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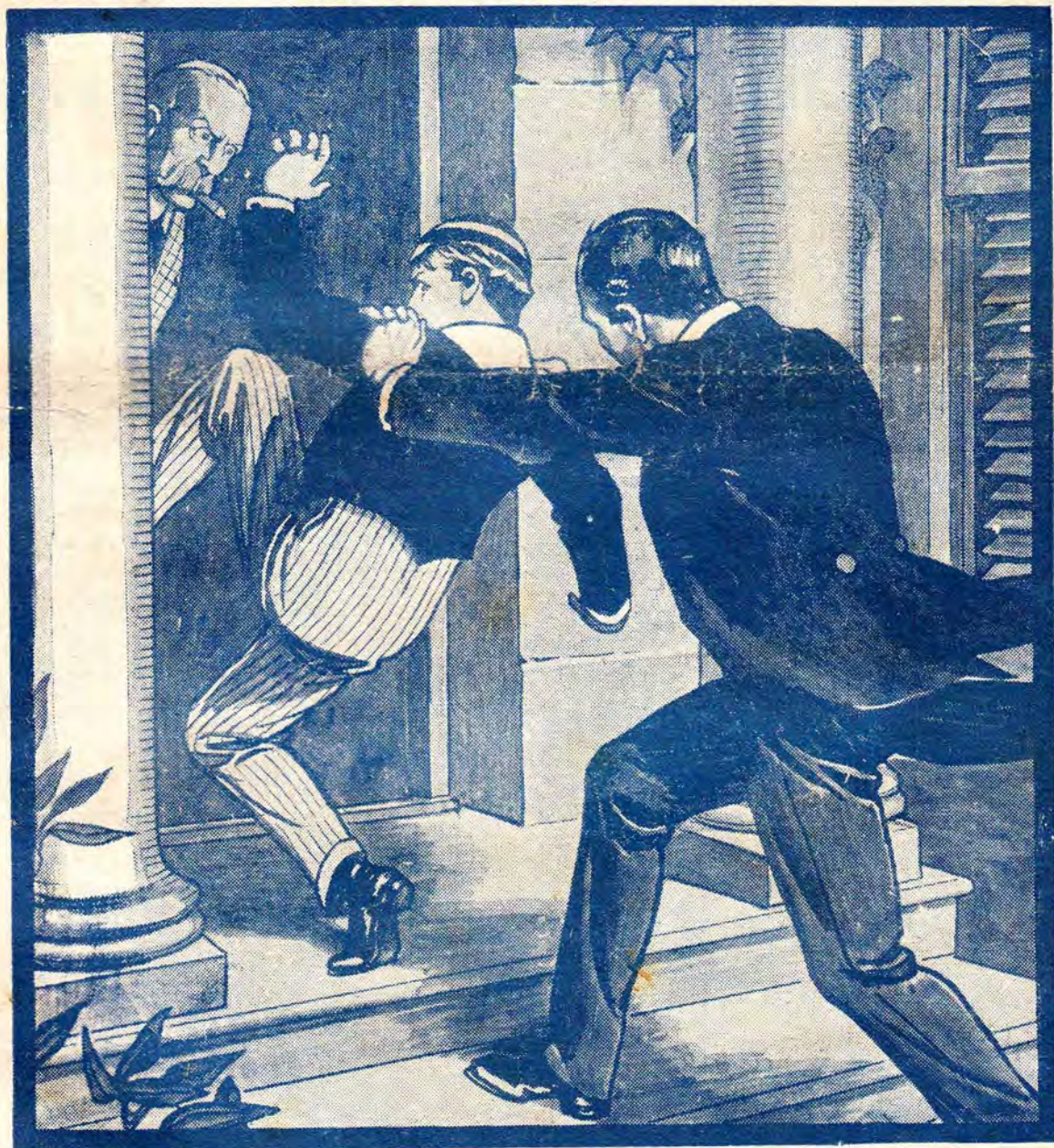
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TALBOT'S FOES!

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



TALBOT TRAPPED!

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A MAGNIFICENT NEW, LONG, COMPLETE SCHOOL STORY OF TOM MERRY & CO. AT ST JIM'S.

TALBOT'S FOES!

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.

A Face From the Past.

TALBOT! Tom Merry called in cheerily at the door of Talbot's study in the Shell passage.

Talbot of the Shell did not answer. He was standing by the study window, looking out into the quadrangle, where rain was pattering down.

In the quad the leaves were falling and whirling in the autumn wind and the rain. Talbot's handsome face reflected the gloom without. His look was one of deep and not happy thought, and he was too absorbed in his reflections to hear his chum's voice at the door.

Tom Merry looked surprised for a moment, and then his sunny face clouded. His chum, generally as cheery as any fellow at St. Jim's, was in the grip of the black mood that came upon him sometimes. Tom Merry had seen that expression upon his face before, and he knew that Talbot was thinking of his strange and shadowed past—the dark old days before the handsome Shell fellow had come to St. Jim's.

Tom Merry stepped into the study. Manners and Lowther were waiting for him on the staircase with their coats on. The Terrible Three were going out in the rain, and Talbot was to go with them; but he had apparently forgotten.

"Talbot!" repeated Tom Merry.

The Shell fellow heard then, and he turned quickly from the window. His face coloured as he met Tom Merry's glance.

"Yes? Hallo?" he said. "It's you, Tom."

"Did you think it was my ghost?" asked Tom, with a smile. "I called you, Talbot. You were coming out, you know."

"Is it time? I'm sorry I forgot. I—I was thinking."

His colour deepened.

"Anything the matter?" asked Tom.

"No. Oh, no!"

"You don't look very cheery."

"Well, I'm not feeling very cheery," said Talbot. "The—the weather, perhaps. It doesn't look very inviting outside."

"Nothing's happened?" asked Tom, eyeing him.

"What should happen?"

"Look here, old man," said Tom Merry quietly, "you're down in the blues. I can see that. It's not like you. You're looking just as you used to look when—"

Tom Merry paused.

It was tacitly understood among Talbot's chums that the past was never to be alluded to—that grim, strange past which seemed like a dream to Talbot now, when he had been called "The Toff," and was the prince of cracksmen—a very different fellow from Talbot of St. Jim's, the nephew of Colonel Lyndon, and one of the most popular fellows in the school.

"When?" repeated Talbot, with a faint smile.

"Oh, never mind!" said Tom. "Let's get off."

"I know what you mean, Tom," said Talbot quietly. "I don't want to be evasive with you, old fellow. I was thinking of—that time."

"But why?" asked Tom. "It's all over and done with long ago. Most of the fellows have forgotten what they ever knew about it. What do you want to keep it in mind for?"

"I don't keep it in mind. Sometimes I forget the whole thing for weeks together. Tom, and then it comes back into my mind," said Talbot. "But—but I've seen a man—"

Tom Merry understood then.

"A man you knew when you were the—"

"When I was the Toff, and used to consort with rogues and thieves in the rookery in Angel Alley," said Talbot bitterly. "It seems like a black dream now; but I couldn't help being brought up as I was, could I, Tom? If my uncle had known me then, it would have been different; but I was alone in the world, and my poor father had gone to the bad, and he left me—as I was then. I couldn't help it, Tom."

"My dear old chap," said Tom Merry softly, "I know you couldn't. Nobody thinks so. Some fellows have hard luck, and you had, at that time. You chucked it as soon as you were among decent people, and saw things in a different light. You needn't reproach yourself. You oughtn't to think of it."

"I don't; only, seeing that man to-day brought it all back into my mind," said Talbot.

"Who was it?" asked Tom.

"Do you remember a sharper called Tickey Tapp—not his real name, I think—who used to hang round the school at one time? He got Gore into trouble with gambling, and so on; and I made him clear off. I knew enough about the brute to send him to prison, and I gave him the choice of letting Gore alone or going to chokoey. He went."

"I remember," said Tom, with a nod.

"I saw him to-day," said Talbot. "I was coming back from Rylcombe after dinner, and I saw him in the lane. He was talking to a one-eyed man—a shifty-looking fellow. They did not notice me, and I came on."

"You're nothing to fear from Tickey Tapp, Talbot."

"Nothing. He has reason to fear me, for that matter. I'm not afraid of him," Talbot smiled slightly. "But—but the sight of him and his evil face—you understand, Tom?"

"I understand. The man can't have come back in connection with you?" asked Tom.

Talbot shook his head.

"Oh, no! I don't think that's possible. He may be playing his old game as a sharper in his old locality, that's all. But—" Talbot paused, and shook himself, as if shaking off gloomy thoughts. "But I'm a duffer to give way like this to the blues. Let's get off, Tom."

"Come on, old scout!"

The two Shell fellows left the study together.

Talbot, by an effort of will, had banished the black thoughts from his mind, and his handsome face was composed, if not quite so cheerful as usual.

Tom Merry was feeling troubled. He understood well enough how any reminder of his old life was gall and wormwood to Talbot, giving him the feeling that he was not, after all, like other fellows at St. Jim's. Tom Merry would very gladly have planted his fist in the evil face of Tickey Tapp for returning to his former haunts, and rousing bitter recollections in Reginald Talbot's mind by that chance meeting.

"Oh, here you are!" yawned Monty Lowther, as the two juniors came along to the staircase. "I thought you were never coming."

"We've been letting Gussy bore us while we were waiting," said Manners, also yawning.

Arthur Augustus D'Arey of the Fourth was standing near the head of the stairs, with an unusually frowning expression upon his aristocratic face.

He gave a slight sniff as Manners spoke.

"Weally, Manners—" he began.

"Gussy's on the high horse," said Lowther. "He wants us to go on the war-path, and scalp Racke & Co. They're being naughty again."

"Oh, bother Racke!" said Tom Merry.

"It's wathah a sewious mattah, Tom Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus. "Wacke and Cwooke and those wottahs are food-hoggin' again. Twimble told me so. Even Twimble says he is shocked at them."

"More likely they won't let him join in the feed," said Tom, laughing.

"Yaas, it is poss that Twimble's motives are not disintewested," admitted Arthur Augustus. "Howevah, that does not alter the case. It appeahs to be cleah that Wacke's man, that one-eyed wottah Scaife, is supplyin' him with food against the wotions—Twimble says so. I weally think that those feeshful wottahs ought to be westwained."

Talbot's brow darkened.

Tom Merry glanced at him quickly. He remembered that Talbot had said that Tickey Tapp had been talking to a one-eyed man in the lane. Talbot met his glance, and nodded.

"It was Scaife," he said in a low voice. "Racke's man. They are birds of a feather, I think."

"I have spoken to Blake and Hewwies and Dig," continued Arthur Augustus. "But they say they won't go out in the wain, even to see Wacke hanged."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you fellows will support me, I will take them in hand, and wub their noses in the mud," said Arthur Augustus. "What do you say, Tom Mewwy?"

"Nother time, old chap. We're going over to Abbotsford this afternoon," said Tom Merry. "Talbot's uncle is off to the Front again, and we're going to

see the Tommies off with him. Racke can go and eat cokel!"

"Yaas; but—"

"Ta-ta, old bird!"

The Terrible Three and Talbot went downstairs, leaving Arthur Augustus shaking his noble head very seriously. The Honourable Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was very strict on the subject of the "grub rules," and the food-hogging of Racke & Co. roused his noble ire. He was still pondering on the matter when Racke and Crooke and Scrope came along, with their coats on and umbrellas under their arms. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy turned his eyeglass on the three black sheep with a severity that ought to have abashed them, but failed to have that effect. Racke & Co. were too tough to be abashed easily.

"I am quite awash whah you are goin', you wottahs!" said D'Arcy.

"Go hon!" remarked Racke.

"You are goin' food-hoggin'!"

"My dear man, you don't say so!" yawned Aubrey Racke. "Get out of the gangway, will you?"

"I have a gweat mind to thwash you all wound on the spot!" said Arthur Augustus sternly.

Racke made a sign to his comrades. The three Shell fellows suddenly seized Arthur Augustus, and to his wrath and amazement the swell of St. Jim's found himself sitting on the floor, with Racke & Co. wiping their boots on him as they passed. The three young rascals scuttled downstairs, laughing; and Arthur Augustus sat up in a dazed state, gasping for breath.

"Bai Jove! Where's my eyeglass? You feahful wottahs!" roared Arthur Augustus. "I will give you a feahful thwashin' all wound! Gwoogh! I am feahfully dустay, you feahful hooligans! Oh, owumbel!"

The swell of St. Jim's scrambled to his feet with vengeance in his eye. But Racke & Co. were gone, and vengeance had to be postponed.

CHAPTER 2.

Good News From Crooke.

"HANG him!"

George Gerald Crooke made that amiable remark as Racke & Co. walked down the lane towards Rylcombe.

Ahead of the trio, in the lane, four juniors could be seen—Talbot of the Shell and the Terrible Three. It was upon the back of Talbot's unconscious head that Crooke's glance rested as he spoke.

"Eh? Hang whom?" asked Racke.

Crooke made a gesture towards the quartette ahead.

"Hang the lot of them, if you like!" said Racke genially. "As high as Haman, or higher. But what's got your rag out now?"

Crooke set his lips.

"Isn't it rotten?" he muttered. "I know where they're going—over to Abbotsford. My uncle's off to the Front again to-day, an' he's asked Talbot there. They're going to see the Tommies off."

"What a bore!"

"He hasn't asked me to come over," said Crooke. "My dear cousin has quite cut me out with nunky. Not that I want to go! What's the good of stickin' there an' watchin' the dashed Tommies en-train? Waste of time, I call it!"

"You bet!" agreed Racke.

"But my uncle might have asked me, all the same; he's asked Talbot!" growled Crooke. "I hardly get a word from Colonel Lyndon now. What's he got against me?"

Racke grinned.

"Well, considerin' what a stiff old bird he is, I think he's got a lot against you," he remarked. "You've tried to dish

Talbot with him—tried to make out that he's guyn' the old sport; tried to get nunky down on him, in fact. And as nunky spotted the game, it's natural that he should get his military back up."

"Oh, rats!" growled Crooke. "All I did was to try to show Talbot up in his true colours."

Racke winked at Scrope, who grinned. Crooke scowled at both of them.

"Do you think I take any stock in Talbot's reform?" he snarled. "I'm not to be caught with chaff like that. You know what he was before he came to St. Jim's—a young cracksmen, living among cracksmen—"

"I know you say so!" yawned Racke.

"It's true, you ass! Lots of fellows know it."

"There's somethin' in it!" said Scrope, with a nod. "There was no end of talk about Talbot once, and it was pretty clear that he was hand-in-glove with some jolly queer characters before he came to St. Jim's. I don't know all the rights of the story; lots of it was kept dark, but it was jolly fishy. Tom Merry stuck to him all along, though."

"He wouldn't stick to a chap that wasn't straight," said Racke. "I don't like him, but I know that's so. What's the good of pretendin' that it isn't?"

"Hang him, an' hang Talbot!" grunted Crooke. "I tell you he's suckin' up to my uncle for his money!"

"Well, you've got lots of dibs," said Scrope. "Isn't your father fairly rollin' in it? Doesn't he make it hand-over-fist in the City?"

"Colonel Lyndon's money ought to come to me, all the same!" said Crooke. "An' he's rich—jolly rich. He had a down on Talbot's father, an' it's just dashed obstinacy makes him take to Talbot. He's actually told me that I ought to follow Talbot's example—a dashed reformed cracksmen! Suppose he gets knocked over at the Front this time, I ought to come in for what he leaves behind."

"Oh, draw it mild!" muttered Scrope. "That's a rotten thing to think of, Crooke, when he's going out to fight the Germans!"

"You'd think of it, if you were his nephew instead of me!" sneered Crooke. "I'm out of the runnin' now; Talbot's cut me out. An' I don't believe in his reform, either; he finds it pays him better to run straight, that's all. By gad, I wish I could bowl him out in somethin'! I'd give a year of my life to dish him with Uncle Lyndon!"

"That's a bit above your weight, old nut!" smiled Racke.

Crooke scowled, and tramped on in sulky silence. Ahead of the three, Tom Merry & Co. disappeared into the village, but Racke and his friends did not enter Rylcombe. They stopped at Laurel Villa, down a side road, and went up the garden path and round to the porch at the back. That villa was the headquarters of Racke's man, Scaife.

The three young rascals entered by the back door, to which Racke had a key. There was a murmur of voices in the front room on the ground floor, and Racke went along the passage and looked in. Scaife was there, sprawling in an armchair and smoking a cigar, talking to a shifty-looking man with a pipe in his mouth. Racke scowled as he saw him, and recognised Tickey Tapp.

Scaife jumped up, and threw his cigar into the grate at the sight of Aubrey Racke.

Tickey Tapp rose to his feet.

"Look here, what are you doing here, Tapp?" exclaimed Racke. "I've warned you not to come here again!"

"No offence, sir!" said Mr. Tapp civilly, though his deep-set eyes gleamed at Racke's tone.

"Well, you're not wanted about here!" said Racke. "It draws attention to the place if you're seen here. You know what a thumpin' row there was here owin' to your startin' a gambling game in this house. I don't want any more of that!"

"That's done with, sir."

"I know it is: an' you're done with, too, so far as these premises are concerned, Tickey Tapp! There's the door!"

"Tickey just dropped in to speak to me, sir," said Scaife smoothly.

"I told you he wasn't to come here, Scaife!"

"It's not safe for him to be hangin' round," said Crooke, with a nod. "He's too jolly well known!"

"The fact is, sir, I wanted a few words with you!" said Tickey.

"With me?" exclaimed Crooke, in surprise.

"Yes, Master Crooke. I've something to tell you that will interest you—about your cousin, Master Talbot."

Crooke started.

"Look here, you can't jaw here!" said Racke.

"Oh, let the man alone a minute!" said Crooke. "I'm going to hear him! You can go and grub!"

Scaife had left the room quietly, and was gone to the kitchen. It was Scaife's business to provide the gorgeous spreads that Racke & Co. enjoyed in secret at the villa. Mr. Scaife was an excellent cook, and he had his own methods, whatever they were, of dodging the ration laws. Unlimited cash made that possible for Mr. Scaife, added to his own cunning. What his methods were Racke did not care a rap, so long as the spreads were provided.

"Look here, Tapp had better go!" said Racke. "You can talk with him somewhere else, Crooke!"

"Don't be hard on a man, Master Racke!" said Tickey Tapp, still very civilly. "I'm keeping you little secret, sir, you know!"

"What?"

"I wouldn't think of mentionin' what goes on in this house," said Tickey Tapp. "I wouldn't dream of it! But if a man was to talk careless, it would be rather bad for some parties, sir!"

Racke bit his lip hard. He understood the threat well enough, and he realised that it would not do to quarrel with this civil-spoken Mr. Tapp. Without replying, he walked out of the room, followed by Scrope.

Crooke sat down in the armchair vacated by Scaife, and lighted a cigarette.

"Now, what's that about Talbot, Tapp?" he asked. "You've told me before that you used to know him at the time before he came to St. Jim's."

"I knew him well, sir, said Tickey Tapp. "Bless your 'eart, he was pretty well known in the gang that used to hang out at the rookery in Angel Alley—the Toff, he was called then. He always had a very high way with him, even in them days. Him and the professor, and Hookey Walker, and the rest—I knew them all well. The gang's broken up now, and what's become of the others I dunno; but I know Master Talbot well. Oh, yes!"

There was deep malice in the sharper's tone, and Crooke felt himself growing more cordial. Anyone who hated Talbot of the Shell was well recommended to Talbot's cousin.

"Well, I know about Talbot's past," said Crooke. "I don't suppose you can tell me much about that. Colonel Lyndon knows it all, too! If you could tell me something useful—"

"The Toff's supposed to be reformed, and goin' straight now, sir."

"So he makes out."

"You don't believe it, Master Crooke?"

"No," growled Crooke, "I don't!"

"You'd like to show him up?"

"I'd give anything to show him up!" said Crooke savagely. "He's dished me with my uncle, and that means a lot to me. Look here, don't beat about the bush, Tapp! If you know anything that Talbot's done lately, I'll make it worth your while to tell me, if you've got proof!"

"Suppose," said Tapp slowly, and watching Crooke's expressive face like a cat—"suppose the Toff was to join in with some of the old gang once more, Master Crooke, to play the old game?"

"He's not such a fool, I'm afraid!"

"That's the size of it, sir. It could be worked."

Crooke started.

"You could induce him, you mean?" he exclaimed.

"That's what I mean, sir."

"Oh!" said Crooke.

There was a long pause, and Gerald Crooke let his cigarette go out. He was startled, and he was a little scared. He had hoped to hear something against Talbot—something that would be of use in disgracing him with Colonel Lyndon and at the school. But the scheme was to tempt Talbot back to the old path—to draw him from the path of honour back into his old pursuits; and the baseness of the suggestion startled even Crooke for a moment.

There was a struggle in his breast, and Tickey Tapp saw it as he watched his face. But Mr. Tapp had no doubts as to the outcome; he had taken Gerald Crooke's measure pretty accurately.

"You think you could do it?" muttered Crooke at last.

"I know I could."

"But—but—"

"Once let me get a word with the Toff—private like—and the thing's done," said Mr. Tapp. "You get him to call here, frimstance. I can tell you how to manage that easy. Then the trick's done!"

Crooke hesitated.

"If that's true, it shows that his reform is all humbug," he said slowly. "It's a proof that he's only spoofing."

"Course it is," said Tickey Tapp reassuringly. "Spoof all along the line!"

Again Crooke hesitated. Even if Talbot's reform was only skin-deep, he knew that it was a crime to put temptation in the way of the unhappy junior. But his hesitation did not last.

"You're sure?" he asked.

"Quite sure."

"Then he's only spoofin', an' it's simply a way of showin' him up in his true colours," muttered Crooke.

"Just so, sir."

"But—but how I could get him to come here—I'm not on friendly terms with him?" said Crooke haltingly. "We never speak. And—and it would have to be kept awfully dark!"

"There's an easy way, sir," said Tickey Tapp. "I'll give you the office, sir. Is it a go?"

"It's a go!" said Crooke at length.

Serope looked in at the door.

"Come on, Crooke—ready!" he called.

There was a savoury smell of cooking already from the direction of the kitchen. Mr. Scaife had only had to give the finishing touches to the feast already prepared. The food-hogs were about to enjoy themselves. But Gerald Crooke only made an impatient gesture.

"I'll come later," he said.

"More duffer you!" said Serope. And he went back to rejoin Racke.

It was some time before Crooke joined his comrades at the festive board; the interval being spent in deep consultation.

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with Tickey Tapp. When Crooke came in to join the feasters there was a grin of satisfaction on his face. Evidently the scheme had been arranged, and all was going well, from Crooke's peculiar point of view.

CHAPTER 3.

Talbot's Task.

"**B**AI Jove! You fellows look wathaw wet!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy made that remark as Tom Merry & Co. came in the dusk. The chums of the Shell did look rather wet and rather muddy. But they were very cheerful, and Talbot's face was bright now. He seemed to have thrown aside the cloud of depression that had weighed on him earlier in the day.

"It's owing to the rain, Gussy," answered Monty Lowther solemnly. "With your wonderful perspicacity, old bird, you've probably noticed that rain is sometimes wet."

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Crooke's been asking for you, Talbot," said Gore of the Shell.

"Crooke has?" repeated Talbot.

"Yes; he's in the study now," Gore grunted. "I didn't want to talk geeges, so I left him there."

"I'll go up!" said Talbot.

His handsome face softened a little as he went up the staircase with the Terrible Three.

"Crooke wants to ask me about Uncle Lyndon, I suppose," he said to his chums. "I'd have asked him to come over to Abbotsford with us if I'd thought that he'd have cared to come. I suppose he feels a bit anxious, as I do."

Tom Merry nodded, quite willing to leave Talbot in that opinion, though he did not share it. If Crooke felt any anxiety for his uncle at the Front, he succeeded in concealing it pretty well. Talbot lost no time in going to his study—he was pleased by that sign of grace in Crooke.

George Gerald Crooke was seated in the armchair, and Skimpole was in the study, busy with one of his big volumes. Crooke coloured a little as he met Talbot's glance.

"I suppose you're surprised to see me here?" he muttered.

"I'm glad to see you here," said Talbot. "Uncle's off now, and he looked quite well—fit as a fiddle."

"Eh? Did he? Oh, yes, Uncle Lyndon, of course," said Crooke. It was pretty clear that Crooke had not been thinking about Colonel Lyndon.

Talbot's face fell a little.

"The fact is, I wanted to speak to you, Talbot," said Crooke. "If—if you will give me a few minutes—"

"Certainly."

Crooke glanced expressively at Skimpole. Skimpole's big spectacles were fixed on his book, and he did not see Crooke's glance.

"I—I'd like to speak to you alone," said Crooke.

Talbot's face hardened.

"I don't see why," he answered. Talbot was not suspicious, but he had had more than one example of his cousin's treachery, and he did not trust Crooke, though he was willing to think the best of him that he could.

"It—it's about uncle," said Crooke sulkily. "I—I'd like to talk about him a bit—and—and—"

Skimpole rose to his feet, volume in hand.

"My dear fellows, I'll leave you for a little while," said the good Skimpole. "I am very pleased to see you two fellows so friendly, as near relations should be—very pleased indeed. Pray, have a pleasant talk."

And Skimpole left the study, taking his huge volume with him, and closed the door. Talbot remained standing, resting his hand on the table, and looking inquiringly at Crooke.

"Now that fool's gone I can talk!" said George Gerald.

"Go ahead!" said Talbot cheerily. If Crooke was concerned about the colonel it was a proof that he was not so hard-hearted, as he was supposed to be, and Talbot was ready to encourage him.

But Crooke did not mention Colonel Lyndon again. Evidently he had only given Skimpole an impression that family matters were to be discussed in order to get the unsuspicious Skimpole out of the study.

"Do you know a man named Tickey Tapp?" asked Crooke abruptly.

Talbot started.

"Yes," he said in a low voice.

"I thought so. You knew him when—"

"I'd rather not speak about it, Crooke. If you come here to remind me—"

"I haven't! That's all past and done with, isn't it?" said Crooke, with an air of great frankness. "If you know the man, and matters are as I think, you can do me a good turn, and some other fellows. Please yourself!"

"You can go on," said Talbot.

"Tickey Tapp is in Rylcombe."

"I know. I saw him to-day."

"Oh, you saw him!" said Crooke. "Good! I suppose you can guess that he's here for no good?"

"No doubt about that."

"Well, I'll tell you more," said Crooke. "He's hand-in-glove with Racke's man, Scaife, at Laurel Villa. You may have heard some of the talk about Cardew of the Fourth lately?"

"I've heard Trimble's talk about him, but took no notice of it."

"Well, Trimble was on the right track," said Crooke. "That fellow Tapp started a gambling game at the villa—petits-chevaux, it's called—and Cardew lost a lot of money there. His chum Clive chipped in and smashed up the machine."

"Good man!" said Talbot.

"A lot of other fellows went," said Crooke. "Racke allowed it to go on there—you know, the place is really his—because he liked the game, though it cost him a pretty penny, too. But as I said, Levison and Clive chipped in, and mucked it up. Tapp is awfully wild."

"Very likely."

"He hasn't cleared out," went on Crooke. "He's still hanging about the neighbourhood, an' he's a good deal at Scaife's place. I've got an idea that he's planning somehow to get even with Clive of the Fourth for busting up his game. He's a dangerous man—I know that."

"He is," assented Talbot, his lips setting. "A very dangerous man, Crooke."

"I suppose you wonder why I'm telling you all this?" went on Crooke. "Well, I know you used to know the man in the old days; and, from what's been let drop in my hearing, I believe you once warned him off from this neighbourhood. He had got a St. Jim's chap in his clutches, and you made him clear off by threatening to give him away on account of something you knew about him."

"It's true. I know enough about the man to send him to prison," said Talbot quietly. "I told him I would do it if he didn't clear, and he cleared."

"You could do it again?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's what I'm coming to," said Crooke. "The man's dangerous, and, though his game has been knocked on the head at the villa, he may start it again somewhere else. I believe he's looking for a chance to get even with

Clive. It may save no end of trouble if he could be got rid of. He's the kind of man to lay for Clive, and bash him in the dark—a regular ruffian! If you could make him clear you ought to do it. That's all."

Talbot looked very hard at Crooke.

"That's right enough," he said. "I was already thinking of it when I saw him in the lane to-day. But—but—"

"But you didn't expect me to suggest it," said Crooke, with a grin. "Well, I've got my reasons. I'm in with Racke in some things, but I don't care to get mixed up with that kind of man. He's dangerous, and might round on a chap any minute. The fact is, I'm a bit afraid of him and what he might do; and if he hurt Clive some day there would be no end of a shindy, and lots of things might come out—things that wouldn't suit me."

"I understand," said Talbot drily.

"I'm not pretending to be disinterested," said Crooke. "I want the man to clear off; he's dangerous. From what I've heard, you did the trick once, and could do it again. It's up to you, then."

"And I shall do it," said Talbot. "Tickey Tapp will have his choice between going away for good and going to prison."

"Right!" said Crooke, with an air of relief. "Mind, this is in confidence, of course. Racke would be wild if he knew I'd spoken to you. He plays cards with the fellow, and he doesn't agree with me in this. You won't mention what I've said to you?"

"No. I don't talk to Racke."

"I don't want to quarrel with Racke, of course, or Scrope—or Scaife, for that matter; but, really, it would be better for Racke to have nothing to do with a scoundrel like Tickey Tapp. The man will get him into mischief—I'm sure of that."

"Very likely. Can you tell me where to find him?"

"That's just what I can do," said Crooke. "He goes to the villa every evening to play cards with Scaife. I don't know where he lives, but he's at Laurel Villa every evening at half-past eight."

"That's after locking-up," said Talbot slowly.

"Well, that's when you could find him, if you liked," said Crooke, rising. "I don't think you'd have much trouble with him. I noticed that he looked alarmed when your name was mentioned, and he asked us not to mention to you that he was in the neighbourhood. You'll keep it dark, of course? I don't want to get his knife into me."

Talbot nodded, and Gerald Crooke quitted the study. He drew a deep breath when he was in the passage.

"That's done it!" he muttered. "Easier than I thought—"

"I say, Crooke!"

Crooke spun round, startled, and glared at Baggy Trimble of the Fourth.

"You fat rotter, what are you spying for?" he exclaimed furiously.

Trimble jumped back, startled.

"Who's spying?" he demanded warmly. "Can't a chap walk along the blessed passage if he likes?"

Crooke glared at him, and hurried away to his own study, leaving Baggy Trimble looking considerably astonished.

Talbot of the Shell had sat down to his prep rather early. He wanted to get his work done. His mind was quite made up—indeed, it had almost been made up before Crooke spoke to him—on the subject of Tickey Tapp. The rascally sharper was not wanted near St. Jim's, and Talbot knew that he could only be there for mischief. That evening, now that he knew where to find Tickey Tapp, he intended to see the



Looking for Talbot.
(See Chapter 6.)

man, and warn him to go. If he did not go Talbot meant to call in at the police-station; and, in the latter case, Tickey Tapp would go fast enough, escorted by a man in blue.

Talbot went quietly and steadily through his work, and finished early. Gore and Skimpole had come into the study, and they were still at prep when Talbot rose.

"Hallo! Finished?" asked Gore.

"Yes."

"You'll have to wait a bit for me," said Gore. "I'll see you in the gym in about half an hour."

"Eh?"

"You haven't forgotten you were going to have the gloves on with me, I suppose?"

"I—I'd forgotten," said Talbot. "If you don't mind, Gore, we'll leave it till to-morrow."

"Just as you like, if you've got anything on this evening," said Gore. "I don't mind."

Talbot nodded, and quitted the study.

CHAPTER 4. Out of Bounds.

"TWOOT in, deah boy!"

Talbot of the Shell was passing Study No. 6 on his way to the stairs when Arthur Augustus D'Arcy called to him.

"Yes, trot in," said Jack Blake. "Just in time, old scout! We want you to umpire."

"Why, what's on?" asked Talbot.

Blake and Herries and Digby were grinning, but the face of Arthur Augustus was very serious.

"I am goin' to give Blake a lesson, deah boy," said D'Arcy. "Blake has the extwadinaway ideah in his head that he could knock me out with the gloves. I am goin' to double him up in one wound, as a warnin' not to be conceited. Pway come in and wefewee for us."

Talbot smiled, but it was rather a

worried smile. He wanted to slip quietly out of the School House for his visit to Tickey Tapp. It was past locking-up, and it was necessary to leave quietly, if he left at all. He did not want to draw attention to the fact that he had an engagement out of doors for that evening. Breaking bounds after dark was a rather serious matter.

"Come in, old chap!" said Herries. "Not busy—what? Done your prep?"

"Yes; but—"

"Then come in, and referee in the terrific combat," said Dig.

"Excuse me; I've got to get along," said Talbot hurriedly; and he walked on before the Fourth-Formers could ask any questions, leaving them rather surprised.

He hurried downstairs, and slipped out quietly into the dusky quad, putting on his cap as he went. The rain had ceased, fortunately, and he did not need his coat.

It was very dark in the quadrangle, and Talbot hurried across to the school wall where it bordered the road. Three figures loomed up in the gloom, and the Shell fellow suddenly found himself collared.

"Oh!" he ejaculated. "What—"

Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn, of the New House, grinned at him in the gloom. Figgins & Co. were taking a sprint round the quad, as they often did in the evening.

"Naughty!" said Figgins. "School House kid going to break bounds! It's up to us to teach him manners. Bump him!"

"Hold on!" said Talbot breathlessly.

"No larks, Figgys! I'm in a hurry."

"Hallo, that's Talbot's voice!" exclaimed Kerr, peering at him.

"Yes; let me go!"

"Mustn't go out of bounds!" chuckled Fatty Wynn. "Naughty!"

Talbot repressed an exclamation of THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 563.

annoyance. Figgins & Co. were only being humorous with me. I was sure that anything close easy House "C" as a special specimen of your nature. The Green... "Nothing of the kind!" said Talbot, laughing.

"All right; I'll give you a bunk!" And Figgins & Co., instead of bumping the School House junior, helped him over the wall, and then resumed their sprint. Talbot dropped into the road, and set his face towards Rylcombe.

He was feeling anxious to get his interview with Tickey Tapp over—almost feverishly anxious. The man's evil face haunted him—an unpleasant reminder of his own early, evil days—and he was bitterly angry with the rascal for returning to the vicinity of St. Jim's. As he tramped on in the darkness he was tempted to make for the police-station direct, instead of giving Tapp the chance to escape. But he shrank from that.

With Tickey Tapp or any of his kidney Talbot had nothing in common; but there had been a time when such men were his associates. He had completely broken with the past; but he shrank from the thought of giving information, even against an unscrupulous rascal like Tickey Tapp. He only wanted to be clear of the man. And he had a shrinking, too, from any dealings with the police, which would lead to talk and discussion, and to all the miserable story of the past being dragged into the light once more.

He wanted to forget it all, and he wanted others to forget it.

But if Tickey Tapp refused to go, he was grimly resolved upon his course. At any cost that rascal should not remain near the school.

He arrived at Laurel Villa, and found the house quite dark as he went up to the door. After what Crooke had told him, however, he had no doubt that Tickey Tapp was there with Scaife. He groped for the knocker, and rapped loudly.

The door was opened at once, and he made out a man's form in the dark hall within. A single eye glittered at him from the gloom.

"What's wanted?" It was Scaife's voice.

"You can let me in, Scaife," said Talbot quietly. "I've called to see Tickey Tapp, who is here with you."

There was a pause, and then Scaife said sullenly:

"You can come in!"

There was no light to be seen in the house, and it was Talbot's old caution, learned in his wild days as the Toff, and which had become habitual to him, that made him strike a match before he entered. Scaife gave him a peculiar look in the light of the match.

Close by the door Tickey Tapp was standing, and his hard face was a little pale as the sudden light revealed it.

"Oh, you're here!" said Talbot, holding up the match.

"I'm here, if you want to speak to me, Toff!" said Tickey Tapp sullenly. "You can come in!"

"No need to come in," answered Talbot. "I can speak to you here!"

"What are you afraid of?" sneered the sharper.

"I am afraid of nobody; least of all of you!" said Talbot contemptuously. "But

I do not choose to enter the house. I have very little to say to you, Tickey Tapp, and that little can be said here!"

The match went out.

"You can talk here," said Scaife. "What does it matter, Tickey? I'll leave you to it. Shut the door after the young gentleman's gone."

And Scaife's footsteps rang away in the darkness to the back of the house. Talbot stood on the doorstep, barely within the doorway. He could just make out Tickey Tapp's form in the gloom within.

"Well, what is it, Toff?" asked Tickey Tapp in a low voice that had a faint tremor in it. Talbot could divine that the ruffian was a prey to some feeling of disquiet and uneasiness.

"I think you can guess!" said Talbot. "You came to this neighbourhood before, Tickey Tapp, and I warned you off. You've got to clear! I warned you not to come back here, and you have come!"

"P'raps I wanted to see an old pal," said Tickey Tapp, with a hoarse chuckle. "P'raps I ain't forgotten old friends as quick as you 'ave, Toff!"

"You were never a friend of mine! Even when I was what I was I always despised you for a swindling, sneaking thief!" said Talbot scornfully. "Listen to me, Tickey Tapp! My past is known and done with; you know that I had the King's pardon, and you cannot harm me now if you shouted all you know of me from the house-tops. With you it is different. I have only to tell what I know of you for you to be arrested at once, and brought to trial on half a dozen charges."

"And the Toff's goin' to turn nark, is he?" said Tickey Tapp.

Talbot winced.

"I'm going to say nothing," he said, "so long as you keep clear of me."

"Ain't I kep' clear of you, Toff?"

"And this neighbourhood," said Talbot. "You're here for no good—I know what you're here for. The last time it was to swindle and blackmail a foolish fellow in my Form; now your game is something of the same kind, on a larger scale. Well, I won't allow it to go on! I tell you plainly, Tickey Tapp, that you're to leave Rylcombe this very night; and if ever I hear of you again within a dozen miles of St. Jim's, I'll go straight to the police and put them on your track!"

"You mean that, Toff?"

"I mean every word!"

"You always was a feller of your word, Toff," said Tickey Tapp in a low voice.

"Enough said! Are you going?"

"Ava I got any choice about the matter?" said Tickey Tapp sulkily.

"You're 'ard on an old pal, Toff!"

"That will do! So long as you go, and keep away, I shall do you no harm. But I mean what I say! And next time I shall act without warning, you!"

"Old on, Toff!" exclaimed Tickey Tapp, as the Shell fellow was making a movement to go. He was peering strangely past Talbot into the dark garden. "Old on! I've got something to say!"

"You've nothing to say to me; my business here is done," said Talbot coldly.

"Jest a word!" said Tickey Tapp. "It won't hurt you to listen to me for a minute, Toff!"

"Well, what is it?" said Talbot impatiently.

"I was going to say," said Tickey Tapp slowly—"I was jest going—Nail him!" He broke off with a sudden yell.

There was a rush of footsteps behind Talbot in the darkness of the garden. Before he could turn, he was seized from

behind and hurled in at the dark doorway, colliding with Tickey Tapp.

His assailant followed him in with a breathless rush, and the door was slammed. The next moment Talbot of the Shell was struggling fiercely with two unseen antagonists in the darkness of the house.

CHAPTER 5.

Tickey Tapp Makes Terms.

TRAMP, tramp! In the narrow hall of the villa, in the intense darkness, there was a scuffling of feet, a panting of breath, and muttered ejaculations.

Talbot struggled fiercely, with the clutch of two pairs of savage hands upon him.

He realised what had happened. While Tickey Tapp had kept him in talk at the door, Scaife had left the house at the back and crept silently round the building, to take the schoolboy from behind.

Utterly unsuspecting such a move, Talbot had been taken by surprise, and hurled within the house by the one-eyed man. And now the door was closed, and he was fighting an unequal fight against the pair.

Even now, though he understood what had happened, he could not imagine the reason why he was attacked. Scaife was evidently hand-in-glove with Tickey Tapp, but his reason was not to be guessed.

It was no wonder that Talbot had been unprepared for such a move, when even yet he could not grasp its motive.

Both men were grasping him fiercely, and striving to drag him down. But though they were two men against a boy, the task was not easy.

But the odds were too heavy at last. Talbot went down, and a knee was planted on his chest.

"Quiet, you young 'ound!" panted Tickey Tapp, in the darkness. "Quiet, or I'll let you 'ave the life-preserver!"

"Take it easy, young 'un!" chuckled Scaife. "You're 'obbled!"

Talbot panted.

"What does this mean? Are you mad?"

"Not quite, my buck!" said Tickey Tapp, between his teeth. "P'raps you'll be sorry you've rounded on a man afore I'm through with you!"

Talbot ceased to struggle. It was in vain, and he was spent. Two pairs of strong hands held him pinned to the floor.

His coolness returned at once.

"I don't see your game," he said quietly. "I suppose you know I shall go straight to the police after this, Tickey Tapp?"

"You mayn't 'ave a chance, Toff!"

Talbot laughed contemptuously.

"Are you trying to frighten me?" he said. "You don't dare to knock me on the head, and you know it!"

"I ain't looking for a rope to finish my career on," agreed Tickey Tapp, with a chuckle. "If I was, Toff, I desay I should knock you on the 'ead for rounding on a man. But I ain't."

"You surely are not mad enough to think that you can keep me here!" exclaimed Talbot.

"P'raps. Quiet, now! I warn you, Toff, that if you give one yell you get a crack on the 'ead that will keep you quiet enough!"

Talbot did not call for help. The place was too solitary for his call to be heard if he had done so. While Tickey Tapp was speaking, Scaife had dragged the junior's wrists together, and bound them with a cord. As soon as he was secured the two ruffians dragged him to his feet.

"Now walk!" said Tickey Tapp.
 "Where are you taking me?" muttered Talbot, more and more amazed.
 "You'll see! Mind the step. Get a move on!"

With the two ruffians grasping his bound arms, the Shell fellow was forced forward in the dark. He was taken along a passage, and a door was opened, and in the darkness a damp, earthy smell came to him. Then he was led down a flight of steps.

A light from below glimmered upon his eyes.

The steps led down to a bricked cellar where firewood was stacked. In the wall was a low door giving admittance to a smaller cellar beyond. The door was half opened, and from the inner cellar light gleamed out. He was led through the doorway.

The cellar in which he found himself was bricked round, and apparently under the kitchen of the house. There was no window, as it was quite underground, but in one corner was a small ventilator. The air was damp and heavy.

The cellar was not empty. There were several boxes and cases stacked there, all of them padlocked. Talbot could guess that they contained the food-board from which Mr. Scaife supplied Racke & Co.

"You can sit down, Toff," said Tickey Tapp, with a wave of the hand towards a bench.

Talbot stood where he was. Tickey Tapp and Scaife remained between him and the little doorway. The Shell fellow looked at them steadily in the dim light of the lantern perched on a shelf. Tickey Tapp was grinning with triumph.

"Well," said Talbot quietly, "now I am here, what does this mean? I suppose you don't think you can keep me here long?"

Tickey Tapp bit the end from a cigar and lighted it, with much satisfaction.

"I fancy we'll keep you 'ere as long as we choose," he answered. "What's to prevent us, Toff?"

Talbot shrugged his shoulders.

"In the first place, I shall be missed at the school at bed-time," he said.

"What then? Will they search for you?" grinned Tickey Tapp.

"Naturally."

"'Ere?" asked Mr. Tapp, with a chuckle.

Talbot compressed his lips.

"Yes, here," he answered. "As it happens, a fellow knows where I have come, and when I am missed he will say so. You have had all your trouble for nothing, Tickey Tapp, and you had better let me go!"

"Only one feller?" said Tickey Tapp, eyeing him curiously.

"One is enough, I should think," answered Talbot. "You should have laid your plans a little more carefully. A game like this cannot be done successfully on the spur of the moment."

The sharper laughed.

"You ain't so keen as you was in the old days, Toff," he said, blowing out a cloud of smoke. "Do you really think I made up my mind to kidnap you when you was standing at the door talking to me?"

"I suppose so," said Talbot, with a start.

He hesitated as he spoke, for it was borne in upon his mind that there were many signs of preparation for what had happened.

He realised on a sudden that the two ruffians had known that he was coming, and that was why Tickey Tapp had been standing in the hall in the darkness when he knocked.

If he had stepped in then without striking the match he would have been seized at once. He understood it now.

And with that sudden knowledge came the inevitable thought that Crooke had betrayed him into the hands of the ruffians!

Tickey Tapp shook his head mockingly.

"You're losing your keenness, Toff," he said banteringly. "Do you think we hadn't got it all cut and dried? Think again!"

"You knew I was coming here?" exclaimed Talbot.

"Just a few!" grinned Tickey Tapp. Talbot drew a deep breath.

"Then, I was sent here—" he muttered.

"We knew you was comin' one evening after 'arf-past eight, Toff, and we reckoned it would be this here evening," smiled the sharper. "But if it 'ad been to-morrow you'd 'ave found us just as ready. We thought you'd walk right into our 'ands; but the Toff was too smart for that. Not quite smart enough, though. Ha, ha! Scaife knew what he was to do if you didn't come into the 'ouse."

THE BLOT



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

See page 11.

Scaife gave a low chuckle

"And the feller what knows you've come 'ere, Toff," pursued Tickey Tapp, in great enjoyment, "is his name Crooke?"

Another chuckle from Scaife.

Talbot's handsome face paled a little.

"I can't believe that Crooke had a hand in this!" he said, in a low voice. "You've made use of him somehow, but he wouldn't have had a hand in kidnapping me. He wouldn't have the nerve, for one thing."

Tickey Tapp nodded.

"Right on the nail!" he assented. "Master Crooke would be very much surprised if he knew what had 'appened—eh, Scaife?"

"I made use of him, jest as you say, Toff. I told him that if you came here I was going to draw you into the old game, and he believed it. He thinks you're going to join with me, Toff, in the old game—the merry old game!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Talbot.

"Pr'aps he ain't so far mistaken as you think, neither," added Tickey Tapp. "You've been done, Toff, and you haven't 'eard the end yet. Master Crooke thinks you're going to join the old gang as soon as I get a word with you, and I fitted him up with a yarn to spin you to make you come 'ere, and you walked into it, Toff, like a little dicky-bird."

Talbot set his teeth. He remembered the talk with Crooke in his study, and

the vague distrust he had felt. And Crooke had sent him there believing that the persuasions of his old associate would draw him back into the miserable life he had quitted for ever.

Crooke's motive was easy enough to see—his old hatred and his rivalry for Colonel Lyndon's regard. But Tickey Tapp's motive was still a mystery to the Shell fellow.

He had made use of Crooke to get Talbot to the lonely house, and he had succeeded in kidnapping him. But what then? That was a puzzle to the Toff, keen-witted as he was.

"Master Crooke knows you came 'ere," resumed Tickey Tapp, grinning through the smoke of his cigar. "But when you don't go back, Toff, what will he think? He'll think, my buck, that I was giving him straight goods—that it only needed a word from me to get you back into the old game. He don't expect you back at St. Jim's, Toff. He expects that you're going to clear with me. I've told him so. He don't quite believe it, perhaps, but he'll believe it fast enough when you don't turn up at the school again—what?"

"I suppose so."

"And do you think he'll explain what he knows of your comin' 'ere, and confess that he had a hand in sending you to joint your old pals—what?"

"No!" said Talbot, with a deep breath.

"Exactly!" grinned Tickey Tapp. "Crooke will 'old his tongue, and nobody else knows you've come 'ere, Toff. I put it to Crooke that he was to make you promise to say nothing of what he'd told you—what? They can search for you, old bean, till they're black in the face, but they won't look 'ere for you. Even Crooke himself won't suspect that you're kept here."

"Even so," said Talbot contemptuously—"even so, how long do you think you can keep me here?"

"As long as I dashed well please, Toff!"

"And then?" said Talbot. "You've planned this cunningly, Tickey Tapp, but I don't see where you score."

"You're goin' to, dear boy, don't you fret!" said Tickey Tapp. "Look 'ow the matter stands. I've had hard luck. I should have made a good thing here with my petits-chevaux game as long as it lasted, but an interfering fellow had to chip in, and that's done for. My pal Scaife is in low water, too. This food-hog biznez can't go on for ever. Master Racke's suspected at the school now, and it's getting too well known. You see 'ere, Toff, two coves that are low down, and don't mean to stay low down. My game's up, and Scaife's is very nearly up. Can't you see my drift now, Toff?"

Talbot shook his head.

"You ain't the Toff I knowed in Angel Alley, then," said Tickey Tapp. "I'll make it plainer. In the old days, Toff, you was called the prince of cracksmen. There wasn't a man in the three kingdoms had a 'and like yours for a safe. You ain't lost your old skill, Toff, playing cricket and football—what?"

"What then?" said Talbot, looking intently at the man.

"Don't see it yet? Toff, old bird, you're going to be one of the boys ag'in!" said Tickey Tapp. "You're going to 'elp two coves—us—to get on their feet arter a hard time. Savvy? I'm a good-natured cove, and I'm villing to let bygones be bygones. You've played the fool at school long enough, Toff; now it's time for business. The prince of cracksmen is going back to his old job!"

Talbot understood at last.

"So that's the game?" he said.

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"That's the game, and a paying game, Toff. Think of it—what's within our reach, with you to help!" Tickey's eyes glistened. "There's your own school, first—two or three thousand that crib would be worth to us. There's the Grammar School—some good pickings there. There's Glyn House, and Major Stringer's place, and a lot more, Toff, as I've had my eye on, within six miles round. We're rich for life, Toff, if you do the sensible thing, and go in with your old pals! What do you say?"

"I say that you are as big a fool as you are a rascal!" answered Talbot.

"That means no, I reckon?"

"Naturally."

Tickey Tapp nodded, and threw away the stump of his cigar.

"I expected that," he answered. "You reckon you're on a paying game at the school—nobby friends, and Colonel Lyndon's money-bags some day. I don't say you ain't right. But this is a better game, Toff, and you're going to play it. I don't expect you to agree at once—not to-night—not next week, maybe. I ain't in a hurry. Scaife ain't in a hurry—are you, Scaife?"

"Not at all!" grinned Scaife.

Tickey Tapp took down the lantern from the shelf.

"Think it over, Toff," he said agreeably. "You've got lots of time. Tomorrow night I'll see you ag'in."

"You are going to leave me here?" muttered Talbot.

"You've hit it!"

Talbot set his teeth. He made one wrench at the cord that bound his wrists, but it was useless. He said no more, but seated himself on the bench.

He was in the hands of the two rascals. Escape was impossible—for the present, at least. He was to be left alone, bound, in the darkness and the silence, till his resistance was overcome. Tickey Tapp evidently expected that his resistance would not last long; but he little knew the iron determination of the Toff.

If death itself came upon him in that dark cellar, Talbot of the Shell would never yield!

Scaife left the cellar, followed by Tickey Tapp with the lantern. The door was shut, and Talbot heard a key turn. The footsteps of the two ruffians died away in the outer cellar and on the stone steps. Another closed, faintly, in the distance.

In the darkness, the silence, Talbot of the Shell remained alone.

CHAPTER 6.

Where is Talbot?

TOM MERRY looked into Talbot's study in the Shell passage in the School House. Skimpole was there, sitting at the table, pen in hand, with a thoughtful frown upon his bumpy brow, and a smear of ink on his nose. Gore was in the armchair, giving first aid to a damaged footer.

"Hallo! Where's Talbot?" asked the captain of the Shell.

"Ask me another," answered Gore.

"I've been looking for him," said Tom. "Weren't you going to have the gloves on with him in the gym, Gore?"

"He asked me to put it off," said Gore. "Something else on, I suppose. I'll brain Trimble for falling on this footer! How in thunder could a footer stand his weight? I'll brain him!"

"Skimmy, old duck, do you know where Talbot is?"

"I have not seen him since I left him here with Crooke, my dear Merry," said Skimpole, blinking at him. "I have been waiting for him, in fact. I want to ask him his opinion on my latest invention."

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 563.

"Perhaps that's why he's keeping out!" grunted Gore.

"My dear Gore, that is an asinine remark! Talbot shows quite an intelligent interest in my invention," continued Skimpole, beaming upon Tom Merry. "I have been explaining to him my scheme of driving a new kind of airship by means of compressed air. Is it not a striking idea, my dear Merry?"

"And how the thump are you going to drive an airship by compressed air?" asked Tom Merry, laughing.

The genius of the Shell generally had some tremendous invention simmering in his mighty brain. They got no further than that.

"It is perfectly simple, my dear fellow," said Skimpole, delighted to have

Cadet Notes.

The War Office scheme for starting special Cadet Corps in connection with the R.A.F. is making good progress, and we understand that the proposed arrangements will soon be made public. The idea seems to be that Cadet Units in suitable localities should make special arrangements to train boys in the elements of aeronautics. The training will probably be of an elementary character only, the idea being that after a year or two of the work the lads can be transferred direct to the Royal Air Force. Such lads, if accepted by the R.A.F. authorities, would then be given commissions as Pilots or Observers, or would be made non-commissioned Pilots or Observers, according to their general standing, ability, etc.

No doubt it will take some time for this scheme to be worked out in detail, and a sufficient number of Corps started to cover the whole area of Great Britain. The number of such Corps, also, must be limited by the fact that it is only in certain areas that facilities can be given for affording the special training required. However, it is very good news that the War Office is taking the matter up so actively and on such sound lines, and in the course of a short time there should be a number of units in the Cadet Movement established on this basis, which would afford an excellent means of training for boys anxious to get into the Air Force, and secure them the right of entry, on the expiration of their service in the Cadet Unit. Further particulars will be announced in these Notes as soon as they are available; and, meanwhile, any lad who wishes to join the Cadet Movement, or would like any further particulars on the matter sent to him as soon as they are available, should apply to the C.A.V.R., Judges' Quadrangle, Law Courts, Strand, W.C.2.

found an auditor. "The force of the compressed air is brought to bear upon the airship from behind, propelling it forward."

"But how?"

"I haven't thought out that detail yet, Merry. Except for that trifling detail, I have the thing simply perfect. I will explain it from the very beginning—My dear Merry, where are you going?"

But Tom Merry was gone.

"Dear me!" said Skimpole, blinking after him in surprise. "My dear Gore, would you like me to explain—" "I'll bung this footer at you if you do!"

Skimpole sighed, and took up his pen again. Gore was not quite so patient with the good Skimmy as Talbot was.

Tom Merry sauntered down the passage, and looked in at Study No. 6 in the Fourth. He found Arthur Augustus

D'Arcy there, standing before the looking-glass and dabbing at his nose.

"Hallo! Trying to crack the glass?" asked Tom cheerily.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy"—Arthur Augustus D'Arcy glanced round—"if that remark is intended to be humorous, I can only say—"

"What's happened to your nose?" asked Tom.

"I have weceived a vewy wuff shock on my nose, Tom Mewwy. I was boxin' with Blake, to show him how it should be done, an' he vewy wuffly and wudely lit me on the nose. I wegaraded it as uttally unfeelin' of Blake, an' I had a gweat mind to give him a feahful thwashin'. Do you think it looks vewy wed?"

"Well, it's a nice, healthy pink," said Tom.

"There is nothin' so howwid as a wed nose," said Arthur Augustus, in distress. It looks like indigestion, you know—as if a chap doesn't take enough exercise. I am sowwy to say that Blake is vewy little bettah than a Hun!"

And Arthur Augustus turned to the glass again, and resumed his attentions to his aristocratic nose.

"Seen Talbot?" asked Tom.

"Not since he passed the steday about half-past eight, deah boy. I wanted him to come in and wewee, but he had anothah engagement."

Tom Merry walked on, and went down to the Common-room, where he looked round for Talbot. It was near bedtime, and the gym was closed, and nobody was supposed to be out of doors at that hour. But Talbot was not in the Common-room. Tom was a little puzzled. He had intended to have a talk with Talbot about footer that evening, and the evening was nearly gone.

"Anybody seen Talbot?" he asked, addressing nobody in particular.

"Not since he passed our study a while back," said Blake.

"I've been looking for him," said Manners. "He was coming into the dark-room to help me develop, but he didn't turn up."

"I say—" began Monty Lowther, looking up from a sheet upon which he was scribbling with a pencil.

"Oh, you know what's become of him?" asked Tom.

"Eh? Of whom?"

"Talbot, fathead!"

"Oh, bother Talbot! Listen to this," said Lowther. "I've just done it for the comic column in the 'Weekly.'"

"Keep it, old scout!" said Cardew of the Fourth. "Let it come as a pleasant surprise to us in the 'Weekly.'"

"Good ideal!" said Wilkins heartily. "You can't do better than that, Lowther."

"Oh, don't play the goat!" said Lowther. "Listen to this. Why are they short of butter in Austria?"

"Are they?" asked Grundy of the Shell.

"Yes, they are."

"Well, I should put it down to the British blockade," said Grundy thoughtfully. "That's about it, Lowther."

Monty Lowther snorted.

"It's a conundrum!" he yelled.

"Oh, is it?" said Grundy. "I don't think much of conundrums, Lowther. Rot, if you ask me!"

"Well, I don't ask you!" snapped Lowther. "Now, then, why are they short of butter in Austria?"

"Because there's butter little of it to be had," suggested Baggy Trimble, with amazing brightness.

Snort!

"Isn't that the answer?" asked Tom Merry, laughing.

"Of course it isn't! Do you call that an answer?" grunted Lowther. "If I

couldn't make up something better than that I'd chuck up the comic column!"

"Time you did, anyway!" retorted Baggy warmly. "I call it a waste of space. If Tom Merry had any sense, he would put in my serial instead."

"Dry up, for goodness' sake, Trimble!"

"My new serial," continued Baggy Trimble independently. "It's a real corker—The Horrid Hun; or, The Blood-Be-dabbled Boche!" What do you fellows think of that for a title?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, dry up!" roared Lowther. "I asked you, why are they short of butter in Austria?"

"Give it up, old sport!"

"Because the Prime Minister's no longer Czernin!" said Lowther.

"Wha-a-at?"

"Oh, crumbs!" groaned Lowther. "Don't you know that the Prime Minister of Austria was named Czernin, and he was sacked?"

"I don't see what that's got to do with butter," said Grundy. "Do you mean he was a food-hog, and took more than his share of the butter?"

"No!" shrieked Lowther.

"Then what do you mean?"

"Czernin—churnin'!" roared Lowther. "See? It's a play on the man's name. If the Prime Minister was still churnin', he would churn butter—see?"

"Blessed if I see!" answered Grundy, with a shake of the head. "I don't believe the Prime Minister made butter in Austria. Lloyd George doesn't make butter in England, does he? You won't catch a politician doing anything with so much sense in it."

"I never said he made butter!" shrieked the unhappy humorist. "I said he was Churnin'—"

"Do you mean churning? That's a silly trick, dropping the last 'g,'" said Grundy. "Affected, I call it!"

"Oh, you ass!" Lowther fairly gasped. "If the last 'g' isn't dropped the pun doesn't come in!"

"Oh! It's a pun, is it?" asked Grundy, as if that had dawned upon him for the first time.

"Of course it is!"

"Well, where's the pun?" asked Grundy. "I think punning is all rot, and conundrums are bosh; but I'll give you a chance. Where's the pun?"

"Czernin—churnin'!"

"No need to say a word twice over! I'm not deaf, Lowther!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"All serene, Monty!" said Tom Merry soothingly. "It's a corker—a real corker! Never mind Grundy. Put it in the comic column—"

"And leave it there," said Gunn.

"Of all the silly idiots—" said Lowther heatedly.

"Well, I don't see the pun," said Grundy obstinately. "It may be there. I don't say it isn't. But I can't see it. Of course, punning is all rot; you'll admit that yourself, Lowther?"

Monty Lowther's reply would probably have taken a discourteous form, but fortunately Kildare put his head into the Common-room just then.

"Bed-time, kids!" said the captain of St. Jim's.

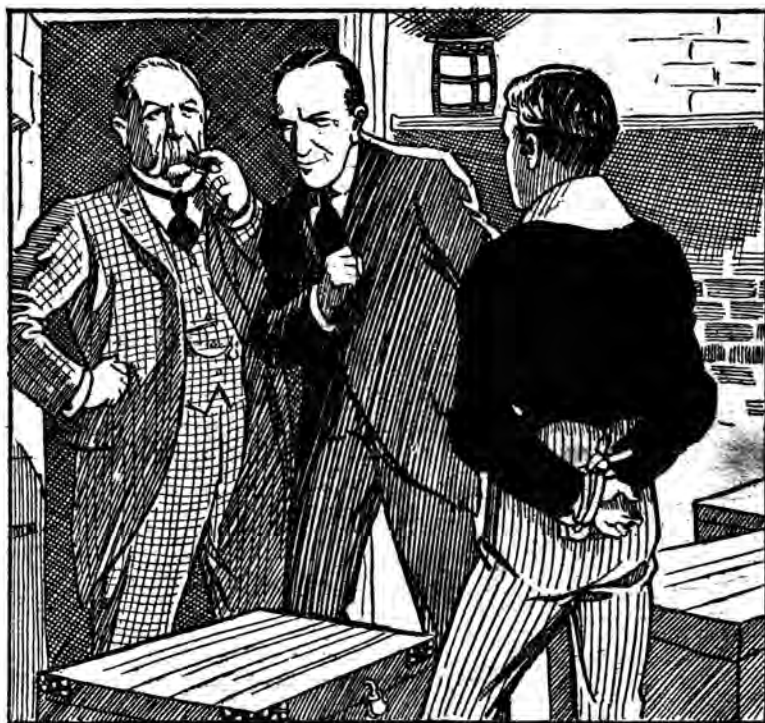
And there was a general move.

Tom Merry expected to find Talbot in the dormitory when he arrived there, but Talbot was not to be seen. A good many fellows noted his absence, as the Shell turned in, and when Kildare came back to put out the lights Talbot's bed was empty. The prefect noted it at once.

"Hallo! Somebody not come up?" exclaimed Kildare.

"It's Talbot," said Tom Merry; "I don't know what's become of him."

"Cheeky young beggar!" said Kildare.



Talbot in the Hands of the Enemy.

(See Chapter 5.)

warmly. "I suppose he knows it's bed-time—what? Anybody know where he is?"

Nobody did.

Kildare, looking very puzzled, left the dormitory, with the light still on. There was a buzz of talk among the juniors now. Kildare came back in about ten minutes.

"Talbot's not downstairs," he said. "He must be out of doors. Do any of you kids know whether he went out this evening?"

Crooke's eyes glimmered, but he did not look at Kildare. Talbot had not come back—it was certain now. Tickey Tapp had kept his word, and the "Toff" was the "Toff" once more—back among the old gang.

Crooke could scarcely restrain a chuckle of satisfaction.

The cad of the Shell had not the faintest suspicion of what had really happened at the villa; he was not aware that Tickey Tapp had used him simply as a tool to get Talbot into his hands. That he had unconsciously helped in a kidnapping scheme would have startled him if he had known it.

He did not know it, or suspect it. He had placed Talbot in the way of temptation, and Talbot had fallen; that was what he believed. He felt that his scornful disbelief in the "Toff's" reformation was justified now.

He kept his head on his pillow, and was silent.

His share in Talbot's disappearance was his own secret, and he realised how necessary it was for him to keep it. Not even to Racke or Scrope had he spoken one word.

Racke, indeed, was as surprised as the rest of the Shell at Talbot's absence. With the exception of George Gerald Crooke, the whole dormitory was amazed.

No one answered Kildare's question—no one had any information to give, excepting Crooke, who did not intend to give it.

Kildare compressed his lips.

It was a serious matter for a junior to leave the school after locking-up, and fail to return by bed-time.

"Nobody here knows anything of where Talbot is?" he demanded.

There was a general shaking of heads.

"Very well! I shall have to report this to the Housemaster. Good-night!"

Kildare turned out the light, and left the dormitory. There was a buzz of amazed discussion from bed to bed.

Where was Talbot? Why had he not returned? It was a puzzle, and it kept the Shell fellows awake long after the usual time.

Tom Merry was the last to fall asleep.

It seemed absurd to suppose that any accident could have happened to Talbot; if he had left the school he had undoubtedly done so of his own accord.

But Tom Merry felt vaguely uneasy about his chum. When he slept at last, at eleven o'clock, Talbot was still missing.

CHAPTER 7.

Missing!

"W^{HE}REAS MARKABLE!"

That was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's opinion.

Most of the St. Jim's fellows agreed with Arthur Augustus that it was remarkable—very remarkable indeed—when it was found next morning that Talbot of the Shell was still absent.

His absence had been reported to the Housemaster, and Mr. Railton had stayed up to a late hour the previous night waiting for the junior to come in. But he had not come in.

At breakfast, in the morning, there was a buzz of talk on the subject in both Houses of St. Jim's.

For a fellow to stay out all night was simply unheard of, and unless Talbot had a very good explanation to offer when he came back there was no doubt as to

what would happen—he would be expelled from the school.

Racke & Co. had their own theory.

They opined that Talbot had gone on the razzle, and overstayed his time—indeed, Baggy Trimble brightly suggested that Talbot had spent the night in a cell, having been taken up for being drunk and disorderly. Baggy made that suggestion in the hearing of the Terrible Three, with painful results to himself.

The word was passed round after breakfast that anyone who knew anything of Talbot's movements the previous evening was to go to Mr. Railton's study to tell the Housemaster what he could. Tom Merry had nothing to tell him; he was quite in the dark. But Blake & Co., as the last fellows who had seen Talbot in the School House, thought they had better go. The Terrible Three were hanging rather moodily about the doorway when Figgins & Co. of the New House came in. Figgins stopped to speak to the captain of the Shell.

"Just a word with you, Tommy," said Figgins. "About Talbot—"

"You know something about him?" asked Tom eagerly.

"We happen to know he went out of bounds last evening," explained Figgins. "We were in the quad, and we helped bunk him over the wall."

"My hat!"

"Of course, we haven't mentioned it," said Figgins. "But now the fellow hasn't come back, and Railton is asking for information, I suppose we'd better tell him. What do you think? It's not much good trying to keep it dark that Talbot broke bounds, I suppose?"

"None at all," said Tom. "It's known that he must have gone out after locking-up, or he'd be here now. You'd better tell Railton."

"Well, I think so; and Kerr thinks so," said Figgins. "I thought I'd speak to you first. What can have become of the chap?"

Tom shook his head.

"It beats me," he said.

"May have met with an accident," remarked Kerr—"in fact, he must have, or he would have come back."

"I suppose so," said Tom. "But it's queer there's been no news of the accident. Anybody would know he was a St. Jim's chap, and they'd telephone."

"He can't have run away!" said Fatty Wynn.

"Of course not!" exclaimed Tom sharply.

"Well, we'd better speak to Railton," said Figgins.

And the three New House juniors went in, and joined Blake & Co. at the door of Mr. Railton's study.

The School House master was looking very grave when the juniors presented themselves.

"You have come to tell me something about Talbot?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," said Blake. "We seem to be the last chaps to have seen him. He spoke to us as he was passing our study last evening about half-past eight."

"He was going downstairs, sir," said Herries. "He said he had something on."

"Was he going out?" asked Mr. Railton.

"Never thought of that, sir," said Digby. "He seemed in rather a hurry."

"Yass, wathah! He wufused to wefewee for us."

"That is all you can tell me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, you may go. Now, Figgins—Mr. Railton turned to the New House trio, who were waiting—"you have something to tell me?"

"Ye-es, sir!" said Figgins hesitatingly.

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"I—I think we ought to tell you. Kerr thinks so—"

"Please speak out!"

"We were taking a sprint in the quad last night, sir, and we came on Talbot."

"At what time?"

"It was something after half-past eight, sir, I think."

"Sure!" said Fatty Wynn. "It was just half-past eight when we finished the sausages, Figgy. We went out after that."

"Did Talbot leave the school precincts?" asked Mr. Railton sternly.

Figgins coughed.

"Yes, sir."

"You are sure?"

"We bunked him up, sir," murmured Figgins.

"What?"

"I—I mean, we helped him over the wall."

"You helped a junior to break bounds after locking up!" exclaimed Mr. Railton sternly.

"Ahem! He—he said it was something special, sir. Of course, I shouldn't have mentioned to anybody about his breaking bounds, only he hasn't come back, so I thought—I mean, Kerr thought—you'd better be told, sir."

"You did quite right to come and tell me, Figgins. Have you anything else to say?"

"That's all, sir."

"Did Talbot tell you where he was going?"

"Oh, no!"

"Are you aware whether he was going to meet anyone?"

"Haven't the least idea, sir. I thought he seemed a bit serious."

"It is extraordinary!" said Mr. Railton. "Thank you for coming and telling me this, Figgins. You may go."

The juniors left the study together.

They heard Mr. Railton at the telephone as they went. He was ringing up the police-station at Rylcombe to ask whether anything had been heard of an accident to a schoolboy.

There was a buzz of incessant discussion among the St. Jim's fellows till morning classes. Talbot's place was empty in the Shell Form-room that morning, and it was observed that Mr. Linton was looking very grave.

Tom Merry was distressed and worried.

What could have happened to Talbot was a complete mystery to him. He was glad when the Shell was dismissed and the worry of lessons was over. He found it difficult to put his mind into Form work just then.

Why had Talbot left the school? He asked himself that a hundred times. Above all, why had he not returned?

He observed Racke & Co. grinning together, and gave them a fierce look.

Aubrey Racke had his own explanation; so had Crooke. Crooke hinted pretty plainly his belief that Talbot had cleared off to join his old associates, though he was careful not to hint that he knew anything definite about it.

The part he had played would have brought down the vials of wrath upon his head if it had been suspected.

While the other fellows discussed Talbot's absence and his possible return, Crooke had not the faintest expectation that the missing junior would return. He had gone off with Tickey Tapp—that was Crooke's belief—and a good riddance to him.

But Crooke gave a jump and changed colour when D'Arcy minor of the Third came up to him in the quadrangle and informed him that Mr. Railton wanted him.

"Wants me?" exclaimed Crooke shrilly. "What does he want with me?"

D'Arcy minor grinned.

"Forgot to ask him, old bird," he answered. "But I don't know that he would have told me if I had."

And Wally walked away whistling. Crooke stood hesitating, feeling very uneasy and alarmed, and Racke and Scrope eyed him curiously.

"Well, why don't you go?" asked Racke.

"I—I suppose I'd better. What the thunder does he want to see me for?" growled Crooke.

"Perhaps somebody's reported your study as smelling of smoke!" suggested Scrope, with a grin.

"He'd want me, too, in that case," said Racke. "Perhaps he wants to ask you about Talbot, Crooke."

Crooke gave him a savage look.

"I don't know anything about Talbot. How should I?" he said between his teeth. "Why should he ask me?"

"The chap's your cousin, and Railton probably doesn't know you're at loggerheads," said Racke, rather surprised by Crooke's evident disturbance. "He may think you know where Talbot went."

"I don't know."

"Well, tell Railton so, then, if he asks you. What are you scared about?"

"I'm not scared, you fool!"

With that polite reply Crooke slouched off to the School House, leaving his pals staring. He had composed himself by the time he entered the Housemaster's study. He found Tom Merry there. The captain of the Shell had ventured in to ask whether there was any news of Talbot.

"None, my boy!" Mr. Railton was saying, as Crooke arrived. "No accident has been notified to the police, either at Rylcombe or Wayland. I believe you were a very close friend of Talbot, Merry?"

"Yes, sir," said Tom.

"Did he tell you anything of his intentions last night?"

"Nothing at all, sir."

Mr. Railton pursed his lips.

"Come in, Crooke!" he added, as he saw the new-comer hovering at the door, and Tom Merry left the study. "Crooke, as you are Talbot's cousin, it has occurred to me that you may know something of this strange affair."

"Nothing, sir," said Crooke at once.

"You were not very friendly with Talbot, I believe?" said Mr. Railton, eyeing him.

"I never liked him, sir. Of course, I'm sorry if anything has happened to him."

"He told you nothing of his intention of going out last night?"

"He wouldn't be likely to, sir. We weren't on speaking terms."

"Is your uncle, Colonel Lyndon, still in England?"

"He left for the Front yesterday, sir. Talbot went to Abbotsford to see him off, I believe."

"Then Talbot has no relations I can communicate with, excepting, perhaps, your father, Crooke?"

Crooke indulged in a sneer, which he did not take the trouble to suppress.

"My father wouldn't care to hear anything about him, sir. He didn't like Talbot, and didn't trust him, any more than I did."

"What do you mean by that remark, Crooke?" asked Mr. Railton in a stern tone.

"I mean what I say, sir," said Crooke doggedly. "We all know what Talbot was before he came to St. Jim's."

"That is a very old story, Crooke; and you surely would not bring up Talbot's early misfortunes against him now?"

"I don't believe in reformed criminals, sir."

"I am afraid you have not a very generous nature, Crooke. Talbot has given every proof of a high and honourable character," said Mr. Railton sternly. "If you have nothing to tell me you may go."

Crooke paused a moment.

"Well, it looks to me—" he began.

"What?"

"It looks to me as if Talbot has got tired of playing his game here, and has cleared off with his old friends," said Crooke doggedly.

Mr. Railton knitted his brows.

"Have you any reason to say so, Crooke, beyond a mere ungenerous suspicion?"

"N-no, sir."

"Then I forbid you to suggest anything of the kind! You may go!"

And Crooke went.

Mr. Railton remained for some time with knitted brows, thinking, and then he went to the Head's study. The telephone was brought into requisition again, but without result. When St. Jim's went into the Form-room for afternoon classes Talbot's place was still empty, and nothing had been heard of him.

CHAPTER 8.

The Chance of a Clue.

"TOM MEWWY!"

Tom started out of a brown study. The captain of the Shell was walking aimlessly in the quad, with a troubled face, thinking of his missing chum. Arthur Augustus' face was very sympathetic.

"Hallo, Gussy?"

"Somebody wants to speak to you, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "Will you twot ovah to the Head's garden? Miss Mawie asked me to tell you."

"Thanks, old chap! I'll go at once."

Tom Merry walked away towards the Head's garden with a clouded brow. He knew that Marie Rivers must have heard of Talbot's disappearance by this time, and must be worried about it, and he had no news for her.

The girl was waiting for him by the little summer-house.

Her face was pale and troubled.

Marie Rivers' life had been a happy one of late. Her father, once known as the "Professor," and a member of the cracksmen gang to which the unfortunate Toff had belonged in his dark, early days, had been through the fire in Flanders, and earned his pardon by his courage and devotion to duty. He had won his way up from the ranks, and was now a lieutenant in the Loamshire Regiment; and he had twice been wounded, and was out again.

Marie had a happy home at St. Jim's. But she had never forgotten the old days, and Talbot of the Shell was still, to her, the Toff of former times.

She gave Tom Merry an eager look as he came up and raised his cap.

But his clouded face was sufficient to tell her that nothing had been heard of Talbot.

"No news?" she asked, with a catch in her voice.

"I'm sorry—none."

The girl's lip quivered.

"You don't know why Talbot left, Miss Marie?" asked Tom. "He didn't tell you—"

"No. I heard only this afternoon that he was missing."

"He went of his own accord," said Tom. "Figgy helped him over the wall; it's come out since. It beats me!"

"Something has happened to him, Tom," said Marie in a low voice. "And—I cannot help fearing—something in connection with past times. That is why I wanted to speak to you. Talbot has no secrets from you, I believe? Do you know whether—whether he has heard

anything from those he used to know before—"

She broke off abruptly, but Tom Merry understood.

He started as he remembered what Talbot had said to him the previous day, just before going to Abbotsford.

"Tickey Tapp!" he exclaimed.

Miss Marie looked at him.

"You know that name?" asked Tom.

"I have heard it," said Marie. "I—I have heard my father speak of a man of that name. I don't think I ever saw him."

Talbot told me yesterday that he had seen him in the lane," said Tom. "I don't think they spoke—in fact, I'm sure they didn't. Talbot saw him at a distance. He mentioned it to me. But that can't have any connection—"

"I feared it—I feared it!" exclaimed the girl, clasping her hands. "That man has done Talbot some harm!"

"But how?" said Tom. "Talbot went out of his own accord."

"I am sure of it! Think of it, Tom! Talbot saw the man yesterday, you say,

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and last night he disappeared. Does it not look—"

"It looks as if there might be some connection," said Tom. "But if Talbot met Tickey Tapp last night it was by his own will, Miss Marie. I can't believe that he would have broken bounds to go and meet that man; it's impossible. But I think I had better tell Mr. Railton."

"Do so at once," said Marie. "If the man could be discovered, I am sure he would be found to know something of what had happened to Talbot. I am sure of it. Go to Mr. Railton at once!"

"I will!" said Tom.

He hurried away from the garden in a state of great perplexity of mind. It was a coincidence, at least, that Talbot's disappearance should have taken place on the very day that he had seen Tickey Tapp near the school. Yet if the man had meant mischief, how could he have induced Talbot to leave the school at night, and place himself at his mercy? It seemed a wild theory; but Tom wisely resolved to leave it to an older head than his own.

He found Mr. Railton in his study, and the Housemaster listened gravely to what he had to say. The increasing gravity of his look startled Tom Merry a little.

"This is very curious," said the Housemaster. "This man Tapp, you say, was one of Talbot's associates in his early, unfortunate days?"

"Talbot knew him, at least, sir," said Tom.

"I cannot believe that the boy has thrown up his life here and gone away

with an old associate of that description!" exclaimed the Housemaster.

Tom started.

"Oh, no, no, sir!" he gasped. "That's impossible!"

"It is what is implied in what you have told me, Merry."

Tom Merry stood in utter dismay. He realised that he had not made matters better for his absent chum.

"But—but that's rot—I mean, it's impossible, sir!" he panted. "Besides, they were enemies. I know they were enemies, sir."

"How do you know, Merry?"

"Talbot could have sent the man to prison, sir, if he'd told all he knew about him."

"And he did not?"

"N-no."

"That does not look as if they were enemies, Merry."

"Oh, sir! I—I mean, they were, and I know it. The man was hanging about the school once before, and Talbot made him clear off. I knew it at the time. He was trying to get a St. Jim's chap into trouble with—card-playing, and so on, and Talbot chipped in, and made him go. Manners and Lowther knew it, as well as I, sir."

Mr. Railton pursed his lips.

"He may have gone to see the man, then, with some such intention last night," he said slowly.

"That's it, sir!" exclaimed Tom, in great relief. "I'm sure of it."

The Housemaster smiled slightly.

"Do you know where this man Tapp is to be found, Merry?"

"No, sir. But I remember Talbot said he saw him talking to a man named Scaife—a one-eyed man, who lives at Rylcombe. Scaife may know."

"Where does Scaife live?"

"At Laurel Villa, just outside Rylcombe, down the lane. He took the place a few months ago from Mr. Pepper."

Tom did not add that Scaife was "Racke's man," and that the villa was the headquarters of the food-hoggs. It was not his business to betray Racke. But the slightest clue to the missing junior had to be followed up, at any risk to the black sheep of St. Jim's.

Mr. Railton remained some minutes in thought.

"I am afraid, Merry, that you have told me nothing very tangible," he said. "But I will call on this man Scaife, and see what he has to say."

"You—you will go at once, sir?" stammered Tom.

The Housemaster nodded, with a smile.

"I will go at once, Merry."

He was taking his hat and coat a few minutes later; and Tom Merry, from the School House steps, watched him striding down to the gates. Racke and Crooke and Scrope came out of the House, and grinned at Tom Merry's troubled and clouded face. They had their coats on.

"Nothing heard of Talbot yet?" smiled Crooke.

"No!" snapped Tom.

"And you still expect to hear from him?" sneered Crooke. "I should think it's pretty plain by this time!"

Tom Merry clenched his hands.

"Oh, come on!" said Racke. "We haven't much time before locking-up."

"You are going to Laurel Villa?" exclaimed Tom, as the three young rascals went down the steps.

"Find out!" answered Racke.

"You fool, I don't care twopence where you're going!" said Tom contemptuously. "I was going to warn you to keep clear of the place to-day, that's all."

CHAPTER 9.

Tickey Tapp at Home.

"Thank you for nothing! We'll please ourselves."

"Mr. Railton has just gone there," said Tom quietly.

Racke, who was going down the steps, swung back suddenly, with a scared face.

"Railton—gone to Scaife's house?" he stuttered.

"Yes."

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Scrope. "He might have run into him! I say, I'm much obliged, Merry."

Crooke's face had turned white.

"But what's Railton gone there for?" muttered Aubrey Racke. "You—you rotter! Have you given us away, Merry?"

Tom walked into the House without troubling to answer. The three black sheep looked at one another, and Scrope went quietly into the House. Crooke's lips were trembling.

"Come in, Crooke!" said Racke savagely. "We shall have to keep clear of the place for a bit. What on earth can Railton have gone there for? Tom Merry can't have sneaked about us; he's not that sort. Come in! What's the matter with you? What are you scared about? Scaife won't mention our names, even if Railton asks him questions."

Crooke did not reply. He was not thinking of the forbidden feasts at the villa; he was thinking of more serious things than that. Without answering Racke, or even hearing him, he hurried in to look for Tom Merry. He found the captain of the Shell in his study, rather dismally getting tea with Manners and Lowther. The Terrible Three stared at Crooke's white face as he came in.

"What do you want?" growled Tom.

"You—you said Railton was gone to Scaife's house?" muttered Crooke.

"Yes."

"What has he gone for?"

"Better ask him!"

"It—it isn't about the grub, or anything of that kind?"

"No."

"What, then?"

Tom Merry stared at him. Crooke's terror was so evident that the Terrible Three could not help observing it, and it made them wonder.

"I don't see that it concerns you," said Tom. "What does it matter to you, Crooke?"

"It—it does! Can't you tell me why he's gone there?" muttered Crooke.

"He's gone to see Scaife."

"Yes; but why—why?"

"Nothing to do with any of your little games there!" said Tom contemptuously.

"If you must know, it's to ask Scaife where to find a man who may know something of what's become of Talbot."

"Tickey Tapp?" said Crooke involuntarily.

"Yes, Tickey Tapp; though I don't see how you know."

Crooke pulled himself together. After all, he told himself, Tickey Tapp must be gone long before this, and the Toff with him; and Crooke's dealings in the matter could never come to light. He left the study without another word. He told himself again and again that nothing could come to light; but his nerves were not good, and he waited at a window in feverish uneasiness for the Housemaster's return. But his fears would have been increased tenfold had he known that Talbot of the Shell, instead of being gone with Tickey Tapp, lay a kidnapped prisoner in the very house which Mr. Railton was then entering.

Fortunately for Crooke, he did not know that.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 563.

MR. RAILTON stopped at the gate of Laurel Villa. The dusk was falling; but there was the clink of a busy hoer in the garden.

A one-eyed man in his shirt-sleeves was working there, and Mr. Railton's glance fixed on him.

Mr. Scaife was very busy in the garden. He made it a point to be seen very frequently in the front garden, hard at work, by passers-by.

In the village Mr. Scaife was supposed to be an enthusiastic gardener, whose great ambition was to raise a bumper crop of vegetables. It was necessary for Scaife to camouflage his real business.

Scaife did not look round, but he was quite aware that the Housemaster was there. One of his eyes was missing, but the other was very sharp indeed. The progress of his hoeing, however, brought him nearer to the gate, and Mr. Railton spoke to him over it.

"Excuse me!"

Scaife ceased work then, and looked up, leaning on his hoe.

"Evening, sir!" he said civilly.

"Good-evening! You are Mr. Scaife, I think?"

"That's my name, sir!"

Scaife's manner was very smooth and suave. He knew the Housemaster of St. Jim's by sight, and he was wondering what Mr. Railton wanted there. The knowledge of the kidnapped junior hidden in the deep cellar near at hand made Scaife feel decidedly uneasy, but his face did not betray any uneasiness.

"I have called to see you, Mr. Scaife," said the Housemaster. "I think you can tell me where to find a man I wish to see."

"Very pleased if I can, I'm sure, sir," said Scaife. "Will you step in?"

"Thank you; I don't need to take up your time, Mr. Scaife. The man I speak of is named Tapp—Tickey Tapp."

"Old Tickey?" said Mr. Scaife genially. "Yes; I can tell you where he is, sir, if you want to see him."

"I should be much obliged."

Mr. Scaife pointed up the lane with his hoe.

"You know the Green Man, sir?"

"Quite well!"

"That's where Mr. Tapp is puttin' up. I dessay you'll find 'im there—in the bar, most like."

"Thank you!"

"Not at all, sir; only too happy to oblige!" said Mr. Scaife.

The Housemaster walked on slowly. The Green Man was a public-house with a very unsavoury reputation, and Mr. Railton did not care about visiting such a place; but he had come to Rycombe to see Tickey Tapp, and there was no choice about it.

Scaife's single eye glittered after him as he went.

"What does he want?" muttered Scaife. "What does he know? Hang him!"

He dropped the hoe, and went quickly into the house. A minute more and he had rung up the Green Man on the telephone, and was asking for Mr. Tapp.

There was some delay before Mr. Tapp came to the receiver; probably he had been busy in the bar or the billiard-room. But Scaife heard his husky voice at last on the wires.

"Hallo!"

"Is that you, Tickey?"

"You bet! That's Scaife?"

"Yes. Mr. Railton, from the school, has just called in to ask me where to find you, Tickey."

"Oh, gad!"

"I don't know what he wants. Keep your eyes peeled!"

"Wot! Thanks for the tip, old bird! Is he coming here?"

"Yes; I told him at once! Better to be above-board, Tickey. Mind your eye!"

"Leave him to me!"

Scaife rang off, and went back to his hoeing, intending to be industriously at work should Mr. Railton come to the villa again.

Meanwhile, the Housemaster walked on to the inn; and, arriving there, asked for Mr. Tapp. Mr. Tapp was in his room by that time, and was reading the war news in the "Times" when the Housemaster was shown up.

He rose civilly to meet his visitor.

"Come in, sir!" he said. "Take a seat! Very happy to meet you, Mr. Railton! Quite at your service, sir!"

Mr. Railton came in.

"Anything I can do for you in my line, sir?" rattled on Tickey Tapp. "Only too pleased, sir! You can rely on my discretion."

"I don't quite understand you, Mr. Tapp!" said the Housemaster in surprise.

Tickey Tapp closed one eye.

"I understand perfectly, sir—it's all right with me!" he said. "Why shouldn't a gentleman have a little flutter if he chooses on a 'orse? I can fix it up for you, sir, and nothing said to nobody. Trust old Tickey, sir!"

Mr. Railton coloured.

"Bless my soul!" he ejaculated. "You surely do not suppose that I have called upon you with reference to racing matters?"

Tickey Tapp looked less agreeable.

"If you ain't, I don't see why you've called, then!" he answered. "I suppose you know what a man's business is?"

"You are quite mistaken; it is nothing of the kind," said the Housemaster hastily. "I have called on you in connection with a boy at my school, Mr. Tapp, named Talbot."

Tickey Tapp looked astonished.

"A boy at your school?" he repeated. "You don't reckon as I have anything to do with boys at your school, I s'pose?"

"I certainly hope not! But I believe you are acquainted with Talbot."

"Don't remember the name," said Mr. Tapp, shaking his head. "What's he like? Of course, a man in my way of business meets all sorts!"

"I believe," said Mr. Railton, with an effort, "that you knew him before he came to the school, when he was called by another name—a nickname. He was called the Toff!"

"Oh, the old Toff!" exclaimed Mr. Tapp heartily. "Now you're talking, sir! Yes, I knowed the Toff well enough afore he quarrelled with his old friends. A bit of a goer, and perhaps not too honest, sir; but full of sperrit!"

Mr. Railton winced.

"And he calls himself Talbot now, does he?" said Mr. Tapp, with a smile. "Well, it's as good a name as any other, I s'pose!"

"You came in contact with Talbot, I think, when you were in this neighbourhood some time ago, Mr. Tapp?"

"I saw him," assented Mr. Tapp. "Very 'igh and mighty, without a word to say to an old friend."

"Have you seen him lately?"

"Can't say I 'ave, sir!"

"It appears that Talbot saw you yesterday, and mentioned the fact to another boy."

"I dessay," assented Mr. Tapp. "I shouldn't wonder. He didn't take the trouble to speak to me, though. Too 'igh and mighty in these days. He was civil enough when I knowed him in the old time."

Mr. Railton did not answer. He left the room without another word.

And Mr. Tapp went down to the billiard-room easy in his mind.

1. He could see that the House-
ster was being driven to a conclusion
which he was reluctant to accept; but

By Martin Clifford.)

THE GEN LIBRARY.—No. 563.

THE ST. JIM'S GALLERY.

No. 24.—Ephraim Taggles.

NO, we are not getting near the end. I will admit that Taggles is not among the most important two dozen at St. Jim's; but that is no reason why he should not come in here, for I decline to attempt any order of merit in connection with these sketches.

Taggles is interesting, anyway, and that is good enough.

He does not always show up quite so well as he did a week or two ago, when he represented the household staff in making a presentation to the Head. It is true that he could not work off his carefully-studied speech then; at the critical moment something like stage-fright seized him. But that did not matter. Taggles' peculiar style of eloquence does not lend itself readily to a set speech.

Ephraim is really not at all a bad old chaps, though there are times when the St. Jim's fellows are inclined to regard him as an enemy. The man at the gate is apt to be looked upon in that light. When he looks up he sometimes looks out. He cannot avoid it. And the consequences of being looked out are not exactly pleasant. But every fair-minded fellow recognises that the porter is only doing his duty, and does not really think of owing him a grudge for doing it.

Probably Ephraim's opinion of the juniors is worse than theirs of him. Or if he only does his duty where they are concerned, they go a whole long way past that in their dealings with him. Nothing requires them to play japes upon him, though those japes are often merely retaliation for something a bit arbitrary he has done. Nothing requires them to chaff him in season and out of season; but they will do it. The temptation is too strong to be resisted, perhaps.

And Taggles has his vulnerable points. Gin-and-water—chiefly gin—is one of them. Taggles has what the funny merchants call a strong weakness for gin. I have no doubt that but for two reasons he would take even more of it than he does. One of these is Mrs. Taggles, and the other is the price of gin. Neither of them can be considered as merit on the part of Ephraim. But no doubt he does try sometimes to curb his appetite for the juice of the juniper.

Do you remember when poor old Skimpole got into trouble through the gin of Taggles? Skimpole was on the crest of a wave of teetotal fanaticism at the time, and he tried to cure Taggles of the gin habit by smashing his bottle of gin. For a philosopher it was not too brainy. Smashing one bottle was hardly likely to effect even a temporary cure, unless the dear Ephraim were stony, and Mrs. Taggles hard-hearted and unrelenting. And Skimpole, who of course had never tasted ardent spirits, had not reckoned on disaster for himself. The fumes of the stuff, which got spilled over his clothes, made him quite silly. He smelt of gin, and he had every appearance of being drunk. But Tom Merry & Co. got him out of the scrape.

Another weakness of Taggles is snoozing at times when he should be awake. It is a weakness that, unfortunately for him, he advertises; not willingly, of course, but he does advertise it. For Taggles is the owner of a several horse-power snore, and when the ground near the porter's lodge quivers and reverberations are heard in the quad, there is distinct ground for suspicion that Taggles may be snatching forty winks. Snatching is hardly the right word, though; it is not deliberate enough.

Taggles is very sensitive as to his age. It is supposed to be somewhere in the neighbourhood of sixty—very much the same as the Head's, and the Head does not mind anyone knowing his. But Taggles would prefer to be thought in the prime of life—just above the Army age limit, perhaps; but we will not rub that in, for he is not the only person at St. Jim's who is sensitive

about the Army age limit. There is also Mr. Selby. He does not talk about his years, if he can avoid it; and there is a better chance of keeping the esteem of Taggles if one fights shy of that subject with him.

The worthy Taggles can still run. Did he not run after Professor Burnham's piebald pony, and come in third in the race, with the pony and Skimpole ahead of him? Whether this points him out as a really high-class sprinter is another matter.

Lots of things have happened to Taggles, but I can recall only one story in which his part can be said to have been a really considerable one. That was when he had a benefit.

It was Taggles' birthday next day, and Tom Merry had remarked kindly that to look at him no one would take him for ninety.



When he said he was only sixty-five—a bit older than the Head, I see, but never mind—Tom said he did not know that he was such a kid. Taggles did not quite appreciate the humour of that remark.

It was suggested that the occasion might be marked by something in the way of a testimonial, and the juniors of both Houses held a meeting in the wood-shed to talk it over. Taggles broke up that meeting. The wood-shed is part of his domain, you know, and the meeting, which had developed into something not precisely harmonious, was doing damage there. He had threatened to report them, and they told him that they would heap coals of fire upon his head, which Taggles, who has a literal mind, construed as a particularly Hunnish threat.

"Figgins' Circus" was the method employed of raising cash for Taggles. An elephant and a buck-jumping pony were hired from a circus then at Rylcombe by Figgins, and a shilling each for pavilion seats and sixpence for standing room on the playing-fields were the charges of admission to see them.

The fellows rolled up fairly well, and Taggles had a present of five pounds next day. There was trouble in connection with the circus, but Taggles had nothing to do with that. He was no end mollified by the testimonial, of course. For quite a time he never said "I'll report yer!" or "You young rip!" to any junior, lest he might be offending a friend and patron. And for quite a time, no doubt, he comforted himself with gin beyond the regular ration—if there is any such thing as a regular ration for Taggles.

There are some quite useful things Taggles can do and does for "the young rips" at times. Towser has been put into his charge, and Herries was not satisfied with the manner in which Towser was treated; but then, Herries is very hard to satisfy when Towser's comfort is in question. It is not likely that Taggles would neglect an animal he had to take care of; and Towser has not been the only one. I cannot recall any instance of Towser's showing unfriendliness towards the porter. Perhaps my memory is at fault; but I am inclined to think that Taggles and Towser are on quite amicable terms.

Of course, there are hamperers at times. Thereof come tips. Taggles is not much in the way of doing something for nothing. If he puts a hand to a hamper he expects to have his horny palm crossed with silver.

It would be too much to say that the old fellow is above being bribed; but he is not easily bribed, and to try it on is distinctly unsafe. When the juniors find themselves outside after looking-up time, they either get in over the wall, or, if they know that their absence will have been noted at calling-over, ring up Taggles and have the gates opened for them. This does not look as if bribery was a paying game.

The Grammarians dealt very harshly with Taggles on a time, and it is scarcely likely that he has forgotten or forgiven. They gagged and bound him—fastened him up to one of the elms in the quad. He was bribed that time; he took half-a-crown to say nothing about it. But then he needed some compensation for his sufferings, and, after all, it was not exactly a breach of trust towards the school authorities of which he was guilty. He was merely a passive sharer in a joke against his tormentors, the St. Jim's juniors.

Taggles is not quite a hero, perhaps; but there is far more pluck in the old chap than in Gosing, the Greyfriars porter. Gosing is a bit of a funk. Taggles is certainly not that, though his courage may not be proof against anything and everything. When Lord Conway, Gussy's elder brother, turned up at night with his Territorials, Taggles took them for German invaders, and he went for them with a stick. It was injudicious, but it was not cowardly.

And he showed up really well in the matter of Jack Blake's Hun. Not in the incident of the old boots which he let Kerr have—for a consideration, of course. That was nothing to the purpose. But he had a good deal to do with preventing the Hun's escape. The German, who had escaped being smashed when an aeroplane on raiding work was brought down near Rylcombe, had hidden in the old tower. Through Blake he was got out of that retreat, after his raid upon provisions had brought—for once—founded suspicion upon the egregious Baggy.

Then there was an exciting chase up the quad. Blake and Tom Merry and the rest were hard on the track. Kildare and Monteith saw, and joined in the hunt.

Taggles had the gates open. There was no time to shut them. For a moment he was taken aback. But then he recovered his presence of mind, and as the Hun made his dash for escape Taggles buried his big bunch of keys full in the fellow's face. He reeled, and the two big seniors were upon him before he could recover.

Good old Taggles!

HORACE JAMES COKER, DETECTIVE.

By TOM BROWN.

"**Y**OU'RE a bit of a detective, aren't you, Coker?" said Squiff of the Remove—otherwise Sampson Quincy Ifley Field; but life is too short for all that.

Coker, the wonder and admiration of the Fifth—rest of Greyfriars, too, matter of that—snorted.

"Think again, Field," he said severely—that is, if you have anything to think with, which seems doubtful."

Squiff stood for a moment or two in the doorway, regarding Coker with a solemn face.

"I've thought again, Coker," he said. "You ain't a bit of a detective—not the least little bit."

Potter and Greene, who have the joy and honour of sharing Coker's study, sniggered.

Coker glared at them in wrath. He glared at Squiff with more wrath. Coker always has lots of wrath on tap.

"Wha-a-at?" he roared.

"That's what!" said Squiff.

"Look here, young Field—"

"I've been looking for the last eighty-seven pounds. About three seconds more is my absolute limit, old bean! You ain't pretty, you know, Coker!"

"Wha-a-at?"

"Well, now, are you?" asked Squiff. "I've been open mind on the subject. In matters of beauty tastes differ. If you can prove to me that—"

"If you want anything—"

"Thanks! Nothing in the thick ear line, old bird. I can get that kind of thing cheap in the Remove. But when I want the help of a really expert detective—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" burst out Potter.

"You shouldn't, Field!" said Greene reprovingly. "That's one of the delusions Coker's given up. He thinks to most of them like the drowning sailor to the oar—or was it the mast? But he's given up that one. He knows that the Herlock Sholmes bizney"

"Shut up, William Greene! You may think you are funny; but you are only showing your amazing ignorance!" hooted Coker.

"Oh, well, I dare say it's a delusion of mine to think you've given up any of your delusions," said Greene, in a resigned tone. "Go on—be what you like! Be a detective—a conjurer—a hypnotist—a ventriloquist—a novelist—a poet—a scientist—"

"The fact of the matter is, Greene, that you're jealous. So is Potter. I should be ashamed of it if I were you. It's a mean trick."

"And what in particular am I jealous of, old top?" asked Potter.

"It isn't anything in particular; it's things in general—everything, I may say. There's jealousy rankling all the time in both you and Greene because I can do everything better than you can with a tenth part of the trouble. You know very well that I can lick your heads off at any blessed thing I care to go in for; and you don't like having your heads licked off—that's the size of it. You know that, young Field, don't you?"

"Well, I don't mind admitting that most fellows I know have a sort of kind of an objection to having their heads licked off," said Squiff thoughtfully.

"There you are, Potter! There you are, Greene! Young Field knows I'm right, though he's a silly tag who can't be expected to have much sense."

Squiff took that smiling. Potter snorted.

"Let's get on with prep, Greene," he said. "We ought to start before Coker if we're not going to have our numbers taken down by him in the morning."

That was sarcasm, of course. Everyone knows that Coker's the biggest ass in the Fifth, and the despair of poor old Prouty. He can't get the bare meaning of the simplest sentence in Latin or Greek without help, and he has never learned yet the correct use of a lexicon. Coker's notion is that Liddell and Scott compiled theirs because blundering asses in the Fifth needed a really heavy book to throw at other fellows.

"If you've got anything to say, say it, Field!" said Coker.

"Well, I have," said Squiff. "I know you never mind putting your wonderful gifts as

a detective at the service of other fellows not so richly gifted."

"That's right," replied Coker, with a beam-smile. "The fact is, I think it's a duty, and I'm great on duty—always was. That's me!"

"I knew it," Squiff said, looking at him with seeming admiration. "Well, it's like this. The grub in our study goes a good deal faster than we like."

"You mean some rotter's stealing it?" said Coker eagerly.

"I don't say that. Stealing's a hard word. But it goes—it goes fast."

"Let's see. Who are the chaps in your study?"

Coker knew that as well as Squiff did; but, of course, the magnificent Horace cannot admit that his mind can get down to such unimportant items as the fellows in a Remove study unless there's something special in the question.

"There's Bull," answered Squiff. "Rather thick-set chap, with a face. Grows a good deal. You must have seen him about."

"Oh, I know Bull, of course!" said Coker impatiently. "He's a cheeky young beast. But I don't think he's a thief."

"What a quick mind you have, Coker!" said Squiff. "I've made up my mind that Johnny Bull's not a thief. But you don't need to make up yours; it simply leaps to the conclusion."

Coker smiled a gratified smile.

"I'm a judge of character," he said. "Who besides Bull and yourself?"

"Yes, there's me. I'd almost forgotten that, Coker. Do you think by any chance that I'm—"

"Don't talk such rot! If you were the thief you wouldn't come to me about it!"

"Q.E.D.," said Squiff solemnly. "I should naturally prefer a testimony to my honesty based on higher grounds; but I don't insist on that. The other chap is Fish—Fisher Tarleton Fish. Comes from America, and talks accordingly, thin face, rather hatchet-shaped. You've seen him?"

"Of course I know Fish! Don't waste my valuable time on rubbish of that sort, Field, or I shall begin to think that you aren't in earnest in asking for my assistance."

"Oh, never think that, Coker! That would spoil it all."

Squiff spoke no end seriously. I never knew a fellow who could jump with a solemn face better than old Squiff can.

"Fish is a bit doubtful," said Coker, rubbing his chin meditatively. "He ain't what I should call straight."

"You've noticed that?" said Squiff. "What a chap you are for taking notice, Coker! But I've noticed—as no doubt you have—that the direct steal ain't exactly Fishy's method. He leans more to the business proposition gadget—like our profiteers and contractors."

"That's so," replied Coker. "I thought of that at once. On the whole, Field, I think I can assure you that the thief is not in your study."

"Well, that's something!" Squiff said. "We can look each other in the face now. It may be painful, but it won't be embarrassing."

"Eh? What rot you talk!" snorted Coker.

"Do I?" said Squiff humbly. "Sorry! But we can't all have brains like yours, Coker."

"I should say not! Greyfriars would be a very different place if that were possible."

"There would be a big Second Form, and nothing at all above it," murmured Greene.

"Eh? What's that you say, William Greene? But never mind. I don't want to hear your silly rot. Have you thought of Bunter, Field?"

"I do sometimes think of Bunter, but not oftener than I can help," said Squiff. "He ain't what I should call a pleasant subject of contemplation. I'd rather think about you, Coker—really, I would!"

"I should say so!" said Coker, with emphasis.

"Funnier!" murmured Potter.

"Eh? Oh, shut up, Potter, do, or I'll turn you neck and crop out of this study!"

"You were saying, Coker—"

"Bunter. Bunter's always after the grub. I've caught him at it here."

"No, it's not Bunter. Bunter doesn't wolf our grub," said Squiff.

"I don't see how you can be sure."

"I am, though. It's brainier chaps than Bunter who make grub scarce in our study."

"Well, Bunter is a clumsy lout. I dare say it wouldn't be above even your capacity to catch him out, Field."

"Might not be," replied Squiff, as if he were not at all sure.

"It doesn't do to mention names," Coker said darkly. "But there's another chap I have in mind—more than one chap, in fact. I'll take up the ease for you, Field, and you can count upon my getting to the bottom of it—even if I have to sit up all night in your study to watch for the thief!"

"Would you do that, Coker—just for me?" asked Squiff, looking no end grateful.

"Oh, not for you! It isn't to be expected that I should put myself to trouble for the sake of a mere fag in the Remove!" replied Coker loftily. "It's in the cause of justice and as a matter of duty. I'm not the chap to let my talents lie idle, you know. I use them for the benefit of the community—that's me!"

"Thanks, no end, Coker! Shall you watch to-night?"

"Yes. I don't believe in letting the grass grow under my feet. But I don't need any help. This is quite a simple case, and I'm going to put it through alone."

Squiff retired. Potter and Greene winked at one another. They are not quite so easily taken in as Coker.

II.

"**D**OES the great one catch on?" asked Piet Delarey.

"Oh, rather!" answered Squiff. "He's not merely willing; he's keen—ever so keen!"

"And he never smelt a rat?" inquired Bob Cherry.

"Not the slightest sniff! He's going to wait up in our study to-night for the thief."

"What thief?" growled Johnny Bull.

"There's no thief in our study. Of course, some of Fishy's deals ain't fair and above-board. But if you're to call Fishy a thief I fancy you'd have to put the same label on most of the millionaires in the world."

"It would fit lots of them," Squiff said. "I didn't tell Coker there was a thief in our study; he's expecting him from outside."

"Well, he won't be lonely!" remarked Harry Wharton, with a cheerful grin.

Horace James Coker has his points. There are not many better-hearted fellows at Greyfriars than Horace James. He means well. But it is an unlucky fact that nothing is much more of a nuisance than an absolute ass who means well. And that's Coker!

Among his many delusions is to be numbered his notion that he is a born disciplinarian. He is not a prefect—simply a common or garden Fifth-Former, with less authority than Gosling, the porter, and not much more than the smallest kid in the Second Form.

But he goes about "keeping the fags in order."

That's what Horace James calls it.

We of the Remove call it unjustifiable interference at best, and somewhat very like like gross bullying at worst.

"Two of us can handle him—with difficulty. I don't mean just any two; I mean two of the pick of the Form. But one is helpless against him. It hurts our dignity—not to mention our nappers—when the heavy hand of Horace James descends upon us."

He goes away and promptly forgets all about it. I must say that for Coker—there's no malice in him. He will clout a fellow's head one minute, and feel quite kindly towards him the next. And he can't make out why the feeling is not mutual.

So when he gets too much to be borne with we combine against him. And that little habit of his—that lordly fashion of forgetting that his hand has fallen heavily upon some of us—is very useful at such times.

He never remembered that Squiff had quite a recent score to work off on him. If he had seen Squiff and Delarey, Wharton, Nugent, Bob Cherry and Luky, Johnny Bull and Toddy and me all together, plainly talking something over, it would never have struck him that he had struck us all lately.

and that we might be plotting against his place.

But that was how it was.

We made our preparations for the night. Inside the cupboard lurked a bucket of whitewash. I know we are told not to waste anything in war-time; but we were all agreed that it couldn't be called waste to use that whitewash on Coker. There had been far in what he had done to one of our number, and cold water had played its part in the sufferings of another. So why not whitewash for Coker?

"He might look in the cupboard and find it," said Bob Cherry doubtfully.

"Well, suppose he does?" returned Squiff. "Is there a chap here who believes that he'll suspect anything?"

There was not. Nobody there believed that Coker was capable of adding two and two together and being quite sure that they made four.

Squiff was so sure that he would not be suspicious that he suggested leaving the rope by the bucket. But two and two might make five to Coker if we had done that, and he might not have been quite easy in his mind. We didn't like the notion of Coker feeling anything but easy in his mind.

Old Coker's a stickler. At ten o'clock he was reported by Johnny Bull as sitting all alone in the dark in Study No. 13, waiting for the grub-thief. At eleven Piet Delarey reported him still there, though shuffling his feet and making impatient noises that might have warned the thief—if any—off.

At a quarter past eleven we descended—nine of us. It would have been easy to recruit more; but nine was enough.

Johnny Bull cautiously pushed open the door.

"I shouldn't call Johnny Bull a first-class actor," Wibley has been heard to say that he couldn't act for nuts.

But it doesn't need much ability in that direction to take in Coker. He saw every sign of guilt in the face of Johnny, by the light of the electric torch he flashed on, and he hooted.

"So I've got you red-handed, Bull, you young sweep?"

When you come to think of it, that wasn't precisely brainy. In the first place, Johnny had not been caught red-handed, he had not even been given the time to get his hands red. In the second place, only two other fellows had as good a right as he to come into that study; certainly he had more right there than Coker. And in the third place, nothing was much more unlikely than that Johnny should be coming down at night to wolf grub in No. 13.

All that was there was as much his as anyone's—rather more, if you come to that, for Fish is a mean rascal, and Squiff hasn't as much oof as Bull, while those two are chummy enough for neither of them to think much about who does the biggest share of the shelling-out.

But it was up to the general level of Coker's detective deductions—or down to that level.

The triumph of Horace James lasted but a second or two. Behind Johnny Bull swarmed in the rest of us. In less than a minute the lordly Coker was lying on his back on the table, bound and gagged.

Then, by the light of Coker's own electric torch, Johnny and Squiff spread newspapers on the floor.

"Can't have whitewash all over our expensive and luxurious carpet, can we, Johnny, old son?" said Squiff.

"We're careful chaps, Squiff!" growled Johnny.

"Gurrrrr!" came from behind Coker's gag. It was all he could say. But he was less deaf than dumb, and he had heard the word "whitewash."

We put him down on the newspapers, and used it—mercilessly. You don't need to be told all about that, or how Coker squirmed and struggled, or how we japed him meanwhile. Such things are not improving to the youthful mind. But if I had left the whitewash out of the story it would not have been a veracious and circumstantial account, Toddy says.

When we had finished, Wharton removed the gag. It was safe then. As for Horace James Coker, he is not quite such an ass as to sing out for help, and bring along scores of witnesses to his downfall, after that downfall is complete.

"You—you—Oh, I'll make you all smart for this!" he hooted.

"Shush, Coker, old chap! You'll have someone coming and disturbing our comely little party if you're not careful!" Peter Todd warned him.

"You—you—Field, of all the abominable young liars, you're the worst! And—the base ingratitude of it, too! That's what I look at!"

"A chap ought to be no end grateful for having his physog rubbed against a freshly-tarred fence—I don't think, Coker!" said Squiff.

"I'm not talking about that. What's that got to do with it? I came down here at your request to find the thief who you said was in—"

"Your mistake, old bird! I never said any

thief was—in fact, I never even said anything had been stolen!"

"Of all the bare-faced lies!" gasped Coker. "Why, you told me that you were continually missing grub from this study, and—"

"No, no, dear boy—no! Think again!" said Squiff coaxingly.

It was a pretty stout cord that bound Coker. If it hadn't been he would have broken it then.

"I—I—Look here! It's the rottenest sort of cheek that you should treat me—me—in this way. But I don't mind being trapped like this—I don't mind what you've done—half so much as being lied to! And you lied to me, Field!"

"Not a syllable of a lie, Coker, old scout! Think—if you can! I said that the grub in our study goes a good deal faster than we like. Is that correct?"

"You said a great deal more than that! You said—"

"I didn't say anything about Johnny's chormous twist—"

"Steady on, old man!" growled Bull.

"Or my own quite healthy appetite, or Fishy's cormorant propensities. I'll admit that. But they're quite enough to account for the grub going faster than we like."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And I certainly said nothing about thinking it was being boned, did I?"

Coker growled. He would not answer that; but he knew it was true.

"You aren't really quite an Ai, first-class, double-barrelled detective, Coker, old bean," said Toddy, "or else it might have struck you as worth while to think whether there was a case before you took it up!"

Coker growled again. He saw it then.

"Will you make it 'Pax' if we untie you now, Coker?" asked Wharton sweetly.

"Hanged if I will!" hooted Coker. "I'll slaughter every blessed tag of you!"

"Right-ho! Stay there, and yell out for someone else to come and do it!" answered Harry.

"The sameness of the honourable persons who discover the ludicrous and respected Coker in the present plightfulness will be—"

"Terrific!" finished Bob Cherry for Inky.

Coker growled again as we cleared out. But he did not yell for help. And when Squiff and Delarey and I came down together half an hour later to offer him the same terms, he gave in.

We let him loose. You can trust old Coker's word.

But he says he shall never trust Squiff's again!

THE END.

The Editor's Chat.

For Next Wednesday:

"BROUGHT TO LIGHT!"

By Martin Clifford.

Next week's story is a sequel to the fine yarn which appears this week.

At the end of this week's story Reginald Talbot is left in a very unpleasant and dangerous position. Anything may happen to him—except surrender. That is out of the question. We all know Talbot too well to doubt his courage, to whatever extreme he may be pushed.

Tickey Tapp and his associate Scuffs are hardened criminals. Actual murder is out of their line; but what they may do if things come to a critical pass with them none can say. I am not going to frighten—or try to frighten—any of you with hints of this sort; I will tell you right here and now—as our American friends say—that Talbot gets out of the clutches of those two rascals.

Knowing that will not lessen your interest in the story. You will want to know how he escapes. That I am not going to tell you right here and now. But I will tell you this much—Baggy Trimble had to do with it, Tom Merry had to do with it, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy imagined that he had to do with it!

THAT FALKIRK READER!

I have had several letters referring to my reply to a Falkirk reader in a recent number. This reader accused me of being unfair to Scotland. "Scotland"—who really has a very considerable nerve, or he would never have adopted such a pen-name—says he caught sight of a letter from a Falkirk reader, and

argued with him in every respect. Now, I cannot argue with people who do not understand the very basis of argument, so I have nothing to say to "Scotland" except that he saw what was not there. I did not print the Falkirk reader's letter.

Other correspondents write in a very different tone. A lady who will not mind my saying that she is middle-aged—though still young enough to read the GEM with the keenest enjoyment—says: "Well, I am English. I had red hair once—it is white now—and freckles, too; but I never felt them a drawback—in fact, rather the reverse. People with red hair have, among other qualities, that of being able to stand variations of climate better than most. I have heard of West African business firms advertising for red-haired clerks, because they were found to bear the very trying climate out there well. It is too bad that you should have such silly complaints to deal with. This Falkirk reader is about the limit."

No, no, my dear madam! We have had lots worse than the Falkirk reader!

"Practical England" writes from Bolton about the Falkirk reader's "idiotic flow of disgust," as he terms it. I should not call it that—merely silly, that's all. "Does red hair spoil good looks?" he asks. "Not it! I'd like to change my mop for a fiery top-covering! Are freckles disfiguring? Not they! I'm proud of them! So are many others! Remember Miss Gene Stratton-Porter's most popular character! I've some, I'm proud of them! Here's to grumpy old Falkirk, and may his (or her) hair never turn red!"

I haven't personally a word to say against Scotland. But I cannot fill the GEM with music for the bagpipes—much as I like them

—or histories of the Highland regiments, can I? And as for improving on Kerr, I cannot see what improvement is needed. Kerr is really one of the very best!

DOES YOUR SOLDIER PAL WRITE TO YOU?

Notepaper is "some" price these days, but none of us would grudge Tommy all the paper he needs on which to write those cheery letters of his if paper were treble the price it is to-day. Still, it's no use simply "gassing" about it; it's up to each one to do his bit to pay the piper.

"It costs the Y.M.C.A., who supply Tommy with free stationery, no less than £200,000 a year. Sixpence will supply your own or somebody else's pal with enough notepaper to write one letter each week for a year. Going to let him have it? Of course you are!"

So send sixpence along to-day to Y.M.C.A. (Stationery Fund), Tottenham Court Road, London, W.C., mentioning that it comes from a reader of this paper.

Your Editor