was, and if he betrayed his ignorance it was certain that the rascal would close up like an oyster.

"The trick?" he repeated. "Oh, yes!"
"He's done it?"
"Yes."

"Good!" Mr. Lodgey rubbed his hands. "I wonder he ain't been to tell me! Then the Toff's been 'ad up?"

"Had up?" repeated Levison.
"Ave the perlice been called in?" asked Mr. Lodgey eagerly.
"No."

Mr. Lodgey looked disappointed.
"I s'pose they'll keep it dark to save the disgrace?" he said.

"That's it," muttered Levison.

"But he'll be kicked out, and that's good enough for me. But 'ow did it come out, Master Levison? Tell me exactly what 'appened!"

That was exactly what Levison could not do. He was fishing for information. He had no information to give. His hesitation caused Mr. Lodgey to give him a very suspicious look.

"Look 'ere, Master Levison, you ain't pulling my leg. I s'pose? Master Crooke has told you, straight? I know he's your pal, and you're birds of a feather. But if he ain't told you— By gum!" exclaimed Mr. Lodgey, as Levison did not speak. "You've been fooling me, you—you young raskil!"

Levison laughed.
"You may as well tell me the whole yarn now," he said. "I'm Crooke's pal, you know; it's quite safe!"

"I dessay; but if Crooke wanted you to know, he'd tell you himself," said Lodgey sourly. "I've let my jaw a bit too loose. If you've come over for a hundred up, Master Levison, I'm your man!"

"But about Talbot?"
"Never mind that!"
"Look here, Lodgey—" "I ain't jawin'!" said Mr. Lodgey, in a tone of finality. "You been spoofing me! You ain't getting nothing out of me, and that's flat! Course, I trust you, Master Levison. I know you're a pal. But least said soonest mended. Wot about billiards?"

It was evident that there was nothing more to be gained from the rascal. As Levison was Crooke's pal, Mr. Lodgey naturally did not suspect his devotion to Talbot. That was an idea that did not enter the rascal's mind for a moment. But he was cautious, and he did not mean to talk. Levison shrugged his shoulders, and followed the sharper through the open French window into the billiard-room.

"Quid on the game?" asked Mr. Lodgey.
Levison nodded.

"You didn't mind me askin' you for that three quid, Master Levison? I was rather pushed, you know—"

"Not at all. The geegee lost, and I was ready to pay up," said Levison coolly. "A pal lent me the money. I'm going to clear you out at billiards, Lodgey!"

"Ha, ha! Werry likely! I ain't much of a player," said Mr. Lodgey genially.

Mr. Lodgey's real opinion was that the schoolboy was not likely to have much chance against him. He did not know Levison, or the amount of time he had devoted to billiards. He had that yet to learn.

Levison adopted a boastful air for the especial purpose of drawing Mr. Lodgey on. He had told Talbot that he was going to "shear a wolf," and he had no doubt that he could do it. Levison did not much resemble most of the "pigeons" whom Mr. Lodgey lived by plucking. That was another discovery the sharper had yet to make.

"But I'm really rather good at billiards," said Levison. "I wouldn't mind putting a fiver on the game!"

"I'm your man!" said Mr. Lodgey cordially.
"A fiver, then?"
"Cert'ly!"

They played. Mr. Lodgey gave a miss in baulk, and Levison began. He made a six, and then Mr. Lodgey ran easily to twenty, and then fumbled clumsily and missed.

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Lodgey's plan, as usual, was to allow his unsuspecting opponent to keep within measurable distance of his score, and, indeed, to affect clumsiness at times, to encourage the intended victim.

At the finish he would run out a little ahead, and win. But Levison knew the sharper's game as well as he knew it himself.

They progressed towards the hundred, Levison getting ahead at fifty, and Mr. Lodgey overtaking him, and then keeping ahead. Mr. Lodgey was at eighty when Levison's turn came again, and Levison had thirty to get. Mr. Lodgey expected him to get about ten or twelve. To his surprise, Levison proceeded with a steady break up to the hundred. Mr. Lodgey's expressive face grew longer and longer as he watched him.

It dawned upon him that he was dealing with a young rascal whose skill was as great as his own.

His face was a study when Levison ran out.

"Not so bad for a kid—what!" said Levison jovially. "You owe me a fiver, Lodgey!"

Mr. Lodgey's first impulse was to bid Levison go to Jericho, and seek his fiver there. But he hoped to make a good deal out of the black sheep of St. Jim's and his friends, and open cheating was evidently not the method. So he paid up with as good a grace as he could.

"Another game?" smiled Levison.

"I got to see a man," said Mr. Lodgey. "Another time, Master Levison."

"Right-ho! I owe you your revenge, you know."

Mr. Lodgey looked queerly after Levison when that cheery youth quitted the place.

He had been beaten at his own game by a schoolboy, and he did not enjoy the experience. But he had the prospect of getting his money back on "geegees," and at the worst Crooke would pay for the loss.

Levison smiled as he walked back to St. Jim's. He looked into Talbot's study as soon as he arrived at the school.

Crooke of the Shell was there with Talbot. He started and scowled as Levison came in. Talbot coloured a little.

"Hallo! Talking secrets?" grinned Levison.

"Mind your own business!" growled Crooke.

"What is it, Levison?" Talbot asked quietly. "What do you want?"

"Nothing. I've come to settle up."

Levison laid three pounds on the table.

"I told you I'd settle, Talbot. There's your three quid!"

"Thank you!" said Talbot.

"So you're in funds!" sneered Crooke. "You may as well settle up my quid; it's rather an older debt than this one, I fancy!"

"There's your money!" said Levison, throwing a pound note on the table. "It's worth it to hear the last of it!"

"My hat! You're settling your debts, and some chap said the age of miracles was past!" sneered Crooke, as he took up the note.

Levison left the study without replying.

CHAPTER 9.

Talbot's Task.

GEORGE GORE came into the study, his bat under his arm, his face ruddy.

"Hallo! What about tea?" exclaimed Gore.

Crooke rose to his feet savagely.

"We can't talk here!" he muttered.

"Eh? You can talk if you like," said Gore. "I'm going to get tea. I told that idiot Skimpole to have the table laid! Where is he?"

Skimpole blinked in.

"My dear Gore, I left the study, as Crooke wished to speak privately to Talbot!"

"Silly ass!" said Gore. "Get the table laid! Ain't you ready for tea, Talbot? What on earth are you jawing to Crooke about? Is he going to stagger humanity in the House Eleven with his wonderful cricket?"

Talbot rose.

"I'll come in later, Gore," he said.

And he followed Crooke from the study.

"Shan't leave you any of the eggs!" bawled Gore after him.

Talbot did not heed. The Terrible Three came along the passage, and hailed him at once.

"You missed the cricket, you slacker! Come in to tea; we've got a spread!"

"Talbot's coming to tea with me," said Crooke sourly.

"Oh, all serene!" said Tom Merry. "Look here, both of you come! We've got a spread!"

"Three kinds of jam!" said Manners impressively.

"And saveloys!" chimed in Lowther.

"Blow the saveloys! Talbot's coming with me!"

"You'll excuse me, Tom—" began Talbot.

Tom Merry laughed.

"All serene, old son! Keep your wool on, Crooke! Ta-ta!"

The Terrible Three went into their study. Talbot looked inquiringly at Crooke.

"Rack's in my study," muttered Crooke. "We can't talk there!"

"Is it anything important?" asked Talbot.

Crooke shrugged his shoulders.

"You said you'd help me out of my scrape if you could."

"I'll do anything I can, certainly."

"I've thought of a way."

"Good! I'll help you, if there's anything I can do!"

"It's something you can do and that nobody else can do. We can't talk here. There's that inquisitive rotter Levison watching us at the end of the passage. I believe he suspects something already!" muttered Crooke uneasily.

Talbot was silent.

"It—it's got to be settled for to-night!" Crooke muttered.

"For to-night!" repeated Talbot.

"Yes; if you'll do it for me. But we can't talk here," said Crooke hurriedly. "Shush!" Kangaroo and Glyn and Dano came along the passage. "Look here, let's take a stroll to the old tower! It's safe there."

"Just as you like."

The two Shell fellows left the School House. The old tower was some distance from the school buildings, and it was a solitary spot, especially at tea-time. Levison's keen eyes watched them from a window. They disappeared round the gym, and Levison sauntered from the House.

Crooke led the way into the old tower, and stopped in the lower room. Talbot waited for him to speak. The cad of the Shell seemed to have some difficulty in beginning.

"It's safe enough to speak here," said Talbot at last.

"Nobody can hear us, Crooke. I don't quite see what you're so nervous about. None of the fellows would give you away, even if they knew about the letter from Lodgey."

"You can't be too careful!" muttered Crooke. "You haven't said a word about it, of course?"

"Not a word!"

"Not even to Tom Merry?"

"Of course not! I told you I should say nothing!"

"That's all right, then. I can't help feeling nervous. Look here. You—you said you'd help me."

"I'm ready to help you if I can," said Talbot patiently.

"Think of old Lyndon!" said Crooke. "He doesn't like me as much as he does you, but—but it would be a shock to him if I got sacked. And—and it's hard on me, too, when I've chucked up that kind of game. You admit that?"

"I do think so, Crooke. I'd do anything I could. I—"

"Hold on! I heard somebody!" muttered Crooke. He ran to the shattered casement, and looked out quickly.

There was no one to be seen.

"Dash it all, Crooke, this is ridiculous!" exclaimed Talbot sharply. "I wish you'd come to the point!"

Crooke turned back.

"It's all right. I thought I heard something. If Tom Merry—"

"Tom Merry would not listen, and you know it! He wouldn't, even if he were curious, which he isn't," said Talbot coldly.

"Yes, I—I know; but I'm nervous. You know what's at stake. If Linton opens that book he's locked up in his desk he will see Lodgey's letter. I remember it was folded, with the signature outside. He may look at the book—he might open it by chance—or the letter might drop out—in fact, he's bound to come across it!"

"It might be safer to own up to Mr. Linton, and—"

"And ask for the sack?" said Crooke, with a sneer. "That isn't the kind of help I want, thanks! I want that book out of Linton's desk, with the letter in it!"

"It's impossible, Crooke! Mr. Linton keeps his desk locked, and keeps the key about him. You're not thinking of breaking the desk, I suppose?"

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"Of course not!"

"Then what's to be done?"

"You could help me, if you liked," said Crooke sulkily.

"I don't see—"

"You can open any lock you like. You know what you were before you came here!"

Talbot's face flooded crimson.

"Crooke!"

"I don't want to rub it in," said Crooke. "But there's the fact. You were brought up a crackman, and you could open any lock you liked, without leaving a trace behind. You could sneak down from the dormitory to-night, and go to Linton's desk, and take out the letter. You needn't take the book—just take the letter from it, and leave the book there."

Talbot paled.

"Crooke! Mr. Linton keeps money in that desk, and valuable things. What would he think if he found me—"

"He'll be in bed, fast asleep, at twelve to-night. There's no risk. It's not even in his study, either. It's in the Form-room. You could do the whole trick in ten minutes, and I should be safe."

"I—I can't!"

"You won't, you mean!" snarled Crooke.

"You don't seem to know what you're asking," said Talbot, his voice unsteady. "You're asking me to break open Mr. Linton's desk in the middle of the night, like a burglar!"

"It's not a question of breaking it open. You can pick the lock as easy as falling off a form. You could pick the Head's safe if you liked."

"I know it. But—"

"You needn't leave a trace behind—"

"It's not that. It's doing the thing!" exclaimed Talbot passionately. "Suppose, by some chance, somebody should wake up, and I should be spotted, I couldn't give you away, I suppose? They'd believe that—that I was picking the lock to steal. They couldn't think anything else. There's money in the desk—everybody knows it."

"You mean you're afraid—"

"I'm afraid of being supposed to be a thief. I suppose anybody would be afraid of throwing away his good name!"

"You won't do it?" muttered Crooke. "You won't, because of a little risk? Where's the risk? Who's likely to go to the Form-room in the middle of the night? Everybody will be fast asleep. To-morrow Linton may get hold of that letter, and I'm ruined! Old Lyndon—nice news for him to get—his nephew sacked in disgrace! And—and my mater—"

"Crooke broke off.

Talbot's face changed.

He did not tell Crooke that he should have thought of all that before he acted like a rascal and a fool. It was useless to tell him so.

Could he do what was asked?

There would be no real harm in it. It was to save a fellow from black disgrace and ruin—a fellow who had given promise of reform. It was to save an old soldier, fresh from the fighting-line, from a shock, from a scandal that he would feel keenly, and never forget. And Crooke's reference to his "mater" went straight to Talbot's heart. He had no mother.

After all, why not? There was nothing wrong in it. Mr. Linton did not even know the fatal letter was there. And to the Toff, the lock of the desk was nothing. To open it without leaving a trace behind was child's play to the fellow who had once been called the prince of crackmen. Crooke watched his face anxiously, as he did not speak.

"You offered to be my friend!" muttered Crooke. "So that's what your friendship's worth! At the first test, you back out! I might have known it! I've no right to ask you. I know that. Of course, you won't do it. You'd rather see me sacked. I dare say you'd like to see me sacked. We've never been friends—"

"You're mistaken, Crooke. I will do it," said Talbot quietly.

"You mean it?"

"Yes."

"And—and when—"

"To-night. Leave it to me. You can sleep soundly. I shall hand you the letter in the morning!"

Talbot turned, and left the old tower without another word. When he was gone, the shade of anxiety dropped from Crooke's face like a mask. He grinned.

"My hat!" he muttered. "My hat! Lodgery was right! Lodgery knew him! To-night—to-night! And to-morrow—to-morrow the sack—the merry sack! By gad, that will be the finish for the cad! He won't cross my path again! The sack—the sack!" And Crooke as still grinning as he followed Talbot, and he walked away quite jauntily.

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When he was out of sight there was a movement in the masses of old ivy under the shattered casement. The thick leaves and tendrils parted, and a form emerged into view—if there had been anyone to see. Levison of the Fourth stepped out of the ivy, and shook the dust from his clothes. Levison was pale, and his eyes were glittering.

"So that's the game," he murmured—"that's the game! And Talbot's number's up unless somebody chips in to-night! And if I told him what I think—what I know—he would call me an eavesdropping cad, and take no notice!" Levison laughed. "It's Lodgery's game. Crooke hadn't the brains to think it out. Of course, there's no letter in the book, but there's money in the desk, and Talbot will be caught burgling the desk at midnight. The Toff broken out again! Once a thief, always a thief! And the sack, and perhaps prison! And only an eavesdropping cad, a shady blackguard, to stand between him and all that!"

And Levison laughed again as he sauntered away. He did not think of warning Talbot. He knew that Talbot would not believe for one moment that his cousin was still his relentless enemy, or that he was capable of so base a plot. Talbot's reply to such a warning would be bitter, scornful words—perhaps a blow. And then he would go to his doom just the same. He would know the truth too late! But if he was to be saved, there was only one who could save him, and that was Levison of the Fourth, the blackguard of the school.

CHAPTER 10.

Levison takes a Hand!

TOM MERRY noticed that Talbot was very thoughtful that evening, though he little guessed what was in the Toff's mind. The junior, whose past had been so strange and chequered, had food for thought. He had made up his mind to do as Crooke asked him—to save the black sheep of the Shell, and let him have another chance. But he knew the risk.

The risk of being caught in the Form-room was not great. It was not likely that anyone would wake, by chance, and visit the Form-room at such an hour. But if, by an untoward chance, there was discovery, then the risk was terrible. It was not risk of punishment, but of bitter disgrace and utter ruin. He could not explain, he could not betray Crooke to save himself, and he did not believe that Crooke would own up if he did. The cad of the Shell was more likely to deny having asked him to do as he had done. For, though Talbot was striving to be his cousin's friend, he was not deceived as to Crooke's character. He knew him to be mean and disloyal and false, as of old. That Crooke was striving towards better things he believed, but a great change did not come in a day. If there was discovery, he had to face it alone—to be suspected of the very worst, and to endure in silence. That was the risk he had resolved to run for Crooke's sake, for the sake of Colonel Lyndon, for the sake of loyalty to the fellow he had sought to make his friend.

Crooke gave him an anxious look when the Shell fellows went to their dormitory that night. Talbot nodded to him without speaking, and Crooke went to bed reassured.

Talbot did not join in the talk of the juniors before they went to sleep. The voices died away at last; slumber descended on the dormitory. Talbot lay wakeful, listening to the hours as they struck dully from the clock-tower.

Twelve rang out on the night air, and he waited still. It was not till the dull boom of one o'clock had sounded that the Toff stirred.

At that hour the last door had long closed, the last light was extinguished. Talbot got quietly from his bed, and dressed in the darkness.

There was no sound save that of the steady breathing in the long, dark dormitory. For a moment it came bitterly into Talbot's mind that Crooke was sleeping peacefully, while he was plunging into deadly risk to save him. Little did he suspect that the cad of the Shell was wide awake and alert, and peering towards him in the gloom, watching and listening.

The Toff trod softly to the door. He had put on rubber shoes, that made hardly a sound. The big door closed behind him noiselessly.

Then Crooke sat up in bed.

His heart was thumping. Talbot was gone, and Crooke also had work to do that night.

Talbot paused to listen in the passage. All was silent. His task, after all, was easy. He was at home in the darkness, from old habit. To slip quietly down to the Form-room, to do his work there, to return—a quarter of an hour would cover it. He trod cautiously down the passage.

Suddenly he stopped.

There was a faint footfall in the darkness, and he heard a hurried breath. Who was stirring at that hour? The Toff stood quite still, his heart beating hard. "Talbot!"

It was a whispering voice, and Talbot started violently as he recognised the tones of Levison of the Fourth.

"Levison!" he muttered.

There was a soft chuckle.

"Yee."

"What are you doing here, Levison?"

"What are you doing, if it comes to that?"

"Nothing that concerns you!" said Talbot sternly. "Is it possible that you have been watching me?"

"Quite possible! You know I'm an inquisitive cad!" said Levison coolly. "But I've got something to tell you—something you must hear!"

"How did you know—"

"Never mind that! Come with me!"

"I've no time to waste!" muttered Talbot.

"Neither have I. But you must come and hear what I have to say!" said Levison calmly. "If I raise my voice there'll be trouble!"

Talbot trembled with anger.

"Levison! You dare to interfere with me!"

"Yes. I'm a cheeky rotter, you know!" Levison laughed softly. "You'll come to my study and hear what I have to say, or I shall see that somebody wakes up!"

"You can speak here!"

"I can't! I've got my reasons!"

"Leave me alone!" muttered Talbot savagely. "Mind your own business! What are you meddling for?"

"Because I'm a meddler, I suppose. But if you don't do as I ask I shall raise my voice!"

Talbot clenched his hands hard.

"Levison! You rotter!"

"Pile it on."

"I'll come with you!" muttered Talbot. "I shall have something to say to you about this to-morrow!"

"Hear, hear!" murmured Levison. "This way, my pippin! I'm master of the ceremonies now!"

He slid his arm into Talbot's, and led him. The Toff submitted silently, with deep anger in his breast. But he was in Levison's hands. What the Fourth-Former's object was he could not even guess. But a raised voice meant the failure of his plans for that night, and he went with Levison quietly, but with his eyes gleaming.

They reached the Fourth Form passage, and Levison opened the door of his study.

"This way!" he muttered.

Talbot stepped into the study.

"Now, what—" he began.

Click!

The door closed suddenly; the key turned. Talbot spun round with a furious exclamation. The key was in the outside of the lock, and he was locked in the study!

"Levison!" His voice was suppressed, but vibrating with anger.

There was a faint chuckle in the passage outside. Then stealthy footsteps died away. Levison had not even replied.

Talbot grasped the handle of the door and tried it. But he knew it was locked. He could not fathom why Levison had played this trick on him, and he realised that he must not call out to the junior. He stood quivering with rage. Levison had evidently led him intentionally to the study to trap him there. The key had been placed outside the door in readiness. Why?

It was inexplicable. But a grim smile came over Talbot's face in the darkness. Levison had forgotten that the light-fingered Toff was not like other fellows. The lock did not make a prisoner of him, as it would have done of any other fellow at St. Jim's. It meant only a few minutes' work to the Toff.

His hands were quickly busy. In two minutes the door was unlocked, and Talbot pulled at it. But it did not open more than half an inch. Talbot's teeth set hard, and he drew a deep, savage breath. Levison had not forgotten, after all! There was a cord stretched from the handle of the door to the door opposite, and tied, and the door was held shut, although the lock had been picked. The Toff was a prisoner until Levison chose to let him out.

CHAPTER 11.

Black Treachery.

LEVISON grinned in the darkness, as he stole away on tiptoe.

The strange game he was playing was exactly in accordance with his peculiar nature. His motive was good, but anything that was deep and tortuous was enjoyment to Ernest Levison. Talbot was furious now, but he would thank him on the morrow, if all went as Levison suspected. True, it was the duplicity of Levison's own nature that helped him to see so clearly through Crooke's plot. A better fellow than Levison would never have fathomed it. But Levison had no doubts. All he wanted was proof—proof that would save Talbot from another scheme from the same quarter.

The junior, silent but swift, hurried back to the upper passage. Unless he was mistaken, Crooke would follow the Toff from the dormitory. He would wait till he believed Talbot had reached the Form-room, that was all. For unless Crooke had planned that the Toff should be discovered at work, Levison had found out only a mare's-nest; and, if Crooke had planned that, it was only by giving information himself that he could contrive the discovery.

That Levison was not mistaken was soon proved. He had not been waiting a couple of minutes in the dark passage when the dormitory door opened softly, and a figure glided out. The door closed again.

Levison held his breath.

In the deep darkness, as he crouched against the wall, he caught sight of only a moving shadow. He knew that it must be Gerald Crooke, but there was no chance of recognising him.

Almost inaudible footfalls died away down the passage. Quite inaudibly Levison followed the creeping Shell fellow down the stairs, till the moving shadow stopped at the door of Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House.

Tap!

Crooke knocked softly—very softly—and opened the door. Behind, in the darkness, Levison listened.

"Mr. Railton!"

It was Crooke's voice, shaken with suppressed excitement. A startled voice replied from the darkened room.

"What? Who is that?"

"It—it is I, sir."

"Is that Crooke?"

"Yes, sir."

There was a sound as of bedclothes flung off, as the amazed House-master sat up.

"What does this mean, Crooke? What are you doing out of your dormitory?"

"Hush, sir!"

"What do you mean?"

"I—I thought I ought to call you, sir," faltered Crooke. "There—there's something awfully wrong."

There was another movement.

"Don't put on the light, sir. It may alarm him."

"What? Alarm whom?"

"The—the burglar, sir!"

"Do you mean to say that there are burglars in the house, Crooke?"

"Yes, sir," whispered Crooke. "I—I thought I ought to call you, sir."

"Certainly you ought to call me, if that is the case," said the House-master drily. "But it is probably only a nervous fancy. Have you seen anyone?"

"I've heard him, sir."

"Tell me exactly what has happened."

Mr. Railton had stepped from his bed, and he was groping for a dressing-gown in the dark.

"I—I woke up, sir, and—heard somebody creeping in the passage outside the dormitory," faltered Crooke. "It—it sounded to me as if the dorm door had been opened. I—I listened, and heard footsteps creeping away—"

"Probably a foolish fancy."

"I—I thought I ought to get up, sir. I got out of the dormitory, and—heard him go downstairs."

"You are sure?"

"Yes, sir. I followed him, and he went into the Shell Form-room."

"Bless my soul! If you are quite certain, Crooke—"

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"I am certain, sir."

"It may be only a boy who has gone down, for some reason. However, I shall certainly see into the matter. You say you thought your door opened? That may have been some boy leaving the dormitory."

"I—I didn't think of that, sir. I—I don't think it was. What should a fellow go down for—"

"Certainly it will need explaining."

"Shall—I call Kildare, sir?"

"Certainly not. There is no need to give the alarm unless there is real occasion for it. I shall soon ascertain whether there is anyone in the house."

"He—he might overpower you, sir. Your wounded arm, sir—"

"You may leave the matter to me, Crooke! Go back to your dormitory."

"Very well, sir."

Crooke's work was done. He was glad to go back to his dormitory. Even Crooke's forehead of brass was not equal to facing Talbot, when the unfortunate junior was caught in the act of opening Mr. Linton's desk.

Levison of the Fourth crouched back in an alcove as the Shell fellow passed him. Levison could have touched him as he passed. He heard the thick, hurried breathing of the cad of the Shell.

But Levison did not move.

He waited.

There was a rustle as Mr. Railton, in dressing-gown and slippers, came out of his room in the darkness, and hurried down the stairs. A sound above told that the door of the Shell dormitory had closed on Crooke.

The slight sound made by Mr. Railton died away.

Then Levison stirred.

Noiselessly he hurried to the Fourth-Form passage, and stopped outside his own study.

"Talbot!" he breathed through the keyhole.

"You cad!" came back Talbot's voice from within. "Let me out!"

"I'm going to. Quiet! Railton's up!"

"Railton!"

"Yes!"

"You have called him?" muttered Talbot.

"No. Crooke has called him."

"Crooke!" panted Talbot.

"Yes!"

The cord was released, the door opened. Talbot stepped into the passage, and Levison caught him by the arm.

"Quiet! Quiet! Look!"

He drew Talbot to the passage window. Below was the wide window of the Shell Form-room. From the window below a blaze of light suddenly came, streaming out into the darkened quadrangle. In the Form-room the electric light had been turned on.

Talbot stared at the sudden light in the quad, dazed.

Levison pressed his arm.

"Suppose you had been at Linton's desk?" he muttered.

Talbot did not answer—he could not. His brain was in a whirl.

CHAPTER 12.

Foiled at the Finish.

TALBOT panted.

There was a soft chuckle beside him—the peculiar elfin chuckle of Levison of the Fourth.

The Shell fellow jerked his arm away.

"Levison!" He found his voice at last.

"Levison! What does this mean? Is Railton in the Form-room?"

"Yes. You can see the light."

"What is he doing there?"

"Looking for the burglar."

"The—the burglar—"

"You!" said Levison softly. "Now you know why Crooke sent you there, with a yarn of an incriminating letter in Linton's desk. Now you know why I shut you up in my study."

"You—you knew—"

"I listened outside the window in the old tower this afternoon," said Levison coolly.

"Levison! You cad!"

Levison laughed softly.

"I expected that. But I've saved you from the sack, and perhaps from prison! You can call me what you like."

"I—I don't understand. How did Railton come to be up?"

"Crooke called him," Levison replied.

"Impossible! It prevents me from getting the letter—"

"You silly chump, there's no letter!" muttered Levison.

"Don't you understand? Won't you understand? Lodgely

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and Crooke arranged it between them—I got that much out of Lodgely to-day. There's no letter—it's a lie to get you to burgle Linton's desk, and for Railton to catch you in the act."

Talbot staggered against the wall.

"It's a lie!" he muttered thickly. "It's impossible! Levison, this is one of your tricks—one of your rotten tricks! It's impossible! It's a lie!"

"My rotten tricks have saved your neck," said Levison, unmoved. "I don't expect you to take my word. I tell you I was on the watch. I followed Crooke to Railton's room."

"You—you followed him? Crooke left the dormitory?"

"I followed him, and he woke Railton, with a yarn of having heard a burglar creeping about, and having followed him to the Shell room—"

"Impossible!"

"He sent him there to make the discovery. He thought you were at work on Linton's desk. I tell you I heard every word he said to Railton. Railton was to catch you in the act."

"I don't believe it—I can't believe it! I know you are a liar," said Talbot, between his teeth. "You awakened Railton yourself, and you came to me with this yarn about my cousin—"

"And that's your thanks?" said Levison, still smiling in the darkness. "Luckily, I didn't expect gratitude."

"Gratitude! You villain—"

"You'd better get back to the dorm," said Levison calmly. "I'm going. Railton won't find a burglar, but he's sure to look round and see whether any chap is out of bed. Don't take my word for what I've told you—ask Railton who awakened him."

"That will prove that you have lied!" said Talbot fiercely. "Yes, if I have lied! He is sure to come to your dorm, to see if any fellow is out of bed—ask him then."

"I will—I will; and if you have lied, I—"

"Never mind what you will do. Get back to the dorm, and don't let Railton find you out of it. He would ask questions."

Levison glided away in the darkness.

After the alarm given by Crooke, Mr. Railton was certain to make a round of the junior dormitories, to ascertain that no junior was out of bed, after he had assured himself that there was no burglar in the house.

In less than a minute more, Levison was in bed in the Fourth-Form dormitory, grinning in the darkness.

Talbot stood rooted to the floor when the Fourth-Former had left him.

But he started, as the light in the quadrangle was suddenly blotted out. The House-master had evidently finished in the Form-room.

Talbot hurried away to the Shell dormitory.

His brain was in a whirl. He had fiercely resented Levison's accusation against Crooke. He did not believe it. Yet there was a growing doubt in his breast. For, false as Levison was, he had never been false to Talbot. The Toff knew that. What if he had spoken the truth? What if Talbot, that night, had had a very narrow escape of shame and ruin? He reached the Shell dormitory silently. It took him but a few moments to throw off his clothes and plunge into bed. Whether Levison had lied or not, it would not do for his absence to be discovered. Awkward questions would have followed.

There was a startled, breathless exclamation from Crooke's bed. Crooke was sitting up, peering through the darkness with startled eyes.

"Who—who is that?"

"It is I," said Talbot quietly.

"Talbot!"

"Yes!"

"But—but—what—how—" Crooke broke off.

Talbot drew the bedclothes over him, his heart heavy as lead. Why was Gerald Crooke so startled? There was no reason why he should be surprised or startled. If Levison had lied!

The Toff did not speak again. Would Crooke question him as to the success of the enterprise. Whether he had obtained the letter from Mr. Linton's desk—the letter which Levison declared did not exist?

Crooke did not ask a single question.

The return of Talbot to the dormitory had utterly confounded him. How had the Toff escaped the House-master in the Form-room, that was what Crooke was fiercely asking himself. Even if Mr. Railton had not found him there, they should have met in the passage. He could not have returned from the Form-room without passing the House-master. Had he not been to the Form-room at all? Crooke was at a dead loss. But he could not command his voice sufficiently to speak. Did Talbot know? Had he guessed?

There was a step in the passage, and a light gleamed under the door.

The door opened.

Mr. Railton stood there, lamp in hand, looking into the dormitory. Talbot lay silent, with closed eyes.

Several of the juniors awakened, as the light gleamed into the room. Tom Merry sat up in bed, rubbing his eyes.

"What the dickens— Ah! Mr. Railton?"

"Do not be alarmed," said the House-master quietly. "There is nothing the matter. There has been a false alarm, that is all."

"Yes, sir," said Tom wonderingly.

"Has any boy been out of this dormitory, Merry?"

"I don't know, sir. I've only just woke up."

"Apart from Crooke, I mean. I know Crooke has been out, as he called me."

Talbot shivered.

"Crooke called you, sir?" said Monty Lowther. "Crooke's in bed now, sir."

"Yes. Crooke fancied he heard burglars in the house," said Mr. Railton. "You have awakened me for nothing, Crooke. I have been to the Shell Form-room, and there was no one there, and no trace of anyone. You must have been mistaken in thinking you heard someone go into that room."

Crooke tried to speak, but could not.

"Possibly some boy left the dormitory, and that was what you heard," went on the House-master. "Yet I cannot understand why you should fancy that he went to the Shell Form-room. You told me distinctly that you followed him and heard him go into that room. I trust Crooke, that this is not a foolish joke—what you would call a jape—played on your House-master," said Mr. Railton sternly.

"I—I thought—" stammered Crooke helplessly. He was asking himself savagely how Talbot had escaped. Did the Toff have Old Harry's own luck? "I—I'm sorry, sir. I certainly thought—"

The House-master's keen eyes searched his face. The possibility that the junior had been pulling his leg from a mistaken sense of humour was more than enough to make Mr. Railton angry. It was no joke—from a master's point of view, at least—to be called out of bed in the middle of the night for nothing.

"If this was a foolish prank, Crooke—"

"It—it wasn't, sir," stammered Crooke, in dismay. "I—I'm sure I heard something, sir."

"It is very odd that you should have supposed that you followed someone to the Shell Form-room, when you did nothing of the sort," said Mr. Railton drily.

"But—but he was there. I mean—I thought—" Crooke hardly knew what he was saying, in his confusion and dismay. "Are—are you sure, sir you—you didn't pass him in the passage—"

"Don't be ridiculous, Crooke! I should hardly be likely to let the fellow escape unseen, if he was really in the house. There was no one, and, as far as I can ascertain, no boy but yourself left his bed. You have had a foolish, nervous fancy, Crooke, if you were not guilty of the impertinence of a foolish practical joke upon your House-master. I will give you the benefit of the doubt, as I should be sorry to be unjust. But I am not satisfied with you, and I warn you to be more careful!"

Crooke stammered out something—he hardly knew what. "Good-night, my boys," said Mr. Railton. "I am sorry you have been disturbed."

"Good-night, sir!"

The House-master quitted the dormitory, and the door closed. Nearly all the Shell were awake now, and there was at once a chorus of questions, addressed to Gerald Crooke.

"So you dreamed burglars, and had the cheek to go and call Railton, Crooke?" asked Kangaroo.

"You smoked too many cigarettes before bed," chuckled Monty Lowther. "Bad for the nerves, Crooke, my boy!"

"What the dickens made you think the giddy burglar went to the Form-room?" asked Tom Merry. "Did you think he wanted to burgle our Latin grammars?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Or Gussy's book out of Linton's desk?" chuckled Manners.

"Or the blackboard?"

"Or Linton's petty cash?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Were you pulling Railton's leg, Crooke?"

"Rotten trick!" said Kangaroo. "Japes on Railton are barred, since the Huns potted his arm. I'll give you a thick ear in the morning, Crooke."

"Why don't you speak, you image?"

"Oh, go and eat coke!" growled Crooke. "I'm going to sleep."

"Go easy on the smokes next time, old scout!"

"And don't take it for a merry burglar next time you hear Manners snore."

"Why, you silly ass!" said Manners.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Shell fellows settled down to sleep again. Crooke did not sleep easily. He lay sleepless, furious, and apprehensive. His plot had somehow gone awry. He knew that. Talbot had heard every word. Talbot knew that Crooke had sent the House-master to the Form-room to catch him there, opening the Form-master's desk. Talbot knew! Why had he not spoken? Why had he not revealed the cowardly trick to the whole Form? What was Talbot thinking? What would he do the next day? The wretched schemer shivered as he thought of that.

He slept at last, though very uneasily.

When the rising-bell rang, Crooke turned out of bed, heavy-eyed and almost haggard in the morning sunshine. He glanced at Talbot, but the Toff did not seem to see him. Talbot's face was calm and set. He knew all. He could not fail to know. Yet he did not speak.

But when Crooke, anxious to get away from the chipping of the Shell fellows, left the dormitory first, Talbot followed him. Crooke hurried on, his heart almost failing him. He had hoped that the morning light would dawn upon Talbot, a prisoner in the punishment-room, awaiting disgrace and ruin. The plot had failed, and Talbot was not likely to be tricked again. The game was up. Crooke knew that. In the quadrangle, Talbot joined him.

"Stop a minute, Crooke," he said very quietly.

Crooke stopped.

"I suppose you know that I know the whole game now?" Talbot's quiet, scornful voice cut like a lash, and Crooke shrank under it. "I very nearly walked into the trap—very nearly! Why did you do it?"

Crooke pulled himself together. His eyes glinted as he looked at the Toff, his lip curled in a bitter sneer.

"Well, you know it!" he said. "How you dodged out of it I can't understand. Why did I do it? To show you up in your true colours. To get you sacked from the school, hang you! Now you know!"

"There was no letter in the book?"

Crooke laughed scornfully.

"Did you think I should be such an idiot as that? Of course you did. You fool! It was Lodgey's scheme from the beginning! And I'm not sorry for it. I hoped to see the last of you, and I'm only sorry it failed, and you can put that in your pipe and smoke it! And if you give it away to the fellows, I shall deny every word."

"I don't think you'd be believed," said Talbot quietly. "I think that if I told the story, you would be cut by every fellow in the school. But I shall say nothing. I shall not touch you, you're not fit to touch. You have tried to ruin me, and I shall be on my guard now. I called the fellow a liar who told me what you were doing. I couldn't believe it. Don't speak to me again, you make me sick!"

Talbot did not meet Levison of the Fourth till after lessons. When they met, Levison looked at him with a satirical smile.

"Well, are you still going to call me a liar?" he queried.

"I'm sorry I did so last night, Levison. I couldn't believe it then; but it was true." Talbot's voice trembled a little.

"But for you, Mr. Railton would have found me opening Mr. Linton's desk, and even if I had chosen to give Crooke away, there was no letter in the desk to bear out the story. It was a lie from beginning to end."

"Rather neat of Crooke, wasn't it?" said Levison cheerfully. "It was really a pity to chip in and spoil such a really clever game. Don't you think so?"

Talbot laughed.

"I'm glad you did. I should have been turned out of the school as a hardened thief, if you hadn't. Nobody could have believed what I really went to the desk for—not even my chums, I'm afraid."

"I should have believed in you, and I'm not your pal," said Levison. "Even an eavesdropping cad is more use than a real pal at times. What? All serene. I don't mind what you said. Hard words break no bones, and soft ones butter no parsnips."

"It's the second time you've done me a ripping good turn," said Talbot. "If ever my turn comes, you can rely on me."

"It may come sooner than you think," said Levison, with a grin. "I'll tell you what you can do. When my minor comes, don't tell him what sort of a chap I am!"

And Levison walked away whistling.

THE END.

(Don't miss next Wednesday's Great Story of Tom Merry & Co.—"LEVISON ON THE WAR-PATH!" by MARTIN CLIFFORD.)

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

NEXT WEDNESDAY: "LEVISON ON THE WAR-PATH!"

OUR GREAT NEW AUSTRALIAN SERIAL!

CORNSTALK BOB

By **BEVERLEY KENT**

The Previous Instalments Told How

Old TOM HILDER, a cattle-farmer of Kattarit, Australia, is faced with ruin for the want of £1,000. He goes to a friend in Sydney, HENRY NORMAN, from whom he obtains the money, but is afterwards robbed, and, in recovering the notes, becomes mixed up, in the eyes of the police, with a gang of scoundrels.

His son BOB receives the money from his father, and takes it to SUMMERS, the bank manager, who is in league with BOARDMAN, a scoundrel who has plotted to ruin old Hilder.

Bob is afterwards arrested, and charged with passing false notes at the bank, but is liberated from his prison-cell by CAPTAIN DASHWOOD, a notorious outlaw.

Bob learns from him that his father was robbed by a man named SUTHERLAND, the leader of another gang of outlaws, and he sets out in pursuit of him. He traces the villain to an hotel, where he also sees his father. A fight ensues, and the place is burnt down. Bob narrowly escapes with his life, believing his father to be dead. He hears later that the old man is still alive.

Later, the house of a squatter, of which Bob is in charge, is robbed by Sutherland; but Dashwood again steps in and rescues Bob, and the silver which had been stolen. He takes him and the stolen property back to the house, but they are attacked by the squatter's men and troopers. Then old Tom Hilder, who is also being pursued, appears on the scene. Explanations are given, and on condition that the silver is returned, the squatter's men consent to let them all go free. Then old Hilder, Bob, and Dashwood, who has been badly wounded, drive off in the buggy.

(Now read on.)

Dashwood's Premonition.

Bob stared at his father. The old man was showing great agitation.

"What about that?" he asked.

Tom Hilder drew a deep breath.

"This plot is getting deeper and deeper, and yet I am beginning to see daylight," he replied. "Boardman had a hand in that business. I am certain of that now. But we haven't the proof. Ah, if we could only get that."

He sat back deep in thought. The lad's impatience to hear what had caused this train of thought forced him to speak.

"Do tell me about Gell," he urged. "There's something very strange on your mind."

"It is strange; the strangest thing in all my experience," his father jerked out, abruptly sitting forward again. "You'll be as amazed as I am when you hear. Only two nights ago, on my way to Coulter's house after meeting Kerr, I put up at a shanty. They were pleasant folk, and gave me a hearty welcome. The men around were knocking off work, and the table was laid for supper. And who should be one of the farm hands but Gell. I recognised him as soon as he came into the room, and, of course, I didn't think anything of that."

"And what happened?"

"At first Gell didn't recognise me; I'm much changed, I suppose, and no wonder. He sat down at the table with some dozen of us, and I noticed that he had grown more surly-looking than ever, and a bit wild in the eyes, too, I thought. There was little talk for a spell, and then someone asked me a question, and I answered it. Gell was sitting facing me, and he stared across the table. Bob, I don't want to see again such a look as came into that man's eyes."

Deeply interested, Bob kept silent.

"There were a couple of candles on the mantelpiece, and that was all the light there was in a long, darkish room," old Hilder went on, with a touch of awe. "Everyone heard Gell gasp as if stabbed to the heart, and turned to look at him. In that light his face had gone green, his eyes had turned bloodshot; a green face and two blotches of red, and his nostrils twitching, and foam coming on his lips; he didn't look like a man at all! And before anyone could ask what ailed him, he spoke, and his voice was like nothing I ever heard before in my life."

"Great Scott!" Bob gasped.

"You, you!" he cried, stretching out his hand, and then drawing it back," old Tom went on. "'Boardman, look! He's come to life again! He's been sent to bring judgment upon us. Take back your blood money! Help! Help! Don't let him get at me.'"

"And then?"

"We all jumped up, but not as quick as he did. He foamed more, his features twisted, he yelled and yelled, and called me by name, begging me to spare him, and then he flung the door open, and dashed out into the pitch-black night."

"We followed him at once," the old man went on, "but we couldn't find him. We came back, and, of course, I was asked a shoal of questions, but I couldn't explain anything. In the morning we searched everywhere, but there wasn't a trace of him, and I came away as much puzzled as the rest; but now I know."

"He thinks I'm dead," Bob said. "He left me to die in the flames. And he thought you were dead, too. And you say he spoke of blood-money?"

"Ay; and he joined Boardman's name with it. He was paid by Boardman to wipe us out, but we haven't the proof. We'll get it yet, though."

"If only we could come up with Gell!" Bob suggested.

"Ay, if we could! But there's something we have to do first. We must clear off on our own, lad. I'm not one to be hard on any man, but our friend behind is no company for us. He's chosen his own lay, and he must stick to it now, but we can't row in with him a moment longer than is necessary. I've told you about myself, and now I want to know about you. How did it happen that you met this outlaw?"

A groan from the back of the buggy checked Bob as he was about to explain. He looked back quickly, and then pulled up. Dashwood's face was the colour of marble; his eyes were closed.

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"He's dying!" Bob cried. "And he has stuck to me like a brick, and he risked his life to-night to give back the silver on my account! Father, what can we do?"

Old Tom was alert on the moment.

"Do?" he repeated. "We'll do what we can for him, of course! Where's that black fellow? We'll send him for a doctor. That's the only chance!"

Bob is Again Captured.

Bob jumped out of the buggy, and looked back along the road. He had expected to hear the thud of horse-hoofs, but no sound came to him. He stood anxious, and listening eagerly. A couple of minutes passed. Something had gone wrong with Bogong.

"He's not coming along, father," the lad said.

"Then we must push on without him," old Tom replied. "We can't risk staying here."

"But I can't get into Dashwood's hiding-place," Bob explained. "You have to go through a maze to get to it. Only Bogong can take us there!"

"Is there no place where we can put this man?"

"We can get to the edge of the maze, and the chances are ten to one that he'll never be found there," Bob explained.

"But unless Bogong can go for a doctor—"

"Let's hope he'll follow on," old Hilder interjected. "The first thing is to lay the outlaw down where he can rest. He's mortal bad. It looks as if he would go out any moment!"

As Bob took his seat again he looked at Dashwood. He had stopped moaning, and his handsome face seemed to be turning a death-like hue. A great pity came into the lad's heart. He knew the good as well as the bad in that complex nature. For him to die in this way would be horrible!

He drove swiftly, but with as great care as the high speed allowed; and old Tom, looking back often, carefully watched the stricken face. They got to the hollow where Dashwood had turned off from the road on the previous night, and they entered the glade. After twenty minutes' more driving, Bob pulled up.

"The entrance to the maze is hereabouts," he said, "but I can't exactly locate it."

Old Tom grunted as he glanced around.

"And I ain't surprised," he commented. "I've lived all a long life in the bush, and I can't see a sign of it. Only a black boy could drop on such a spot. Well, pull the buggy a hundred yards into the bush; that's the best we can do. Then we'll lift him out and see what help we can give him!"

Bob drove in amongst the trees, and presently he halted. Very gently and with some difficulty they managed to raise Dashwood and lay him on the ground. Old Tom made a swift examination.

"He's been shot above the heart, I reckon," he said. "He'd have died at once if the bullet had gone an inch or so lower. He's fainted from loss of blood, and he's gone so far that I doubt if we'll ever get him round; but we'll do our best. Run to a creek and fetch some water!"

Bob soon found a creek, and ran back with his sombrero full of water. They splashed Dashwood's face. Old Tom had torn off his shirt, and had bound the wound. Dashwood did not show signs of returning consciousness. A sort of desperation gripped the lad.

"He'll die!" he muttered.

"He's making a hard fight for life," Tom Hilder said. "He's a splendid figure of a man, and full of pluck, I guess. 'Tis a sad ending, and no mistake. But he's not getting weaker, Bob. His pulse is stronger than you would think. Still, it can only be a matter of time!"

He had been holding Dashwood's wrist. Now he stood up. "You don't happen to have any food in the buggy?" he asked. "Anything that we could boil down, or any stimulant?"

"There's nothing whatever," Bob replied sadly.

"Then unless Bogong comes along sharp, I'm afraid there's no hope."

In his misery Bob began to pace up and down. Only now did he realise how much he liked the dying outlaw, despite all his faults. To him he had been a friend, and a true one. Could he not yet be saved? The lad felt certain that if Dashwood had been in his position, and he in Dashwood's, he would have made a big effort on his behalf. Suddenly Bob wheeled round.

"Father, I'm sure that Bogong has got into trouble, or has taken the police on a wild-goose chase, so as to keep them off our track," he said.

"Mebbe so," old Tom agreed.

"And if he knew his master was like this, nothing would keep him away," the lad continued. "It's up to us now not to forget that."

Old Tom stared.

"What's in your mind, my lad?" he asked.

"I think I had better go and try to fetch a doctor myself."

"And run your head into gaol!" old Tom protested.

"Why, if you identify yourself as far as that with this maz, and you're caught, nothing can save you from the gallows!"

Bob moistened his dry lips. He knew he would have a hard job to gain his father's consent.

"I'm willing to chance that," he said.

"And I'm not willing that my son should die the death of a dog, and have his memory accused for ever, without cause!" old Tom replied firmly. "Chuck that notion! I won't have any more of it!"

"But you don't know all, or half," Bob urged.

"What don't I know?"

"That Dashwood has been a true friend to me—yes, and to you, too. Those forged notes that Sutherland gave you, and that I passed in the bank—"

"Yes?"

"I was arrested for that, and Dashwood set me free!"

"He did!"

"And afterwards he got the forged notes and gave them back to me, and without them we could never hope to prove our case against Sutherland," Bob went on, speaking rapidly. "And now Dashwood has cleared my name with Mr. Coulter. That went hard with him, for he wanted the money, so that he could clear out of Australia and start a new and decent life. And he had a feeling that in doing this for me he was running into danger. He had a foreboding that it might end in disaster, and that has come true; and now—now he is dying, and there is no one to save him but me, and—and I can't stand it, father. I must go."

A long pause ensued. Old Tom's face was turned away. Bob could not divine what thoughts were passing through his mind.

"If I hesitated I would be a cur," the lad went on. "If ever we get out of trouble, we will have to thank this man who lies dying at our feet. I've a good chance of saving him. How should I feel later on if I let it go by? Would he act thus by me? I feel sure he wouldn't. And, father, you have always taught me that a real friend takes risk, and that one good turn deserves another."

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NEXT
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"LEVISON ON THE WAR-PATH!"

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Old Tom wheeled abruptly round. There was just a suspicion of moisture in his eyes.

"You're right," he admitted; "but it goes hard with me, lad, and I don't deny it. After months of misery, when you were never out of my thoughts, we've come together again at last, not to be parted, I hope. And now you're running your neck into a noose, and like as not I'll never see you again. But I won't gainsay you. I won't take back what I taught you. And I didn't know how much we owe to this man. You can go, Bob. I'll stay here, and do the best I can for him. And either you'll find me here in a month from now, if necessary, or you'll know that I've been nabbed and flung into quod!"

Bob began to unyoke the horse.

"I came by Glen Gully," old Tom went on. "It's due north, about ten miles from here, more or less, I reckon. The folk there chanced to speak of a Dr. Ashley, fresh from the Old Country, of whom they think highly. It's just as well he's a new chum. Mebbe he won't twig anything. Fetch him along if you can."

They shook hands.

"Not another word, but ride like the wind!" the old man said stoutly, to hide his pang at the parting. "And good luck go with you."

Vaulting on to the barebacked horse, Bob cantered away. When out on the road he looked up at the stars. Then he dug his heels against the gallant animal's ribs and galloped hard.

Up on the top of the hill he bore away to the right across a fairly open country. Under the trees, over the brushwood, he galloped, urging on the tired horse, and gazing up at the sky whenever possible to make certain that he was taking the right line. He crossed a large hill, and came down into a valley; went up another hill, and looked round. Then he swung round to the left.

There was no town in sight; yet, as he had ridden a good ten miles now, and as he took note of the contour of the land, his bush knowledge told him that he was not far from Glen Gully. Every town in the bush has been laid down near a good water supply, and Bob, from the configuration of the country, was able to see where the creeks were certain to unite in a large stream. He held on, and before long came to a fair road, such as runs for a couple of miles on each side of every town.

Clattering along the road, he turned into the one street of which the town was formed. Amidst the various wooden houses, there was small trouble in picking out the doctor's. It was certain to be one of the largest, and the third he came to had a brass plate upon the door. The lad was glad to see a light shining in the parlour.

He heard voices in merry conversation, and as he knocked they ceased. The door was opened by a young man.

"You are Dr. Ashley?" the lad asked.

"Yes."

"A friend of mine has met with a serious accident ten miles away," Bob explained. "Can you come with me?"

"What's the nature of the accident?"

Bob hesitated. But if the doctor did not take the necessary instruments to deal with a surgical case, Dashwood might die.

"A gunshot wound," he said.

The doctor whistled softly.

"All right. Stop this way!" he said. "I'll get my medical case and saddle a horse. I'll be ready in five minutes."

He flung open the door.

"Walk in," he said. "Dick, here's a man who's called me on a sick case—a gunshot wound. I must be off."

Bob entered the room. He could not hide a start, whilst his heart turned cold. For, seated in an armchair, smoking a cigar, was an inspector of police! At once he sat forward.

"A gunshot wound—eh?" he queried, gazing keenly at the lad. "Humph! This is a job for me, too, I fancy! Who is the man, and how was he wounded?"

"I can't tell you much about it," Bob replied, at a loss for an explanation.

"Hey! That's rum, ain't it? You can tell me more than you want to, I can see. Now, my young friend, I'm not going to stand any nonsense. Honest men don't carry firearms in the bush, as you know well. You had better tell the truth, or else—"

There was a heavy thud on the floor above. At once the inspector paused. He listened, and then he called.

"Doc!" he cried. "Your patient is on the wallaby again. Drat the fellow! He's going to make another beano. Hi, there! Doc, doc!"

He strode to the door. Footsteps were descending the stairs. A man dashed into the room. Involuntarily Bob gave a yell.

The man paused, dishevelled and wild-eyed. He saw the

lad, and clutched at his heart, as if to save it from bursting.

"Hilder!" he almost raved. "Young Bob Hilder back to life like his father! Hilder the swindler! Stop him! Catch him, else he'll be the death of me, as sure as my name is Gell!"

Bob reeled back. The inspector whipped a revolver from his pocket.

"Halt! I know you now! Move a foot, and I fire!" he thundered. "Ha! You young scoundrel, you've tacked yourself on to Dashwood's gang! It is Dashwood who is wounded, I am certain!"

A Narrow Escape.

Bob, his face white, stood with his back to the wall, whilst the inspector held the revolver level with his head.

"Hands up!" the inspector commanded. "We've been hunting for you for a long time now, young Hilder, but I've got you at last. Yes; and through you we'll get Dashwood, too!"

All was lost. To hurl himself on the man would be madness. To plead with him would, of course, be useless. And not only was he caught, but Dashwood, too, must be caught if his life was to be saved. And Bob, in that terrible moment, saw that his father also would be made a prisoner. Yet there was nothing he could do.

"You'll stay here till I can summon help," the inspector went on. "Then you'll take us to the hiding-place of that precious scoundrel Dashwood. If you refuse, your punishment will be the harder. And when we've got you both rounded up, decent folk will be able to live again in security."

Bob did not answer. There was nothing he could say, and his tongue had gone dry. Gell, behind the inspector, was rocking from side to side. His bloodshot eyes were gleaming; his face and hands were twitching; he was near to lunacy. Outside, Bob could hear the doctor leading his horse from the stable. He knew nothing so far of the tragic discovery his friend the inspector had made.

With a self-satisfied smile, seeing how completely the lad realised his helplessness, the inspector turned a trifle to one side. This was the chance for which Gell had been waiting. Thinking that the way was now open to attack Bob, he sprang forward, snarling like a wild animal. He collided with the inspector, sending him staggering, and knocking the revolver out of his hand.

He rushed at Bob. And the lad in that instant saw a chance to escape. As Gell came to him he dodged to one side. The inspector was stooping to pick up the revolver, and Bob, dashing for the door, sent him down by the force of the impact. The lad stumbled, but managed to save himself from falling. Next moment he was out into the hall.

He jumped through the doorway and ran. Never had he sped so fast. He had not gone twenty yards when a bullet whistled past his head; and then a stream of them followed. He heard rapid footsteps in pursuit, but he did not look back. On he ran for a hundred yards, and then sprang into a bit of scrub between two houses.

Through this he went without abating his speed, and up an incline and across a railway-track. On the far side the country was open for a bit, and beyond was the bush. Only when he got to the trees did he look back, and he saw that a man was still following. He took to his heels again, dodging in and out in the darkness of the bush until certain that recapture had become nigh impossible. Then he stood, ready to run again if anyone came near.

No one came. The inspector had realised the hopelessness of pursuit. As Bob listened, he heard the thud of horses' hoofs on the far side of the railway line, and he knew that the inspector and the doctor had mounted and were galloping hard. They intended to collect all the troopers possible and form a cordon around him. If he was to escape, it was necessary to push on at once.

Had they found his horse? he asked himself. Possibly they had not, but the risk of going back was too great, and in any case the animal was very tired. So the lad had ten miles to go on foot. Could he do the distance before day-break? He must try, anyhow, for nothing else was left to him.

So he set off. Getting a glimpse of the stars occasionally, he strode as swiftly as he could. To keep a direct course was impossible; but after an hour's hard walking he came to the top of the hill down which he had galloped into the town.

Now he struck out more boldly. Likely as not, the inspector was looking for him away to the north instead of towards the south, to which he now was going. In any case, to hunt for a man in such surroundings at night time, would be like searching for a needle in a stack of hay. If only he

(Continued on page iii of cover.)

CORNSTALK BOB!

(Continued from page 20.)

could cover the necessary distance before daybreak, he would be safe.

Yes, safe himself, but how would he find Dashwood? Would the outlaw be still alive? The lad felt a lump in his throat. He had failed in his mission of mercy; bitterly he upbraided himself for his want of caution. If only he had approached the doctor's house with more circumspection; if only he had looked into the sitting-room before knocking at the door, he might have awaited the departure of the inspector, and then have summoned the doctor. In that case Dashwood would have been receiving medical attention by now.

Deeply depressed, and fearing what he might hear on his return, the lad went on. So taken up was he by his sad thoughts, that he walked almost unconscious of his own danger, and therefore, when rousing himself from a reverie, he noticed the approach of dawn, he was considerably startled. Three miles of the journey lay before him yet, he calculated, and daylight would have come before he would be with his party. He quickened his pace.

By this time he was very tired; he had gone without food of sleep for a long time; the great anxiety he had been experiencing had helped to wear him out. But, at least, he had thrown his pursuers off the scent. Only very bad luck now could prevent him from— He stopped and drew a sharp breath. Men were galloping close by.

He broke into a sharp run and scaled a hill. He was now about a mile from the track into which his father and he had driven with the outlaw. He could see along the road. Four troopers were cantering along it, but they were not coming from Glen Gully, the town he had just left. Were they riding there in answer to a summons from the inspector? If so, they would pass soon.

No. They halted close to the track, and two of them dismounted. They began to search, and Bob quickly guessed what they were looking for. The tracks of the buggy wheels, of course! If they found these, and followed them up, they would come on his father and Dashwood hiding outside the maze, the entrance to which they could not find. Ay, and the troopers soon discovered the tracks! Bob saw one of them waving an arm to his comrades, in considerable excitement.

The only hope was to get ahead first and warn his father. Summoning all his remaining strength, he began to run. The troopers were already mounting, to follow up the tracks on horseback. Panting and exhausted, and with desperation at his heartstrings, Bob rushed and stumbled on. His chest was heaving; he felt as if his head must burst; his eyesight began to play him tricks; and yet, above all else, he must keep his judgment clear and his mind cool if he was to succeed.

He crossed the scrub at an angle, and before long he could hear the troopers cantering, and the sound of their voices from time to time. Perhaps his father would hear them, too, and seek better cover. But how could the old man carry Dashwood away? Bob knew he would never save himself alone.

Now the lad was only a couple of hundred yards from the troopers, and running almost parallel with them. At any moment they might chance to see him; there wasn't time for him to be cautious; speed now was everything. On and on he ran. He knew, at least, where his father was in hiding; that was to his advantage.

He heard a shout, and guessed that he was seen. He plunged along, the horses now getting into a gallop. He broke through the thick scrub, running almost blindly, and came out where he expected to see his father and Dashwood. They were not there!

Rubbing the perspiration from his eyes, he looked around baffled, and now in despair. Had he made a mistake? Could he have been wrong, and were they a hundred yards beyond, or to the right or left? He could not search properly; his best, indeed his only hope, lay in pushing on. He began to run again.

And now the troopers were close behind, and enjoying the chase. He could hear them shouting and laughing, and he knew that he was the quarry. If he came upon his father now, he would be leading the troopers on to him. If he did not find him, they would catch him, too. Whatever he did now must end in disaster. Yet he would keep on to the end.

Bullets began to whistle, and the leaves above him were cut down. On and on he staggered, and every moment his pursuers were drawing closer. At last he felt he could go no further. He stumbled, nearly fell, but recovered himself, and went a few more yards. Then he stumbled again, and this time he dropped, almost in a heap.

It was over. He had done his best and failed. All hope

left him, and he had made ready to face the worst without further struggle, when a voice rang in his ears.

"Get this way! Crawl along!"

He looked up. He recognised Bogong! The black was only a couple of yards away, and on his hands and knees, his eyes shining, a grin on his face. Something in his voice and manner gave Bob fresh heart. He moved towards him.

"Quick!" Bogong urged. "They here soon, but too late."

As he spoke, he turned and went through the thick undergrowth, Bob following. In a moment he pushed some bushes aside, and Bob's heart began to thump with joy. He recognised the spot. They were entering the maze discovered by Bogong, where no white man could pursue them.

"Safe! Safe!" the lad gasped. "Bogong, you were just in time!"

Bogong grinned.

"Hark! They baffled already," he said. "Yah, yah! Black fellow fool them every time!"

Bob lay down. A delicious feeling of security came over him. Before long his breath was coming less sharply, and the colour was creeping back to his face. Bogong watched him in silence.

They could hear the troopers tramping about; their laughter had died away, and their cheery calls to one another began to give place to loud grumbling, and cries of irritation. Bogong listened in evident glee. At last he stood up.

"They going," he said. "And we go, too!"

Dashwood's Resolve.

Bob stood up and followed him. Outside, the bush was now bathed in golden sunlight, and the birds were chattering; but here all was darkness and silence, as it always is in daytime as well as at night. The farther they plunged, the more intricate the way became; but to the black tracker there was no difficulty—he walked as confidently as if on an open highway.

They arrived soon at the spot from whence they could look down at the glade in the centre of the maze. Up to this Bob had been content to follow, but now he wanted to hear the worst. Full of apprehension, he spoke.

"Are you alone here, Bogong?" he asked.

"The others here, too," the black boy replied—"massa and the old man."

"And how is your master?"

"Massa very ill," Bogong replied.

"Is he dying?"

"I came in time. Massa wanting food, and no one to get it. I know, and I go."

Bob understood. There was plenty of food stored in the hut in the glade, he remembered, but neither he nor his father were able to find their way thither. Bogong had gone for it; it had revived Dashwood, and his father and Bogong had then been able to get him through the maze.

"How did you get your master along?" Bob asked.

"We put him in buggy; I pull buggy, old man push," the black explained. "Then I look for you."

"And it was lucky for me that you did," Bob said earnestly. "Three minutes more, and I would have been nabbed. You've been a good friend to me, Bogong, and I won't forget it!"

They descended the track, and crossed over to the hut. Old Tom Hilder was cooking some soup when he saw Bob. His face lit up with joy.

"Hallo, my lad! So you got through all right?" he began. "But weren't you able to fetch a doctor?"

Very briefly the lad explained all that had befallen him. His father listened in astonishment.

"That was a narrow shave," he remarked. "It was lucky that Gell went for you, and thus gave you a chance; and well, too, that you took it. And to think that we were so near to being nabbed also! Those troopers who got on our track must have been the fellows who followed Bogong. They can't have been sent by that inspector!"

"I didn't know that Bogong had been followed," Bob remarked, in surprise.

"You remember that when we left Coulter's place in the buggy he fell behind to keep watch," old Tom reminded the lad; "and when Dashwood collapsed, and we waited, Bogong did not come up, and we had to do as best we could without him. It seems that these troopers came out on the road close to him, and our friend the dorkie was equal to the emergency. He cleared off across the scrub, they hard on his heels; but trust a black tracker to outwit any white man. They very soon chucked the job of catching him."

"And then he came on to you?"

"Yes; and jolly glad I was to see him. I began to fear more and more every minute that Dashwood couldn't hold out until you returned with the doctor. But Bogong put that right. He nipped down here, and got some stimulants. That brought Dashwood round, and we made a start."

(Another grand instalment next week.)

A Cash Prize for Every Contributor to this Page.



AN EASY ONE!

The reading lesson at school that day told the story of a poor prisoner who was shut up in a cold and narrow cell. The children were reading a portion each, in order, round the class.

After a while the teacher, desirous of ascertaining whether the children understood fully what they were reading about, decided to question the class when the boy who was reading had finished.

"—And through the small window a bar of sunlight came, striking against the grim wall as if it wished to brighten the captive's dreary life. He reached up, trying to get a glimpse of the outer world."

"Now, why was he anxious to look out?" asked the teacher.

"To see who threw the soap in!" answered the class, in one voice.—Sent in by D. Rabbetts, Stroud.

FORCING THE PACE.

An old Scot of miserly habits, whose name was George Gordon, was dying. His relatives had made many futile attempts in days past to persuade him to make a will, and they now commenced to urge him afresh. The old miser at first would pay no heed to their arguments, but at length gave a grudging consent. A lawyer was hastily sent for, but by the time he arrived the old man was sinking fast. The will was smartly drawn up, and duly awaited his signature. The miser was propped up in bed, and managed slowly to write "George Gor—". Then he fell back, exhausted. An eager relative standing by seized the pen, and pushed it into the old man's hand.

"'D'—George 'D,'" he urged, referring to the next letter of the signature.

The old fellow glared up wrathfully.

"Dee!" he snapped. "I'll dee when I'm ready!"—Sent in by J. Gray, Leeds.

RISES ALL ROUND.

An old sea captain was sitting by the briny ocean, listening to the experiences of a young sailor. It was evident, from the expression on the old salt's face, that he did not believe all that was being told him, and at last he interrupted:

"Don't come here, telling me your cock-and-bull yarns about waves being a hundred feet high! Why, I was at sea for fifty years, and sailed in rougher weather than you're ever likely to see, but I've never known waves no 'igher than fifty feet!"

"Ha," said the young sailor; "but see how everything's gone up since the war!"—Sent in by G. Lowe, Stockport.

PROOF POSITIVE.

The father was questioning his small son as to his progress at school. Of course, the little man assured him that he was getting on splendidly.

"But is the teacher satisfied with you?" inquired his parent.

"Oh, yes; quite!" replied the infant.

"How do you know that?" asked his father. "Has he told you so?"

"Yes," answered the boy. "After the examination the other day he said to me, 'If all my scholars were like you I would shut up my school this very day!' That shows that I know enough!"—Sent in by J. Drazin, London.

CORRECT!

The inspector, visiting the village school, walked into a class-room where the arithmetic examination was in progress.

He listened for some time in silence, and then suggested asking the children a few questions himself. Turning to a small boy, he asked:

"If I gave you five rabbits, and afterwards two more, how many would you have?"

"Eight, sir!" was the scholar's prompt reply.

"How do you make that out?" asked the inspector. "If I gave you five rabbits, and then two, that would make seven."

"No, sir!" said the boy. "I've got one at home."—Sent in by J. Comerton, Belfast.

NOT THE ONLY ONE!

The new recruit had been appointed orderly to the captain, from whom he was receiving his instructions.

"You rise at five o'clock," said the captain, "shave yourself, clean your boots and equipment; then you clean my boots, buttons, belt, etc., shave me, and see to my horse, and groom him. After that, you go and help to serve the breakfast. After breakfast, lend a hand—"

The recruit, whose face had been growing longer and longer, then interrupted:

"Beg pardon, sir, but ain't there anybody else in the Army besides me?"—Sent in by F. Mills, Herne Bay.

AN ABSOLUTE NECESSITY.

The gentleman was addressing the children of the Sunday-school, and in the course of his remarks said:

"Now, if we decided to turn and look ourselves in the face, what should we find we needed most?"

He was confused and very amazed to hear a young voice from the back call out:

"An indiarubber neck, sir!"—Sent in by Miss K. Woodhead, Batley.

PAWS.

A would-be politician was once addressing an assembly in the West of Ireland. He did not appear to be making a very deep impression—in fact, many of his remarks only annoyed and disgusted his audience. At last, when several of his hearers began to move away, the orator held up his hand and said:

"Pause, my friends, pause!"

His confusion was complete when a voice cried:

"Ay, sorr, and rale dirty ones they are!"—Sent in by F. Mitchell, Galway.

FISHY.

Fishmonger: "Wotcher want?"

Urchin: "An 'addick."

Fishmonger: "Finnon?"

Urchin: "No. Fick 'un!"

—Sent in by R. Cushing, New Zealand.

LIGHT CONVERSATION.

Muggins: "Heard the latest news?"

Juggins: "No. What's that?"

Muggins: "Why, they're not going to have lamp-posts any longer."

Juggins: "You don't say so! How's that?"

Muggins: "Because they're already long enough!"—Sent in by E. Marney, Leytonstone.

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