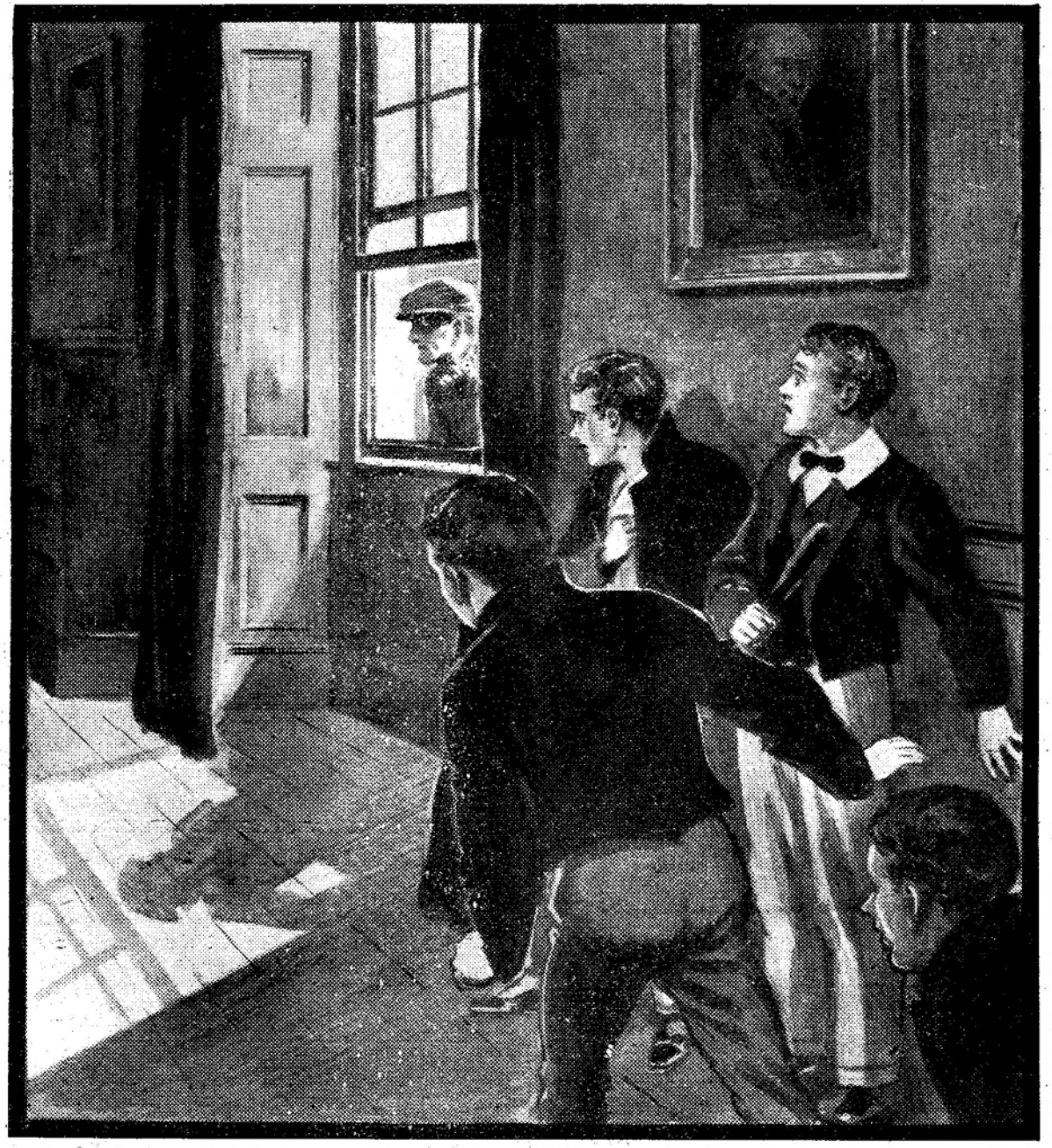
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No. 687.
Vol. XIX.
April 9th, 1921.



HIS PAST AGAINST HIM!

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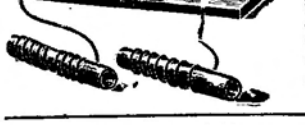
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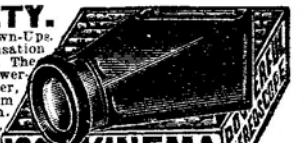
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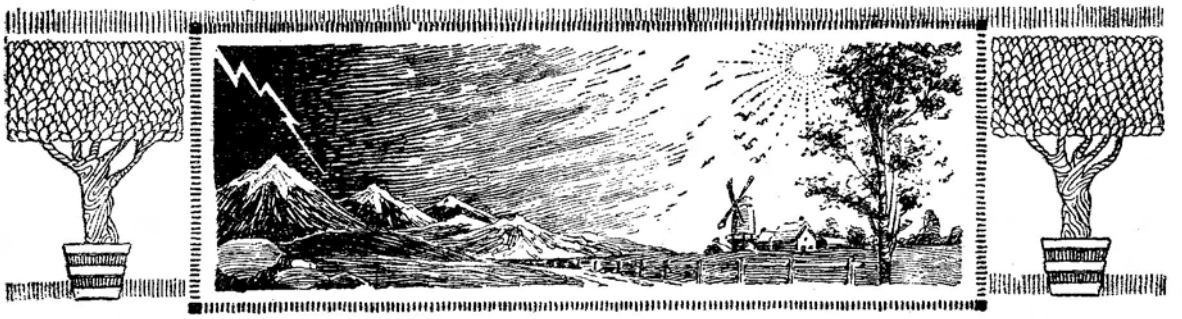
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HIS PAST AGAINST HIM!



A Grand Long Complete School Story of the Chums of St. Jim's.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.
A Queer Consumer.

"BURGLARS!"

"Rats!"

"But I tell you——" persisted Baggy Trimble.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth held up his hand reprovingly.

"Wats!" he said emphatically. "Pway wing off, Twimble!"

"Yes, give us a rest!" said Blake.

"But I've had it from Taggles——" exclaimed Trimble.

"Bow-wow!"

"There's been a burglary——"

Baggy Trimble looked warm and indignant. He had burst upon the group of juniors in the quadrangle at St. Jim's with startling news; and, instead of being startled, shocked, or horrified, the juniors declined to believe a word of it. But they knew Baggy of old, and his startling tales.

"Hallo! Who's been burgled?" inquired Monty Lowther, coming out of the School House with Tom Merry and Manners. "Has somebody been rifling the riches of Trimble Hall, Baggy? Carrying off the family plate on a motor-lorry?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The fat duffer is spinning us a yarn of a burglary here last night," grunted Jack Blake. "Only Baggy's rot, of course."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I tell you——" roared Trimble.

"Let us have a few details, as Sherlock Holmes would remark," said Lowther. "You can speak quite freely before my friend Dr. Watson. Go it, Baggy!"

"It's at the tuckshop——" began Trimble.

"The tuckshop burgled?" ejaculated Tom Merry. "Then we needn't look very far for the burglar! I fancy he can be traced by his circumference."

"Yaas, wathah!" chuckled Arthur Augustus. "If anybody has burgled the tuckshop, I wathah think it was Twimble."

Baggy Trimble jumped.

"Why, you silly ass——" he spluttered.

"Ha, ha, ha! Somebody had better go and telephone to Inspector Skeat, and tell him we've got the burglar," said Manners. "Seize him!"

"Here, hands off, you silly chumps!" roared Trimble, as the laughing juniors collared him on all sides.

"I arrest you, in the name of the law, Trimble!" said Monty Lowther, with great gravity. "I warn you that anything you say will be taken down——"

"Yow-ow! Leggo!"

"To be used in evidence against you at the trial!" continued Lowther. "Now, what did you burgle?"

"He's a bit fatter than usual this morning," said Kit Wildrake, scanning Trimble. "Yesterday he was only nine feet round——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here, you chaps, don't play the goat!" howled Trimble. "I tell you the tuckshop was burgled, and I've just heard it from Taggles. When Mrs. Taggles opened the door this morning, it was open——"

"Speak carefully, prisoner!" said Monty Lowther. "You are getting confused. How could the respected Dame Taggles open it if it was open?"

"I mean, it was already unlocked when she unlocked it——"

"Worse and worse! This is evidently a guilty conscience! Three months hard, without the option of a fine!" said Lowther. "I trust, Trimble, that this will be a warning to you. You see what comes of bagging fellows' jam-tarts in the studies! It has led you to this! Beware of the first steps on the downward path, my young friend!"

"Don't play the goat!" hooted Trimble. "A loaf of bread was taken from the tuckshop and a chunk of cheese ——"

"Not jam-tarts?"

"No."

"Nor doughnuts?"

"No."

"Gentlemen of the jury, it begins to look as if Trimble may not be guilty," said Monty Lowther.

"And a bob was left on the counter," said Trimble. "That's the funny part. The burglar paid for what he took."

"Paid for it?" howled Blake.

"Yes—left a shilling on the counter."

"Gentlemen, the prisoner at the bar is completely exonerated," said Monty Lowther. "Nobody would ever think of accusing Trimble of paying for anything that he took."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Trimble, you leave this court without a stain on your character—though I can't say so much for your paws or your neck."

"You silly owl!" roared Trimble indignantly.

"This looks like a jolly queer burglary!" said Tom Merry, laughing. "I've never heard of a burglar who took only a loaf and cheese, and left cash in payment. What put the idea into your head, Trimble?"

"It happened last night——"

"Rats!"

"But it did!" yelled Trimble. "You can ask Taggles!"

"I guess that's a good idea," remarked Kit Wildrake. "Let's go and ask Taggles; and if Baggy is pulling our leg, we'll bump him in the puddle outside the tuckshop. There's a nice wet puddle there!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The Canadian junior's suggestion was adopted unanimously. Tom Merry & Co. crossed the quad to the little lock-up shop behind the elms.

It was Dame Taggles who kept that little establishment, and every morning the good dame trotted briskly over from the lodge and unlocked it with a big key.

The door was wide open now, and Taggles, the porter, could be seen inside, as well as his buxom better half.

Baggy Trimble accompanied the juniors. He seemed to have no fear of the threatened penalty. Apparently, for once, Baggy Trimble had been stating the facts. Even Trimble stated facts sometimes!

Arthur Augustus' eyeglass glimmered in at the open doorway.

"Mornin', Taggles!"

"Good-morning, Master D'Arcy!" said Taggles, who wore a worried and astonished look on his crusty countenance. "Some of you young gents 'ave been 'aving a lark 'ere, I suppose?"

"Bai Jove! Is it twue, then?"

"What did I tell you?" hooted Trimble.

"Has somebody been bagging bread and cheese, Taggles?"

"Yes, Master Blake."

"And paying for it?"

"I found a shilling on the counter," said Mrs. Taggles. "You young gentlemen should not play such tricks."

"Well, my hat!" ejaculated Lowther. "Trimble has been telling the truth!

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O day worthy to be marked with a white stone!"

"This ought to be put in the local paper," remarked Cardew of the Fourth. "A paragraph headed 'Unprecedented Occurrence at a Well-Known Public School! Trimble Tells the Truth!'"

"Yaas, wathah!" chuckled Arthur Augustus.

"Yah!" snorted Baggy Trimble.

The juniors crowded into the tuckshop, their curiosity very much excited.

Evidently the affair was not a "burglary," as Baggy had called it. But some person unknown certainly had entered the school shop during the night, taken bread and cheese, and left a coin of the realm in payment for the same. The door had been unlocked somehow. How was the mystery, as Dame Taggles had the only key to the establishment.

"Lots of old keys would fit a lock like that," said Blake. "Some chap wanted some grub before the shop opened. No harm done that I can see, as he's paid for it. But it's jolly queer! If it had been jam tarts or doughnuts——"

"What on earth should a chap want bread and cheese for?" said Lowther. "He could have got that from the housedame."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Here's a chance for the St. Jim's scouts," said Digby. "If the merchant's left any tracks——"

"By Jove!" exclaimed Herries. "I'll fetch my bulldog, Towser, you fellows. You know how he follows a trail——"

"Weally, Hewwies——"

"Hallo, Wildrake's on to it already!" grinned Cardew.

The Canadian junior was bending outside the tuckshop, studying the ground. The juniors gathered round him with smiling faces. The Canadian's wonderful skill in woodcraft was well known by this time—he could pick up a trail that was quite a blank to the best of the school scouts. Outside the shop was a puddle left by recent rain, and near it the ground was damp and soft. In the soft soil there were several tracks. There had been more, but they had been trampled away by many feet. But the boy from the Boot Leg Ranch was evidently "on" to something.

He was examining a foot-print clearly imprinted near the wet, and a strange, startled look had come over his face.

Without a glance at the curious juniors he followed the track—there were three or four more footprints, and then the trail was lost on the hard ground.

"That's Taggles' hoof!" said Blake. "Just about his size, anyhow."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I guess not!" said Wildrake quietly.

"Then whose is it?" demanded Tom Merry. "It's a man's track!"

"Correct."

"You know it?" asked Manners.

"I guess I've seen it before," said the Canadian briefly.

"Hallo, there's the bell!"

"Brekker!" said Blake. "Come on!"

The juniors streamed away towards the School House, losing all interest at once in the queer happening at the shop. Wildrake lingered for a few moments, scanning the track he had found, with keen, intent gaze.

"I guess it's the same!" he muttered. "It's the same, for a thousand dollars!"

He straightened up and glanced around him—at the green old quad, the ancient elms, the grey, ruined tower, ivied from base to summit, and the massive school buildings. Arthur Augustus called to him from the direction of the house.

"Come on, Wildwake! You'll be late for bwekkah, deah boy!"

"Coming!" answered the Canadian.

And he followed the rest of the juniors into the School House—still with a thoughtful frown on his handsome, sunburnt face.

CHAPTER 2.

The Mystery of the Foot-prints!

THERE was one vacant place at the Shell table that morning. It belonged to Talbot—who was absent. All the juniors knew where Talbot of the Shell was—locked up in the punishment-room. In that solitary apartment he was having his breakfast by himself.

Why Talbot was detained in "Nobody's Study" the Lower School was not aware—with the exception of Tom Merry. Tom Merry knew; and he was thinking of it as he sat at breakfast.

Tom's face was clouded as he thought of his chum.

When breakfast was over, the Terrible Three left the dining-room together, but they did not follow the crowd out into the sunny quad. Tom Merry turned to the staircase.

"Hold on, Tom!" said Manners in a low voice. "The Head's given orders that nobody's to go near the punishment-room, you know."

"I know. But——"

"Talbot will be out before long," said Monty Lowther. "They can't keep him in Nobody's Study for ever, you know."

"I'm going to speak just a word before lessons," said Tom Merry.

"Don't hang it out, then!" said Manners.

Tom Merry nodded and went up the big staircase. Nobody's Study was in the Shell passage, the door hidden in the shadow of a deep alcove. Tom Merry found the coast clear, and in a few minutes he was stooping to the keyhole of the punishment-room.

"Talbot!"

"Yes, Tom!" came Talbot's quiet voice from within. He knew his chum's voice at once.

"Had your brekker, old chap?"

"Yes; Toby brought it up. You're all serene, Tom—it's not known that you broke bounds last night?"

"No. I've not even told Lowther or Manners."

"I—I don't want you to keep secrets from your pals, old fellow," muttered Talbot uneasily.

"Least said, soonest mended," said Tom. "Still, if you don't mind—they're mum, you know. I hate keeping anything dark from them."

"I don't mind at all. Tom, old fellow, I blame myself for letting you go last night," said Talbot remorsefully. "You're too good a pal to be dragged into my wretched troubles."

"You couldn't help it!" said Tom. "I knew you'd go, if I didn't—and that settled it. The Weasel's got clear off, I believe—at least, he cleared off last night. Oh, Talbot, I hope you're right, and that the man is innocent—if I've helped a criminal to escape——" Tom faltered.

"I am sure of it, Tom," said Talbot quietly. "I've been thinking and thinking while I've been shut up here. I am certain that the Weasel told me the truth, and that he had nothing to do with the bank robbery at Lantham."

"I—I hope you're right, Talbot—I believe you are. You know the man, and you ought to know. If he's innocent, I did no wrong in warning him to go—but it was a close shave, old man. Inspector Skeat was close on us——"

He heard Talbot catch his breath inside the room.

"How was that, Tom? I'd never have supposed old Skeat was sharp enough to get on the track so soon——"

"He isn't," said Tom. "But Wildrake was helping him."

"Wildrake of the Fourth!" exclaimed Talbot, in astonishment.

"Yes. It seems that old Skeat asked the Head to let Wildrake go with him, to pick up the man's trail—he'd heard about Wildrake's skill. And Wildrake did it—and led old Skeat through the woods, right on to the spot—just as I was talking to the Weasel by the dead oak."

"Good heavens!" breathed Talbot. "Tom! The fearful risk you ran—— Did Skeat see you?"

"No; Wildrake gave me a chance to get clear before the inspector came up. He's a decent chap, though——" Tom paused.

"Though what, Tom?"

"I like Wildrake," said Tom. "He's a clean, straight chap—but—but I'm afraid he thinks pretty badly of both of us, Talbot. He was helping the police to run down a cracksman—and he found that we were helping the man to escape. What was he to think of us?"

"I—I never thought of Wildrake being mixed up in it, or any St. Jim's chap," muttered Talbot. "When I'm out of this I'll see Wildrake, and explain to him—I'll clear you in his eyes, anyhow. He's a decent chap, and he sha'n't think badly of you because you stood by me. He can think what he likes of me. Oh, Tom, I wish you'd kept clear of the whole bizney. It was my fault——"

"Rot!" said Tom as cheerfully as he could. "I'm standing by you all the time, whatever happens. I——"

"Merry!"

Tom bounded to his feet.

The Head had come up the passage, and he was standing at the opening of the alcove in the wall, his eyes fixed severely upon the captain of the Shell.

Tom Merry faced him, crimson with confusion.

"Oh, sir!" he gasped.

"You were speaking to Talbot!" exclaimed the Head sternly.

"Ye-e-es, sir!" stammered Tom.

"You are very well aware, Merry, that you are not allowed to speak to any boy under detention in the punishment-room!" said Dr. Holmes sternly.

Tom Merry did not reply. He was very well aware of it; there was no doubt on that point.

"You may go!" said the Head, after a moment. "Do not let this occur again, Merry."

"Yes, sir—no, sir!" stammered Tom.

He hurried away at once. As he went, he heard Dr. Holmes unlocking the door of Nobody's Study.

Manners and Lowther joined their chum anxiously at the foot of the staircase.

"Spotted?" breathed Lowther. "We hadn't a chance to warn you—he passed us here——"

"Yes," said Tom. "But it's all serene! Let's get out!"

The Terrible Three went out into the quad. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came up to them with a smile on his face.

"Wildwake's goin' it!" he remarked.

"Wildrake? What is he up to?" asked Lowther.

"Twackin'!" grinned Arthur Augustus. "He's awfly intewested in the footpwint he found neah the tuckshop befoah bwekkah. Come ovah and have a look at him, deah boys!"

"What utter rot!" said Manners, as the chums of the Shell followed Arthur Augustus. "Wildrake can't be duffer enough to think it was really a burglar?"

"Hardly!" said Lowther.

"Baggy Trimble can talk rot about a burglar burgling a loaf and a chunk of cheese," said Manners; "but burglars don't steal such things—and certainly

they don't leave payment for them. It was some fellow having a joke on Dame Taggles."

"Must have been," agreed Tom Merry. "Though I don't quite see the point of the joke."

"The shop door must have been unlocked somehow," said Arthur Augustus. "It is wathah more than a joke to pick a lock."

"More likely Dame Taggles left it unlocked when she shut up the shop yesterday."

"Yaas, wathah! That is what the Head will think if Taggles weports it," remarked Arthur Augustus. "It's wathah too thick to think a fellow would pick a lock for the sake of buyin' bwead and cheese befoah the shop opened. Heah's Wildwake, goin' stwong!"

Kit Wildrake was scanning a damp patch of ground near the tuckshop, and the Terrible Three paused to look on. Half a dozen fags of the Third Form had gathered round the Canadian, watching him and grinning. D'Arcy minor was showing off the Canadian junior, as if he were a showman and Wildrake going through a trick.

"Walk up, gents!" said Wally D'Arcy, grinning. "Here you behold our tame wild and woolly Westerner in his well-known, celebrated, and famous tracking act! Warranted to trail down anybody who burgles bread and cheese, and to recover the bread and cheese unless in the hands of Trimble of the Fourth!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the fags.

"No charge for admission!" continued Wally, heedless of a rather wrathful glance from the Canadian junior. "All are welcome! Don't throw things at the performer; he's doing his best!"

"Whose track is it, Wildrake?" asked Levison minor. "Do you figure it out that it was the Head who bagged the loaf?"

"Or the House-master?" chorded Reggie Manners.

"Look here, you silly fags! Clear off!" exclaimed Wildrake.

"My dear chap, this is as good as a thrilling act on the cinema—in fact, better!" said Wally. "We want to be in at the death! I rather suspect that the loaf will be stale by the time you track down the burglar!"

"And the cheese will be a bit gorgonzoly!" said Frank Levison.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What on earth are you up to, Wildrake?" asked Tom Merry. "It's as plain as anything that Mrs. Taggles left the shop door unlocked overnight, and somebody went in and helped himself and left the money. We've often done so when Mrs. Taggles was out."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Wildrake gave Tom Merry a very penetrating look.

"You really think that?" he asked.

"Of course I do!"

"Mrs. Taggles is quite positive that she locked the shop door on leaving it last evening."

"Oh, she's forgotten!"

"Perhaps!" said Wildrake.

"Anyhow, what the thump are you making out of those scratches?" asked Manners. "You can't call it a track."

"I guess it's fairly plain," answered Wildrake. "I've picked up the track several times in different places—once behind the elms, close to the school wall."

"Where the giddy intruder came over in the dead of night?" chuckled Monty Lowther.

"Sure!"

"Wha-at?" ejaculated Lowther.

Tom Merry stared blankly at the Canadian.

"You really think somebody got over the school wall, helped himself to bread and cheese in the tuckshop—picking a lock to get in—and left a shilling in payment!" he exclaimed.

"Correct!"

"Then you must be off your dot!" said Tom.

Wildrake shrugged his shoulders.

"I guess it's the payment that beats me," he said. "The man left a shilling for what he took. Was it simply to give the impression that it was some fellow belonging to the school who went into the shop, or——" He broke off.

"Or what?" asked Tom.

"Oh, nothing! I guess this matter wants figuring out."

"What rot!" said Tom; and he walked away with his chums, Wildrake casting a very curious glance after him.

"Keep it up, Wildrake!" said D'Arcy minor. "This is no end funny! Haven't you found any bloodstains yet?"

"Or any body?" asked Manners minor.

"There ought really to be a body!" said Frank Levison. "We shall be sadly disappointed if you don't find a body!"

"Yaas, wathah!" chuckled Arthur Augustus.

Wildrake smiled, and walked away, his search apparently ended for the present. Perhaps he was tired of following his "stunt" in the derisive presence of the fags. But when the Fourth Form went into lessons with Mr. Lathom that morning, Kit Wildrake wore a very thoughtful frown upon his brow, and for once Mr. Lathom found the Canadian junior a little inattentive in class.

CHAPTER 3.
In Nobody's Study.

DR. HOLMES opened the door of Nobody's Study and entered. Talbot of the Shell rose to his feet at once, his manner very respectful. The Head closed the door. Talbot stood silent before him.

His heart smote him as he noted the lines of trouble in the Head's kind face. The Head of St. Jim's had been the kindest friend that ever came in Talbot's wayward path; the junior who had once been known as the "Toff," the prince of cracksmen, owed more to him than he could ever hope to repay. Talbot of the Shell would have laid down his life for his benefactor, and now he was giving him trouble and anxiety.

Dr. Holmes sat down.

"I have come here, Talbot, to speak to you very seriously," he said.

"Yes, sir," said Talbot quietly.

"You refused to speak frankly to Inspector Skeat when he came to the school yesterday," said the Head. "Your refusal was tantamount to a confession of wrong-doing, Talbot."

"Oh, sir!"

"I have every faith in you, my boy," said the Head gently. "If I found that you had deceived me I do not think I could ever place faith in a human being again."

"I would die rather than deceive you, sir!" said Talbot, his voice faltering.

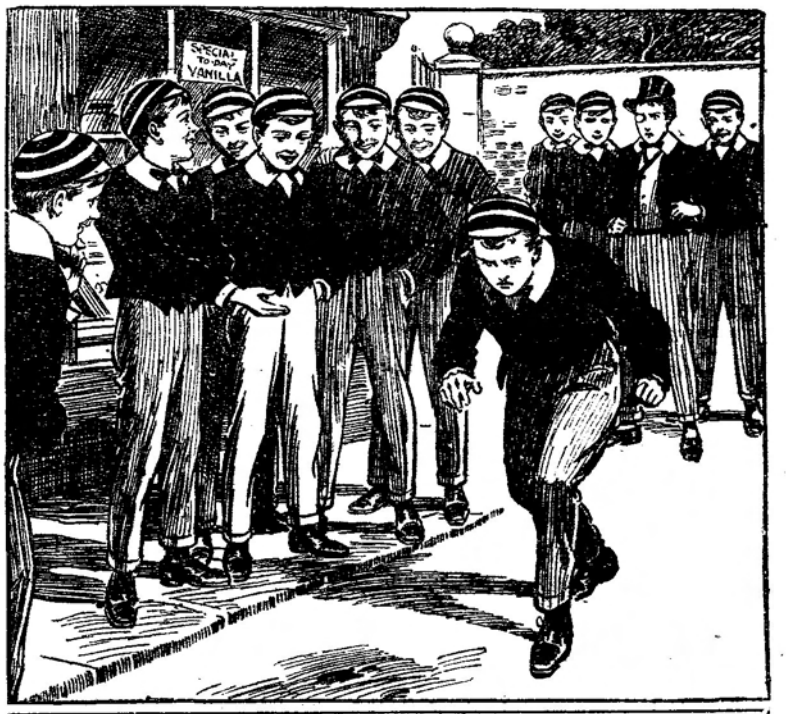
"I ask you to explain," said the Head. "The inspector is not present now—I shall use my own judgment before repeating anything that you may tell me. You have no right to withhold your confidence from me, Talbot. Your uncle Colonel Lyndon—would command you to speak if he were here. Tell me the plain truth. Did you leave the school last evening to meet a man called the Weasel, who is charged with a bank robbery at Lantham?"

Talbot hesitated.

"Yes, sir," he said at last.

"He was a man you knew, I presume, in the old days, before you came to the school—before you—you——"

"Before I gave up my old life, sir," said Talbot quietly, though his pale cheeks were tinged with colour. "Yes, sir, I knew the Weasel then."



"Hallo, Wildrake's on to it already!" grinned Cardew. The Canadian junior was bending outside the tuckshop, studying the ground. He was examining a footprint clearly imprinted near the wet, and a strange, startled look came over his face. *(See page 4.)*

"One condition of your reform, Talbot, was that you should hold no connection with the fearful characters who had once been your associates."

"I know it, sir. But——"

"How did you know the man was in this neighbourhood?"

"He sent a message to me."

"And then you met him as a friend?" asked the Head.

Talbot crimsoned.

"No, sir. I met him to see what he wanted—to hand him over to the police if he attempted any treachery with me, or if I found that he had broken the law."

The Head's brow cleared.

"That was right," he said, "though it would have been wiser not to see him at all. But why did you not carry out that intention?"

"Because, sir——"

Talbot paused.

"Speak freely, my boy! You know that I am your friend, and that I shall look upon your conduct in the best possible light."

"Thank you, sir!" said Talbot, deeply moved. "Heaven knows that I am grateful for your kindness to me, and that I would not willingly cause you pain. You shall judge, sir, whether I have done wrong. This man—the Weasel—was a member of the old lawless gang at Angel Alley."

He shivered a little with the black and bitter recollections that the name brought into his mind.

"But he was not one of the worst—rather a weak man who could not go straight, than a rascal like Dawlish and some of the others. After your kindness to me, sir, enabled me to begin a new life, I saw the man—I helped him with some money, and he promised to begin afresh.

"But he never had any luck. His past was against him. He was sacked from his employment. He lived from hand to mouth after that. I knew nothing of him, or little; but when I met him yesterday he told me he was keeping honest—that the charge against him at Lantham was unfounded. He swore that he was innocent, sir, and after thinking it over, I believed him."

"And the man," said the Head, "he can prove it at his trial."

Talbot smiled faintly.

"A man like that has no chance, sir. He was seen near the place—the job was one of the kind he had done in the old days—and he took fright and fled when he found he was suspected. He has spent ten years of his life in prison. Everything is against him. Unless another man is found to answer for the crime, the Weasel is almost certain to be convicted, and I believe that he is innocent."

"You know and have seen much that a boy of your age should be happily ignorant of," said the Head. "That is no fault of yours. I cannot share your belief in the innocence of this man, for whose arrest a warrant is issued, and who has fled from a trial. Be that as it may, you had no right to assist him against the law."

"I have not assisted him, sir. I simply did not tell Inspector Skeat what I knew."

"And the man," said the Head—"where is he now?"

"I do not know, sir."

"You made no appointment to see him again?"

"I did, sir, but I was unable to keep the appointment."

Dr. Holmes nodded.

"As you see, Talbot, it was for your own good that I locked you in the punishment-room last night."

Talbot was silent.

He wondered what the Head would have thought if he had known that Tom Merry had taken Talbot's warning to the hunted man in the wood at the dead of night.

But it was not necessary for the Head to know that.

That was a secret known only to Tom Merry, Talbot, and the boy from the Boot Leg Ranch.

Dr. Holmes remained some moments in thought.

"I have heard from Inspector Skeat," he said at last. "The man was nearly captured last night with the assistance of Wildrake, of the Fourth Form, who followed his tracks in the wood. But he escaped. You do not know where he is now, Talbot—you are sure?"

"Quite sure, sir. I think he has fled from the neighbourhood. I do not expect ever to see him again. He will not venture back here, I should think, now that he is so closely hunted."

"Then there is little harm done," said the Head. "That the man will be captured soon seems certain, as mounted police are scouring the countryside for him. He can scarcely escape. Talbot, you have acted, I think, from a foolish sense of chivalry; but that your motives were good I am assured. But I fear that you have planted very dark suspicions in Inspector Skeat's mind."

Talbot bit his lip.

"You, sir, cannot have any suspicion that I have the desire or the thought of ever touching again my wretched old associations?" he said in a low voice.

"No, Talbot; but you lay yourself open to the suspicion by your reckless conduct. You must see for yourself that you cannot afford to act as you have done—that you have run a fearful risk of bringing disgrace upon yourself and upon your school by thus befriending a man who is probably guilty of the crime he is charged with. I have always been your friend, Talbot, and I have a right to ask you, to command you, that nothing of this kind shall ever recur."

"I admit your right, sir," said Talbot.

"Very well!" said the Head. "I shall say no more about the matter, my boy. You may go and rejoin your schoolfellows."

"Thank you, sir!" Talbot hesitated. "You do not doubt me now, sir?"

"I never doubted you, Talbot. I only feared that you had acted foolishly and recklessly, and exposed yourself to risks you had no right to run," said Dr. Holmes. "But the man is gone. The matter is closed, and I hope it will not be necessary to mention it again."

Talbot left the punishment-room with a lighter heart.

Dr. Holmes followed him more slowly, and his kind old face was very thoughtful as he made his way to the Sixth Form-room.

Perhaps, in spite of his faith in the boy, some doubt had shaken him—a dark doubt that Talbot, once the associate of law-breakers, might have fallen under the evil spell again—might have dreamed of his old life when he was an Ishmael, his hand against every man, and every man's hand against him. But if a doubt had come, it was gone now.

The boy had acted with a foolish chivalry towards a wretched man down on his luck, but his honour was unstained. He was the noble-hearted lad his kind protector had always believed him to be.

Talbot ran lightly down the stairs, and joined the Shell fellows on their way to the Form-room.

"Hallo, old chap! Out of quod?" exclaimed Monty Lowther.

"Yes," said Talbot, laughing.

"All serene?" asked Manners.

"Quite."

Tom Merry pressed his chum's arm without speaking. His relief was great at seeing Talbot free again, and with so cheerful a face. Evidently the interview with the Head had gone well.

"But what were you shoved into Nobody's Study for?" asked Kangaroo. "I know you were out of bounds yesterday evening. The Head seems to have come down on you rather hard for taking French leave for once."

"Well, I asked for it, and got it," said Talbot lightly. "It's all over now, and it's all serene. Here comes Mr. Linton."

And the Shell went into their Form-room, and Talbot was saved from the ordeal of further questions.

CHAPTER 4.
Wildrake Wants to Know.

KIT WILDRAKE was glad when the Fourth Form was dismissed that morning. There were matters stirring in his mind of deeper import than Latin verbs.

The Canadian junior had done some deep thinking that morning, and his "construe" for once had rivalled Baggy Trimble's in badness.

It had been difficult for the boy from the Boot Leg Ranch to keep his mind upon lessons at all, and he had earned fifty lines from Mr. Lathom, as well as several curt remarks.

He did not join the Fourth-Formers as they crowded out into the quadrangle, but hung about near the Shell room, waiting. It was a few minutes later that the door of the Shell Form-room was flung open, and a crowd of juniors streamed out.

Wildrake came towards Tom Merry as the Terrible Three strolled down the passage.

Tom coloured a little as he met Wildrake's look.

He could not forget the meeting in the wood the previous night, when the Canadian had found him with the Weasel, warning the hunted man that the police were close at hand.

Tom had been in a false position, and he knew that his conduct must have appeared strange, if not guilty, in the eyes of the Canadian junior; and Wildrake's look now was not exactly cordial. His expression was one of grim determination.

"I guess I want to speak to you, Merry!" he said.

"Go ahead!" said Tom.

"Will you come up to my study, and bring Talbot?"

Tom Merry signed to Talbot, who was going down the corridor with Gore. Talbot came over to them.

"Wildrake wants to speak to us in his study," said Tom Merry briefly.

"Certainly!" said Talbot quietly.

"Not little us?" asked Monty Lowther pathetically. "Are we left out in the cold? Aren't you giving us a ticket for the conversazione, kid?"

"What's all the dashed mystery about?" asked Manners, rather gruffly. "I don't see it myself."

"You two fellows come, too, then," said Talbot. "Tom doesn't want to keep a secret from you, and I do not."

"Oh, we're not curious!" grunted Manners.

"Speak for yourself, old top," said Monty Lowther. "I'm awfully curious—as inquisitive as Baggy Trimble—devoured with it! I'm awfully keen to know whether Wildrake's found the body."

"The body!" ejaculated Talbot.

"Didn't you know our merry tracker was on the merry track?" asked Monty Lowther blandly. "Dame Taggles left the door of the tuckshop unlocked last night, and early this morning a fellow went in and helped himself to bread and cheese, and left a bob on the counter. Don't you perceive the serious awfulness of the affair?"

"Not quite!" said Talbot, perplexed.

"Well, I don't, either," said Lowther cheerfully. "But Wildrake does. He's found that some tramp got over the garden wall in the night, bagged the grub by picking the lock, and left hoof-prints nearly the size of Taggles' all over the quad. Wildrake was on the giddy track till the fags chivvied him off it. We're in hourly expectation of Wildrake finding a body. If he doesn't find a body, it will be bloodstains, at least. But he's bound to find something—he's in deadly earnest."

Talbot laughed.

"Will you come to the study?" asked Wildrake quietly. "I don't care whether these chaps come or not—what I've got to say isn't very pleasant, and you may not care for them to hear it."

"You can have nothing to say that my friends can't hear!" said Tom Merry curtly. "Come on, all of you!"

"The mystery deepens!" remarked Monty Lowther, as the four Shell fellows and Wildrake moved off to the staircase. "Probably Wildrake has got the body in his study, under the table, or hidden in the coal-locker. If he doesn't produce a body of some sort, I vote we bump him on the floor of his own study."

Wildrake did not smile; he was evidently in a serious mood. He did not speak till they reached Study No. 2 in the Fourth. Tom Merry & Co. entered, and the Canadian followed them in and shut the door. Monty Lowther winked at his comrades.

"Produce the body!" he said.

"Oh, don't play the giddy goat!" said Wildrake.

"Isn't there a body?" demanded Lowther, in a tone of the deepest disappointment.

"Fathead!"

"Didn't the merry trail lead up to this study?" asked Lowther. "Haven't you tracked the tuckshop burglar up the ivy? Didn't he leave hoof-prints on the window-sill? Then what have we come here for?"

"You seem to have come to talk out of the back of your neck,' said Wildrake gruffly.

"Chuck it, Monty," said Tom Merry. "It's really a rather serious matter. Get going, Wildrake."

"You really don't care if these fellows hear?"

"No."

"Very well, then," said Wildrake quietly. "I guess I can put it short and sharp. Last night Inspector Skeat asked the Head to let me go with him, to pick up the tracks of the man he wanted—the man called the Weasel. That man had sent a message to Talbot, by me, in the afternoon. Talbot broke bounds to go and meet him. I didn't know then that he was a criminal, hunted for having robbed a bank at Lantham, and knocked the night watchman on the head, or I'd have collared him instead of bringing his message."

"What the thump is this yarn?" ejaculated Manners, in astonishment.

Monty Lowther was serious enough now. Tom Merry was red and discomfited, Talbot as calm and impassive as ever.

"I went with the inspector," continued Wildrake. "I picked up the trail easily enough. I followed it, and came on the man near the dead oak in Rylcombe Wood—"

"The thunder you did!" exclaimed Lowther.

"I found Tom Merry with him," said Wildrake. "He was warning the man to clear; and he stopped me when I was going to bag him."

"My hat!"

"I ought to have called Skeat up at once. I knew that if I did Tom Merry would have been taken into custody for helping a criminal to escape."

"Draw it mild!" growled Manners, with an uneasy side glance at his chum's crimson face.

"I'm giving you the frozen facts. That's what Tom Merry was doing, and old Skeat would have nailed him for it if he'd seen him, and known. I hadn't much time to think; but I knew what a disgrace it would be for Tom Merry, and for our school, and I guessed, too, that he had only come there on Talbot's account, because Talbot was locked in the punishment-room, and couldn't get away to warn his precious pal." Wildrake's lip curled. "I've heard some queer stories about Talbot, and his past. I reckoned that whatever he had been, he was straight now, or he wouldn't be allowed to stay at St. Jim's. I reckoned that the Weasel had known him in his old days, and was trying to rope him in to help him. That was as near as I could figure it out. But sending a warning to the man to clear, when the police nearly had him, was outside the limit. It showed, I reckon, that Talbot was hand-in-glove with the galoot. That's not good enough."

Manners and Lowther were silent, in astonishment mingled with dismay.

This was news to them, and unpleasing news.

They looked from Tom Merry to Talbot, and at each other, not knowing what to say—or, indeed, what to think.

Wildrake went on quietly:

"I guess this gave me some thinking to do. To save Tom Merry from ruining himself, I let the man get away—I stopped Mr. Skeat from coming up in time to spot him. I reckoned afterwards that the man had cleared, and was far enough from St. Jim's, and that if I held my tongue, no harm would be done. But it's turned out different. Now I've got a few words to say—you two fellows, Merry and Talbot, are shielding a man wanted for a crime of violence, and you've got to stop it."

"Got to?" said Tom Merry, his brow darkening.

Wildrake nodded.

"You've got to!" he repeated. "I've called you here to tell you so, and if you don't toe the line, and do what's honest, I'm going to see that the right thing is done."

Tom Merry clenched his hand.

"Hold on, Tom," said Talbot quietly. "Wildrake is entitled to an explanation. What you've said is true enough, Wildrake—with this difference. The man called the Weasel is innocent of the bank robbery—at least, we believe so—and that is why we helped him."

"I guess that puts a better complexion on it," admitted Wildrake. "But all the same, whatever you believe, you can't know. You've no right whatever to stand between him and the law. I can't consent to it, because whatever you believe, I don't share your belief. So far as I know anything about the man, he's a dangerous character, and he's got to be rounded up. It's not for St. Jim's fellows to stand between crime and justice."

Tom Merry's eyes flashed.

"Is it your bizney to teach us what St. Jim's fellows ought to do?" he exclaimed hotly. "We know that better than you do!"

"I guess not—in this instance, at least," said Wildrake coolly. "I know there's a poor chap in Lantham with a cracked head, and that the Weasel is wanted for it. I know he's going to stand his trial for it. You fellows can either stand out of the matter, or you can face the music. But the man goes to the police."

"You don't seem quite to understand," said Talbot, still calmly. "The Weasel has bolted, and we don't know anything further about him. Don't you believe me?" he exclaimed, flushing, as



Talbot ascended the stairs with cautious steps. "Weasel!" He called cautiously. A haggard face rose into view from behind a heap of fallen masonry. "Toff!" Talbot gave the hapless wretch a compassionate look. "'Ow did you know I was 'ere, Toff?" asked the Weasel. (*See page 9.*)

he caught the derisive smile on Kit Wildrake's sunburnt face.

"We know nothing whatever of him!" exclaimed Tom Merry savagely. "If you dare to doubt my word——"

Wildrake shrugged his shoulders.

"I guess facts come before chin music," he answered.

"Why, you—you rotter!" shouted Tom Merry, his eyes blazing.

He made a spring towards Wildrake, his fists up.

Wildrake faced him coolly.

"Hold on, Tom!" Talbot seized his chum by the arm, and dragged him back. "That's no good!"

"He's not going to call me a liar!" said Tom Merry between his teeth.

Wildrake's lip curled.

"You say that you know nothing about the Weasel now?" he said.

"I've said so!" snapped Tom savagely.

"Nothing!" said Talbot.

"Nothing!" repeated Wildrake. "Then perhaps you'll answer another question. What is the Weasel doing at St. Jim's?"

CHAPTER 5.
The Compact.

TOM MERRY & Co. stared blankly at Wildrake. That astounding question had taken them utterly by surprise.

"At St. Jim's!" panted Talbot.

"The Weasel here—at the school?" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Are you out of your senses? You must be mad, I think!"

Wildrake eyed the two Shell fellows sharply.

Their amazement was so great, and so evidently genuine, that the Canadian could not doubt it.

His grim look relaxed.

"If I've done you an injustice, I guess I'm sorry," he said, in his frank way. "But you'll allow it looked pretty clear—after you were backing up that rascal last night—that you knew he was here, and were helping him to skulk out of sight about the school."

"It's impossible," said Lowther.

"You—you—you thought we—I—Talbot and I had brought that man within the school walls, to hide him from the police!" gasped Tom Merry.

"What did it look like?" demanded Wildrake. "Knowing as much as I did, I wasn't likely to calculate that he was here without your knowledge or help."

"But he's not here—he can't be here!" said Talbot, his face very pale now. "He's gone—he's probably in another county before this——"

"How could he come here?" said Tom Merry helplessly. "It's utter rot! Do you mean to say you've seen him?"

"Nix."

"Well, then——"

"He's here, all the same," said Wildrake quietly. "He came over the school wall last night, behind the elms; he lurked about the place in the dark for some time, and he picked the lock of the tuckshop door to get food."

"Oh! You think——"

"You think it was the Weasel who entered the school shop?" exclaimed Talbot, a light breaking on his mind.

"I don't think—I know," answered Wildrake.

"How do you know, then?" demanded Tom Merry. "You're talking in riddles, as far as I can see. You say you never saw the man, and yet you give us an account of his movements, as if you were only a yard behind him all the time."

"Easy enough, too," answered Wildrake. "I'll explain. You know I helped Mr. Skeat last night to run him down? I've told you. I picked up his tracks quite easily in the wood. He wore an old busted pair of hobnailed boots—and some of the nails were gone. Wherever the track was plainly printed, it was as easy as reading a book. He took to the hard high road, and escaped, after our row in the wood. I never expected to see his trail again. But this morning I found it——"

"Outside the tuckshop?" said Manners.

"Correct!"

"But—but you can't be sure!" exclaimed Tom.

Wildrake smiled.

"I guess I would go nap on it," he said. "The track of his worn-out, hobnail boots fairly jumped at me from the mud round the puddle. Some of the nails missing—just as in the track I picked up through the wood last night. There's no mistake. The man who left his tracks here was the man I trailed in the wood—the man you call the Weasel. I've been hunting round to follow his movements. Behind the trees by the wall there's a deep track, where he jumped down—his weight was on it, you see, and drove the sign deep. That's where he came in. He lurked about—picking his way, I guess, and trying to learn the lay of the land. He was alone then, and later he nosed round the school-shop, and went in for food. That's the latest I know."

The Canadian junior spoke with quiet confidence.

Tom Merry gave Talbot an almost haggard look. He did not doubt any further the conclusions of the Canadian. Well he knew the almost uncanny skill of the boy from the Boot Leg Ranch in picking up a trail.

"The Weasel—here!" muttered Tom, in dismay.

Talbot compressed his lips.

"After what had happened, you can't blame me if I figured it out that you had brought him here," said Wildrake. "But I reckon I was off the track there, and I'm sorry I doubted you. I wanted to warn you to keep clear while I rounded him up, that's all. You don't want to be bagged along with him, I guess."

"Good heavens!" muttered Manners.

"We knew nothing of the man being here," said Talbot steadily. "You might have guessed that, Wildrake. If we had brought him in, we should have given him food. He entered the school-shop because he was starving and desperate."

Wildrake nodded.

"I guess that's a cinch," he admitted. "I believe you, right away. But it beats me why that rogue left the money for the food. Only to make Mrs. Taggles suppose it was one of the fellows, I guess."

"I think not. I believe the poor wretch has been trying to keep straight, and that he paid for the food because he would not steal it."

"I guess it's possible," said Wildrake. "I don't hold much with believing in a hobo of that sort turning over a new leaf. I've seen some tough characters out West, and don't remember any that took to tracts. But I allow it's possible. You knew the man, and I don't know him. All the same, he's wanted by the police, and he's hidden in the school grounds somewhere, and he's got to be rooted out. You may be right, but you may be wrong, and the odds are on it, I guess; and a man who's wanted for a crime of violence isn't a man to hang around a school."

"No fear!" said Lowther.

"You think he's still about?" exclaimed Tom.

"Sure! He moseyed in to get clear of the hunt; and he wouldn't venture out again in daylight, I reckon. He's lying doggo in some deep corner—not so deep that he can't be routed out in a search, though. I guess that old tower is a likely spot—nobody seems to go in it."

"It's unsafe, and out of bounds," said Manners.

"Which would make it safe for Mister Weasel," said Wildrake. "I guess that's where I shall round him up."

He moved towards the study door.

"Stop!" said Talbot huskily.

"Well?"

"What are you going to do?"

"I guess I'm going to root Mister Weasel out," said the Canadian. "He's not a safe neighbour for schoolboys."

Talbot breathed hard.

"I know you're right, Wildrake," he muttered. "But—but I tell you the poor wretch is down on his luck, and I believe he is innocent. You're not bound to act in the matter. Give the man a chance to clear."

"Give him a chance to rob the school, you mean," said Wildrake. "I guess that's more likely, if he's given rope enough."

"I tell you—no! Listen to me," said Talbot, his voice faltering. "I will answer for him—on my word, Wildrake. Leave him alone, and if he is here, I will see that he goes as soon as it is dark; this night he shall clear out, and none of us shall ever see him again."

"You're asking me to break the law."

"I'm asking you to keep silent, and give a hopeless wretch a chance."

Wildrake hesitated.

Cool and practical as he was, he was impressed by Talbot's earnestness.

"I will look for him, and find him if he is here," said Talbot. "No one else shall see him. I will make him go as soon as it is safe. And—and if you fear that he will commit a robbery here—I will watch to-night until he is gone—you shall watch with me, if you like."

Wildrake drew a deep breath.

"I guess you're sailing pretty near the wind, Talbot," he said. "But goodness knows I don't want to be hard on a poor devil that's knocked out, if there's really a chance that he's an innocent man. I'll take your word for it; and if he goes by midnight, I'll say nothing. If he's here after that, he goes into chokey; and I'll stay out of dorm to see to it."

"Done!" said Talbot.

And so the discussion ended; with Kit Wildrake doubtful and only half-satisfied; and Tom Merry & Co. in a deeply-troubled mood.

CHAPTER 6.
In Hiding.

TOM MERRY wheeled out his bicycle after dinner. It was a half-holiday that day; and Tom had a mission to fulfil for Talbot. But the latter had a second object in sending his chum across to Wayland—he was determined that Tom should not be mixed up further in the affair with the Weasel. If the man was really within the walls of St. Jim's—as Talbot no longer doubted—the consequences would be grave if he was discovered. Talbot was taking a great risk upon himself; and he resolved that Tom should not be dragged into it further. As the captain of the Shell pedalled away, Talbot watched him go, with relief in his face. Then he strolled away, and by a round-about course, reached the old grey ruins of the tower. The tower was at a good distance from the school buildings, and the door was boarded up; the interior was crumbling and unsafe, and one or two adventurous explorers had had nasty

tumbles there, which had led to the place being put out of bounds. But it was possible to obtain ingress through the gaps in the old wall, and Talbot had no difficulty in penetrating into the interior.

If the hunted man was lurking in the precincts of the school, this was certainly the hiding-place he would have chosen, after lurking round the place in the moonlight, and taking his bearings. He was not likely to be discovered there, unless some party of explorers should venture into the forbidden precincts. Even then, there were many nooks and crannies where a fugitive could have crept out of sight, and lain "doggo."

Talbot glanced round the shadowy old stone-walled room, in which he found himself, dimly lighted by ancient loop-holes. The old stone stair was crumbling with age. Several of the steps were missing, and dangerous gaps yawned for the unwary climber. Talbot ascended the spiral stair with cautious steps.

"Weasel!"

He called cautiously.

He thought he heard a movement, and repeated his call.

"Weasel!"

A haggard face rose into view from behind a heap of fallen masonry in a roofless room halfway up the stairs.

"Toff!"

Talbot gave the hapless wretch a compassionate look. Fear and anxiety had left deep marks on the rugged, unshaven face of the Weasel. He stared at Talbot in evident surprise, mingled with satisfaction.

"'Ow did you know I was 'ere, Toff?" he muttered.

"You left your tracks, Weasel."

"Tracks!" repeated the Weasel. "I reckon you've got the second sight if you found anything out from that."

"It was another fellow, a Colonial——"

"He knows?" panted the Weasel.

"He will be silent until you have gone. I persuaded him," said Talbot. "If you clear off by midnight he will say nothing, and give you a chance."

The Weasel shivered.

"You ought not to have come here."

"They was arter me, fairly on my heels," said the Weasel, despairingly. "What was a cove to do? I was hunted out of the wood, and there they was arter me. I reckon all the roads was watched. And I was starving, Toff. I hadn't eaten for thirty hours. I nipped over the wall and chanced it, and—and——"

"It was frightfully dangerous to take food from the school shop," said Talbot uneasily.

"You know that I left the money to pay for it. Your pal gave me a few shillings last night," said the Weasel. "I 'oped as they'd think it was one of the schoolboys——"

"So they do. But it's led to Wildrake rooting you out. I've come here to warn you," said Talbot. "I believe what you told me, Weasel, and that you are innocent of what happened at Lantham. I've brought you some money—all I could get together—and some food." Talbot began to turn out his pockets. "I'm going to get some old clothes and get out to-night to bring them to you, and see you clear. Then you'll have to take your chance. Wildrake will speak if you remain."

"You're a good pal, Toff," muttered the Weasel gratefully. "I know you'll do all you can. I never ought to 'ave stuck on to you like this, but I was right at the end of my tether. And I swear that I never knew anything of the job at Lantham till I saw my picture up at the police-station and a reward offered for me. Then I bolted for it. And who wouldn't, with my record agin 'im?"

Talbot nodded.

"Lie low here, Weasel. Keep quiet. It's not likely anybody will come here. If they do, you must keep out of sight in some cranny. I wish I could do more to help you, but what I've done means utter ruin to me if it comes out."

"I know, Toff, I know. I ain't forgetting that," muttered the Weasel. "But you know I never did it, Toff—that job at Lantham. Cracking the crib was in my line once upon a time, but knocking the watchman on the 'ead from behind—I wouldn't 'ave done that. If the cops wasn't so keen arter me they might land on the right man. It looks to me like one of Silky Smith's jobs. You remember Silky Smith?"

"I remember," said Talbot, with a sigh.

"I saw him a week ago in Lantham," continued the Weasel. "He was got up in a sporting style, but I knowed Silky Smith all right. I dodged speaking to him 'cause I knew he'd want me to help him in his lay. I knowed he was there on a lay. And Silky Smith's the man to knock a watchman out with a jemmy. I never was. I never had the nerve, if you come to that. But they're arter me, and they won't worry Silky. You goin', Toff?"

"I must. I might be missed. You'll see me here again at midnight, Weasel, unless something happens to stop me."

"Right you are, Toff!"

Talbot descended the stairs with a moody brow, leaving the wretched fugitive devouring the food he had brought. In a few minutes the Shell fellow was outside the tower. A few minutes more, and he was sauntering in the quadrangle, waiting for Tom Merry's return. He was thinking of the Head, with a heavy heart. Dr. Holmes trusted him. What would the good old doctor have thought if he could have known that the "wanted" man was within the school walls, and that Talbot knew it and was silent? Was he failing in faith towards his benefactor? Yet to betray the wretched man, that was impossible.

Talbot prayed in his heart for the hours to hasten by, that the Weasel might be gone, and the perilous situation ended.

Tom Merry came in at last, with a bundle of newspapers under his arm. He handed them to Talbot, with a questioning look.

"You've seen him?" he muttered.

"Yes, Tom. Never mind where. You ought to know nothing of it. You get down to the footer while I go over these papers."

"Right-ho!"

Talbot went into the School House and up to his study. Gore and Skimpole were out of doors, and he had the study to himself. He opened the newspapers and sought out the accounts of the burglary at Lantham, the affair of which the Weasel was supposed to be guilty. Tom had gathered all the local papers that he could, and there were several accounts to read. Talbot went through them all carefully.

His handsome face was very thoughtful. What he read confirmed his belief in the innocence of the Weasel. Talbot's recollections of the "old gang" were keen enough, and there were several particulars of the "job"—especially the injury to the night-watchman at the bank—that reminded him of the cracksman, Silky Smith. And the Weasel had seen Silky Smith in Lantham a few days before the robbery. Having finished with the local papers, Talbot opened a "Daily Mail" that Tom had brought with the others, to look for any late reference to the affair.

There was a short paragraph in connection with the Lantham affair, and a larger one that made Talbot start. It was the report of a burglary at Abbotsford, a few miles from Wayland, and the account tallied curiously with the Lantham report. A safe skilfully opened, a quantity of securities taken, and a caretaker cruelly stunned.

"Silky Smith!" muttered Talbot.

The paragraph added that the Abbotsford robbery was suspected to be by the same hand as the affair at Lantham. It had taken place the previous night, while the Weasel was lying "doggo" in the ruined tower at St. Jim's. Of that affair, at least, he was innocent. Talbot figured the matter out in his mind. He knew Mr. Silky Smith of old. His favourite hunting-ground was the metropolis. But when he had made that quarter too hot to hold him for a time, he would take a "country tour," cracking cribs as he went, and apparently his tour, in this instance, was leading him in the direction of St. Jim's. Abbotsford was many miles nearer than Lantham. Talbot was quite prepared to hear of another affair in a day or two at Wayland. He sat for some time in deep thought. When he left his study it was to seek an interview with the Head.

CHAPTER 7.
Talbot's Warning.

DR. HOLMES greeted Talbot of the Shell with a kind smile as the junior entered his study.

"Come in, Talbot," he said.

Talbot stopped before the Head's writing-table, the colour flushing into his cheeks.

"You can spare me a few minutes, sir?"

"Certainly, my boy! Sit down."

Talbot sat down.

"I want to ask your advice, sir. I—I shall have to speak of the—the past." His cheeks burned. "I have told you that I believe the man called the Weasel to be innocent of the robbery at Lantham. I have now read up all the newspaper reports, and I have thought the matter over, and I believe I can make a guess as to the real guilty man. You—you see, sir, I—I know—I remember—many things from the old time. I believe I could tell the police the name of the guilty man."

"That is a very serious statement, Talbot!"

"There was another robbery of the same kind at Abbotsford last night, sir. I believe it was by the same man. And—and unless he is laid by the heels I am certain there will be more. The man is called Silky Smith, and he is a thorough rascal. I know his style of work, and I feel practically certain that he is the man who is really wanted. If the police looked for him they would find the evidence if he is guilty. There were banknotes taken at Lantham, and securities at Abbotsford. Do you think, sir, that I ought to tell Inspector Skeat what I suspect?"

The Head looked at him curiously.

"It is terrible to think, Talbot, that you are acquainted with such things," he said sadly. "But it is not your fault. Undoubtedly it is your duty to prevent further law-breaking if you can. If you are sure of what you say——"

"I feel sure, sir. But at least it can do no harm for Silky Smith to be found and examined. I think I can predict that, if he is not looked after, there will be another burglary in this neighbourhood before long. He is on one of what he used to call his "country tours." Talbot crimsoned again. "I cannot help remembering all that, sir."

"You shall telephone to Inspector Skeat at once, Talbot," said the Head quietly.

"Thank you, sir!"

Dr. Holmes rose, and took up the receiver. He called up the police-station at Wayland, and then handed the receiver to Talbot.

"Is that you, Mr. Skeat?"

"Yes, Master Talbot." There was an ironical tone in Inspector Skeat's voice. "Have you anything to tell me about the Weasel now?"

"No. But I have something to tell you."

"Go ahead!" said the inspector tersely.

"You've heard of Silky Smith?"

"Yes."

"He is in this neighbourhood."

"You've seen him?"

"No; but I know the way he works," said Talbot quietly. "I think he was the man who did the job at Lantham——"

"Huh!"

"And the job last night at Abbotsford——"

"Oh!"

"I have heard that he is going about got up as a sporting man. I should not be surprised if he is in Wayland now. That is all, Mr. Skeat."

"Thank you, Master Talbot!" The inspector's tone was no longer ironical. "The gentleman shall be looked for, I promise you."

Talbot rang off.

His heart was lighter as he quitted the Head's study. There was a possibility, at least, of the Weasel being cleared now of the charge against him. If the right man was once found, the wrong man would be saved. It seemed to Talbot like a rift in the gloomy horizon.

"Heah you are, deah boy!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy hailed Talbot as he came out of the School House. "Where have you been moochin' awound all the aftahnoon, old scout? Comin' down to the footah?"

"Good egg!" said Talbot cheerily.

He was glad to throw himself into his schoolboy life again, and to drive away the black recollections that had been thronging his mind. On the football-ground, with Tom Merry & Co., he was once more the cheery schoolboy—no longer remembering that he had once been the "Toff," the acquaintance of such men as the Weasel and Silky Smith.

He came in to tea in a cheerful mood.

He met Wildrake in the passage, and half stopped, expecting the Canadian junior to speak. But Wildrake passed on. He did not even want to ask if the Weasel had been seen by Talbot. He had made his compact, and was prepared to abide by it without further words. Wildrake went to No. 2 to tea, and found Baggy Trimble and Mellish there. Baggy was still full of the subject of the very queer customer at the tuckshop.

"Taggles went to the Head about it," said Trimble, "and the Head has asked the prefects to find out what fellow went in and bagged the bread and cheese. Of course, they won't find out anything. It was a burglar, you know, though the Head doesn't seem to catch on to it."

"Rot!" remarked Mellish.

"Well, that's what I think!" said Baggy. "As if a fellow would sneak into the tuckshop, and leave the tarts and the doughnuts untouched? 'Taint natural."

"I guess you'd have made a bigger clearance," grinned Wildrake.

"Jolly well wish I had the chance!" sighed Baggy. "Dame Taggles has some new cakes in to-day, Wildrake."

Wildrake took out his books to work, and Trimble eyed him.

"Jolly nice cakes, too, old chap!" said Baggy.

"Go hon!"

"Finished your tea, old fellow?"

"Sure!"

"Wouldn't you like a cake to wind up with?"

"I guess I wouldn't mind!"

"Then I'll stand you one!" said Baggy generously. "I don't see what you're grinning at, Mellish! I'm not talking to you. I'm talking to my pal Wildrake. I'm going to stand you one of Mrs. Taggles' three-bob cakes, old scout!"

"Thanks!"

"Not at all, old fellow! After all, you've stood me some things since you came. I'll cut off now." Baggy ran his hands through his pockets, and struck an attitude of astonishment. "Hallo! I don't seem to have any tin left! That's queer!"

"What's queer about it?" inquired Mellish. "You never do have any tin, do you?"

Baggy Trimble did not deign to reply to that impertinent question.

"I remember now," he said, "I lent my last currency note to Talbot, and it leaves me stony. Lend me three bob till Talbot settles up, will you, Wildrake?"

"I guess not."

"Talbot's certain to square, you know."

"I guess so, if he owed you any money," said Wildrake. "But he doesn't! Come off, you jay! I cut my eye-teeth on the Boot Leg Ranch long ago!"

"If you don't believe me, Wildrake ——"

"My dear ass, don't be funny!"

"Yah!" said Trimble.

And the vision of a three-shilling cake, which had floated before Baggy Trimble's eyes, vanished into thin air.

CHAPTER 8.
The Watchers of the Night!

KIT WILDRAKE stopped to speak to Talbot of the Shell when the School House juniors were going up to dorm. Talbot stopped aside.

"Just a word," said the Canadian junior, in a low voice. "I'm getting out of my dorm at half-past ten—and you?"

"Isn't that rather early?"

Wildrake shrugged his shoulders.

"I guess I'm not taking any chances with your reformed cracksman," he answered. "If he robbed the school before he went, the fault would be with me. I'm going to take jolly good care he doesn't."

"Right!" said Talbot, with a nod. "I don't think there's any danger of that; but I don't blame you for being careful. I will turn out at half-past ten. But it won't be safe for—you know whom—to get a move on before midnight. It means keeping watch."

"I'm prepared to keep watch."

"Very well, then. You'll find me, if you want me, outside the Shell dormitory door at ten-thirty."

"Done!" said Wildrake.

And he went on to the Fourth Form dormitory, after the rest.

After lights out Wildrake did not think of sleep.

He had been up late the previous night, and a good sleep would have been welcome; but he did not close his eyes. He was in too anxious a mood to think of taking a doze.

He had allowed Talbot to influence him into giving the wretched Weasel a chance, and he hardly knew whether to regret it or not. Talbot's earnestness had impressed him; but he knew that the Shell fellow, though evidently sincere, might be mistaken. The thought of a cracksman lurking about the school filled Wildrake with uneasiness.

The Weasel knew now that his presence was known—that he had to quit his hiding-place. What was more likely than that the desperate man should help himself to what he could lay his hands on before he went? Talbot believed that he was reformed—that he was straight; but, so far as Wildrake could see, there was no evidence of it. A robbery at the school was at least possible while the Weasel was lurking there, and the responsibility would rest upon Wildrake, for having kept his discovery a secret.

It was not a pleasant responsibility. The Canadian junior was grimly determined that, at least, if the Weasel made any such attempt, he should pay dearly for it. Even Talbot would not want to stand by that man in such a case; but, Talbot or no Talbot, Wildrake was determined that if the Weasel showed the cloven hoof he should receive no mercy. This night the Head's safe was practically in Wildrake's keeping, and the sense of responsibility weighed heavily upon him.

He lay and heard the half-hours strike till half-past ten.

Then he slipped quietly from his bed, and dressed. The Fourth Form were fast asleep, and in a few minutes the Canadian junior was dressed, and in the passage. He had under his arm a short, thick oaken cudgel, which had been concealed under his mattress. If there was danger to be encountered that night he did not mean to be taken unprepared.

Wildrake moved along in the darkness to the door of the Shell dormitory. Four shadowy figures loomed up there.

"You, Wildrake?" It was Tom Merry's whisper.

"Correct!"

"We're all here," murmured Monty Lowther.

"Enough of us for the Weasel, if he breaks out!" said Manners.

"There's no danger of that!" said Talbot quietly.

"Can't be too careful!" said Manners drily.

Wildrake smiled in the darkness. He could guess that Lowther and Manners inclined to his view of Talbot's protege. Neither of them was inclined to trust the Weasel an inch. Tom Merry had taken Talbot's view. But even he had misgivings, and was quite resolved that a watch should be kept that night.

"Well, we shall see!" said Talbot. "In any case, no harm can happen with five of us on guard."

"Sure!" assented Wildrake.

"They're still up downstairs," said Tom Merry. "I don't see how anything could happen till everybody's in bed. We don't want to leave anything to chance."

"I guess not."

"Talbot's going out to see the—the man—— We're going to keep watch indoors. That suit you, Wildrake?"

"Yep."

"You can settle where we're going to watch," said Tom.

"I guess we'd better get as near as may be to the Head's safe after Dr. Holmes has gone to bed," answered Wildrake. "Until then we shall have to keep quiet. Nobody's Study would be a safe place."

"Good! It hasn't a tenant now," chuckled Lowther.

Talbot quitted his companions, and disappeared in the direction of the box-room. In that room he had concealed the bundle he had made up for the Weasel, which had to be conveyed to the wretched man's hiding-place in the old tower.

Tom Merry and his comrades stepped quietly and softly away, and a few minutes later reached the punishment-room. The key was in the outside of the lock, and they entered quietly.

From the window, which was barred, they had a view of the quadrangle in the bright moonlight.

In the distance the ruins of the tower rose against the dark trees, and the juniors looked in that direction. Talbot, at that moment, was stealing on his way, but no sign was to be seen of him. The "Toff" had learned caution of old, and he was not likely to show himself in the moonlight.

"Is Talbot coming back here, Tom Merry?" Wildrake asked abruptly.

"After he's seen the man off the premises," answered Tom.

"About midnight?"

"Yes."

Wildrake wrinkled his brow.

"After all, I can trust him!" he muttered.

"I hope so!" said Tom Merry quietly. "When you know Talbot better, Wildrake, you'll know that he's as true as steel, though he had rotten bad luck when he was a kid. When Talbot says the man is gone he will be gone!"

"I guess that's good enough," assented Wildrake. "But until he's gone I reckon there's going to be a good look-out kept. We should feel pretty sick if the Head was robbed owing to our having let Talbot have his way in dealing with that galoot."

"Just a few!" said Lowther emphatically.

The juniors waited. One by one the lights in the windows of the School House were extinguished. From where they stood the juniors could see a tree near the Head's window, upon which the glimmer of light fell from within. The glimmer died out suddenly, and they knew that Dr. Holmes had left his study. It was turned eleven.

"I guess we'd better get a move on," said Wildrake, after a few minutes.

"Right-ho!"

The juniors left Nobody's Study. The house was in darkness now, the last light was gone.

In their rubber shoes they moved cautiously down the stairs.

The wide corridor leading to the Head's study was in darkness, broken only by glimmers of moonlight at the windows.

Wildrake tried the study door, and it opened. The room was in darkness. He did not enter.

"I guess the corridor will suit us!" he said. "Keep in the shadow. These passage windows wouldn't worry a cracksman much if he wanted to get in. And if the Weasel comes this is the way he will come."

"Talbot's with him now," muttered Manners.

"After Talbot's left him he may turn back," answered Wildrake drily. "He may be the straightest cracksman that ever cracked a crib, but I guess I'm not putting money on it."

In the darkness they waited again, till a shadow moved in the corridor.

"You fellows there?"

"Talbot!"

Talbot joined the waiting juniors. Midnight had struck from the clock-tower.

"He's gone?" asked Tom Merry.

"Yes."

"You saw him clear off?" asked Manners.

"Yes."

"Good!" Manners peered doubtfully at Wildrake. "You're satisfied now, you wild and woolly westerner?"

"Not quite."

"I've told you the man is gone!" said Talbot, with a trace of haughtiness in his voice.

"I take your word for that, Talbot."

"Then what——"

"Any guarantee that he doesn't come back before he says a final good-bye?" asked Wildrake sarcastically.

"Only my belief in him."

"You're welcome to it. You can't quite expect me to share it."

"That's so," said Lowther. "It's a bit thick sticking out of bed all night, and we shall be pretty dozy in the morning; but we can't afford to take chances. The responsibility's a bit too heavy."

"I guess you fellows needn't wait up," said Wildrake. "If the galoot comes nosing in I shall spot him, and I shall give the alarm fast enough."

"We'll wait!" said Tom Merry.

"Yes, rather!"

And they waited. The half-hour chimed. It was a weary vigil. After the chime had died away there was dead silence, broken only by a faint sough of the wind in the trees without. But suddenly, through the silence, there came a faint sound.

Click!

The juniors started, the blood thrilling to their hearts. Wildrake gripped his cudgel.

Click!

A sash was cautiously raised, and in the patch of moonlight at one of the corridor windows, the shadow of a man's head and shoulders showed blackly on the floor.

CHAPTER 9.
Caught in the Act!

TALBOT of the Shell drew a sobbing breath.

Wildrake's face set hard.

The shadow in the moonlight did not move. It lay there, black in the silvery pool of light, still as an image. The intruder was on the sill, listening—listening, to ascertain that the faint sound he had made had not given the alarm.

The five juniors remained motionless in the deep shadow by the corridor wall, only a dozen feet from the opened window.

Talbot's face was white.

His faith in the Weasel had been great. He had not come by it easily; but having made up his mind, he had not faltered. And now——

Had he saved a ruthless, unscrupulous rascal, who was repaying him by this attempt to rob the school, repaying him by this act of villainy, of black ingratitude? Whose shadow was that that fell in the moonlight from the window? A cracksman's, that was certain. Four of the five juniors, at least, had not the slightest doubt that it was the Weasel who was crouching on the window-sill, listening.

They made no sound.

The shadow stirred at last. The man was satisfied that the coast was clear. There was a faint sound as a rubber shoe landed on the floor within. Almost as silent as a cat the intruder dropped within.

The juniors waited and watched tensely.

There was no fear in their hearts. One, at least, had been expecting such a visitor, and only Talbot was surprised. There were five of them to deal with the man, as soon as he was at close quarters. They saw him as he stood for a second in the moonlight, but it was only a glimpse. The next moment he was treading softly along the corridor, towards the door of the Head's study, and he passed within a few feet of the breathless juniors, hidden in the darkness.

They heard him pass into the Head's study, where the safe was. Evidently the man knew where to work.

Then Wildrake stirred.

Silently he stepped along the corridor in the track of the thief, and reached the study door; as silently his comrades followed.

Their hearts were beating fast, but they were cool.

Talbot was quite himself again. If this was the Weasel, the Toff was prepared to deal with him without mercy. The time for mercy was past.

The study door had closed. A faint fumbling was heard within, as if the



The cracksman struggled furiously, but the five sturdy juniors were more than a match for him. Tom Merry's knee was planted on his chest, and Lowther and Manners pinned down his arms. Wildrake had both hands in his hair. The panting man lay powerless under them. (*See page* 12.)

thief was seeking the key, to lock the door against possible interruption. If that was his object, he was given no time.

"Ready!" whispered Wildrake.

As he spoke he turned the handle, and hurled the door suddenly and violently open.

There was a cry in the study—of startled alarm and pain mingled—as the heavy door crashed against the man within, and then there was a fall. The sudden shock had hurled the man over.

Wildrake knew where the switch was inside the door. In a second he had pressed it, and the study was flooded with electric light.

A man, whose face was covered by a crape mask, was sprawling breathlessly on the carpet. He was scrambling up as the juniors rushed in.

Crash!

Before the rascal had fairly gained his feet, Wildrake's cudgel descended upon him, and he rolled over.

"On him!" panted Lowther.

A fierce and savage curse broke from the cracksman as he struggled to rise, his hand darting to his hip-pocket. Well enough the juniors knew what was there—well enough they knew that the desperate man would shoot if he was given time. But Wildrake's cudgel crashed on his arm, and it dropped numb and helpless.

A second more, and the juniors were upon him.

Hurt as he was, the cracksman struggled furiously, thinking not of his plunder now, but of his liberty. But five sturdy juniors were a good deal more than a match for him.

Tom Merry's knee was planted on his chest, and Lowther and Manners pinned down his arms. Talbot had a grip on his collar; Wildrake had both hands in his hair. The panting man lay powerless under them. His struggles continued, but they grew feebler.

"I guess we've got him!" said Wildrake coolly. "Rather lucky we kept watch to-night, Talbot, for your reformed cracksman!"

"By gad, yes!" panted Manners.

The noise of the struggle had been heard. There were opening doors above, footsteps, and alarmed voices. The glare of the electric light from the open doorway guided the awakened household to the spot. Mr. Railton was the first to arrive, half-dressed, with his old Army revolver in his hand. The Housemaster stared blankly at the strange scene in the study.

"Bless my soul!" It was the Head, in flowing dressing-gown. "What—what—what has happened?"

"Nothing, sir," said Wildrake. "But I guess a burglary would have happened if we hadn't nailed this galoot!"

Talbot bent over the captured cracksman, and tore the crape mask from his face. Then he panted with relief.

It was not the haggard face of the Weasel that was revealed.

It was a hard, clean-cut, clean-shaven face—the face of a man many years younger than the Weasel—a face that Talbot of the Shell remembered.

"Silky Smith!" he said.

Wildrake gave a start.

"Jerusalem! Who's this? This isn't the Weasel."

"No fear," said Tom Merry.

"It's Silky Smith, the cracksman," said Talbot quietly. "I know the scoundrel well enough."

"Oh, holy smoke!" murmured Wildrake.

Not a doubt had crossed his mind till that moment that the man was not the Weasel—the hunted wretch Talbot had befriended.

Talbot smiled slightly.

"You see I was right, Wildrake," he whispered.

"I guess I own up," said Wildrake frankly. "You were right, old scout—this lets the Weasel out. But I guess I was right, too; and, as it's turned out, it's lucky we were on guard."

"Lucky indeed!" said Talbot.

The Head and Mr. Railton were in the study now, and two or three half-dressed Sixth-Formers followed them in. Kildare and Darrel and Langton of the Sixth took charge of the ruffian, and the juniors released him. Wildrake bound the rascal's hands behind his back with a whipcord. Silky Smith, the cracksman, was a helpless prisoner. His narrow, glinting eyes were fixed on Talbot of the Shell as he stood powerless in the grasp of the Sixth-Formers.

"You, Toff!" he muttered. "You've sold an old pal, have you? I'll remember this, Toff!"

Talbot gave him a glance of cold scorn, and did not trouble to reply.

"I guess you're off the mark, Mr. Smith, if that's your name," said Wildrake coolly. "If you want to know whom you owe this to, I'm the infant. You can remember me, dear man, as long as you like, while you're breaking the stones at Portland."

The Head, astonished as he was by the startling scene, postponed explanations for the present. As soon as he had ascertained that none of the juniors had been injured in the struggle, he crossed to the telephone, and rang up Inspector Skeat at Wayland.

"The police will be here as fast as a car can bring them," he said, as he put up the receiver. "We shall keep the ruffian secure until they arrive. And now you juniors will kindly explain how you came to be out of your dormitory at this hour." He gave Talbot a kind smile. "After what you told me this afternoon, Talbot, I conclude that you suspected this man might pay the school a visit."

"No, sir," said Talbot. "It was Wildrake. But for him I should not have thought of keeping watch. And Wildrake knew nothing of this man; it was the Weasel he suspected. We kept watch with him, sir. I hope you will excuse us, as it has turned out——"

Dr. Holmes smiled.

"I can scarcely punish you, as you have saved the school from a robbery," he said. "You certainly should not have left your dormitory; but—— Wildrake, it appears to me that I have you to thank. But return to your beds now. You shall give me a fuller explanation in the morning"

The juniors left the study, leaving Silky Smith in the charge of Mr. Railton and the prefects. In the dormitory passage Wildrake touched Talbot on the arm.

"I guess I'm sorry, Talbot," he said. "You seem to have been right about the Weasel; but I guess I was right not to trust him. I don't know the man; only he's wanted by the police. Still, you were right, and I'm sorry for some hard things I've said and thought."

"All serene," said Talbot, with a smile. "Don't think I blame you, especially as it's turned out. Good-night, old fellow!"

(Continued on page 18.)



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Joy's Gossip

A Visit to St. Jim's.

Dear Mr. GEM Editor,—It is more than possible that you will think I am romancing, but the visit was paid, despite all difficulties. For we did go to St. Jim's! Really we did; and I must explain all about it.

It was just this way. My uncle is very fussy about me. He is silly enough to think a lot of yours to command. He thought I was getting pale through overwork, or something. It was all nonsense. There never was such a man. He says he is proud of me; but he is not as proud of me as I am of him. You don't want anybody to get conceited. If I took seriously all the cheery things that correspondents write to me about my Gossip I should become simply insufferable. There is only one thing they say that I fancy is correct—namely, that I am lucky to be writing for the GEM. Yes, all that is right enough, and I am not going to forget it.

When my uncle suggested a few days' trip in a motor-car I jumped. It was the very idea. And why not pay a visit to St. Jim's? My uncle said the same old thing about the school existing only in the stories; but I assured him that if we had a good little chauffeur who did as he was told, we should find the establishment, and—well, it was this way. We set off early one morning after a hurried breakfast, for I was tremendously eager, and, besides, I knew I should have to do all the showing round, uncle being that sceptical you would scarcely believe.

Off we went through South London, finding our way through the narrow streets where there was a vegetable market in full swing. Then for the country. I know the English country beats ours in Queensland, despite the sunshine of the south. For in England you get such soft and tender tints, and then, right away in the wilderness, there were primroses turning the banks all yellow, and birds were singing. We went on and on right into the St. Jim's country, and we saw scenes which make you feel all joyous—fleecy white lambs going skippety-hop about the fields, and there were miles of woods, and glimpses of the green marshes, and the blue sea, while we also saw hop-gardens and red-roofed farms.

My uncle asked me where St. Jim's was. I told him farther on. Everything really good does seem farther on. I was just planning things, and smelling! South England smells of burning wood and the sea and cuckoo flowers. Well, we had to stop to lunch at an inn, the name of which I have quite forgotten, and at the next table were a couple of boys with their mother. I heard what they said. The fat little boy said he knew St. Jim's existed. Mother just smiled. The elder boy said it was all stuff. We got talking, and then we all drove on together. Our car led the way, and at last I saw a big building with a lodge, and some of the St. Jim's fellows.

There was a group of them at the gates. I saw Taggles standing in the doorway of the lodge, and I knew Aubrey Racke at once. I left my uncle talking to the boys' mother, and we three went off together. Dr. Holmes strolled up under the trees, and made us all welcome. He was wearing his cap and gown, and looked an old duck.

The little fat fellow had been ready to cry at the thought that the GEM stories were not real. I knew they were real. Anyway, they seem like life, and here was a school just like St. Jim's, anyway, so what's the odds?

We stopped and looked at the net practice. Then some of the boys chummed up, and took us round. I asked one if his name was not D'Arcy, but he said it was Brown, though, of course, I knew he was only pretending. As for Skimpole, there was no mistaking him. He was strolling across the playing-fields, a book under his arm, and an expression of almost ferocious learning on his speaking countenance. Not that he spoke, or troubled about us. He did not even glance our way.

D'Arcy was very pleasant indeed. I caught sight of Ralph Lewington. I wish we had been earlier and seen the silver-haired lady. Cardew walked down a corridor very swiftly just as we were coming out of the study next to his. I gave a gasp. I wanted to speak, but—Alas! it was impossible.

And then, as we were passing into the dining-room—it was not called that, but you will forgive me for the mistake—we saw Baggy Trimble. It must have been Baggy. He was short and greasy-looking, and very stout. He had an irritating little twist of black hair muddling over his forehead, and he came up to me and said: "How d' y' do, miss?" I knew he was so near to being Baggy that it could make no difference. It was not worth while asking his name.

It would take too long to tell you everything. I had a glimpse of Kildare and Figgins & Co. of the New House. I tried not to miss anything, but kept a special look-out for the Shell and the Fourth. My companions lamented that they studied under a private tutor. They wanted to go to this school.

Dr. Holmes seemed rather stern at first, but he asked us all in to tea, in a delightful room overlooking the gardens. There were dozens of portraits in the room, and he smiled as I made the tour of the place and inspected them all.

Then he asked me all about Queensland as I sat by him at tea. There were toasted muffins, and a heap more things. He was such a chatty old dear, and so wise!

Your chirpy chum,

JOY.

SIDELIGHTS ON ST. JIM'S.



No. 2.—JOY MAKES A VISIT TO ST. JIMS.



The INVISIBLE HAND



JOHN SHARPE. IRON HAND.

This wonderful story has also been filmed by the popular VITAGRAPH Film Company, and readers of the "GEM" should make a point of seeing the picture week by week at their favourite cinemas.

New Readers Start Here.

John Sharpe, the great analytical detective, is engaged by Chief Burnett, of the Secret Service of Chicago, to track down the band of organised criminals operating under the guidance of Iron Hand. Marna Black, one of the band of crooks, is captured. Burnett induces Anne Crawford, a woman agent of the Secret Service, to assume Marna's identity and get into the confidences of Iron Hand. She is not known to Sharpe.

The mountain den, Eagle's Nest, is run by Potsdam, Iron Hand's lieutenant.

Sharpe spoils many of the plans of the gang. Later he discovers that the gang possess a submarine, and they plot to blow up the Oriental mail steamer. Sharpe sends word for the steamer not to sail, and communicates with a border patrol to have a bombing aeroplane ready for instant use. The submarine is destroyed.

Sharpe follows Iron Hand to Nest No. 2, another lair of the gang, and succeeds in gaining admittance to the house, after a fight with a savage dog. Iron Hand is warned of his presence, and Sharpe is made a prisoner. Anne arrives in time to see Sharpe escape. Sharpe follows Iron Hand to the latter's hotel. Anne also goes there. Iron Hand prepares to receive Sharpe. In the adjoining room a gas machine is arranged so that a bag is to be dropped over Sharpe's head.

Sharpe is enveloped in the folds of the gas-bag. Iron Hand and others secure the bag around Sharpe. Inside the bag Sharpe adjusts a gas-mask, and then pretends to grow weaker and weaker, until he apparently becomes lifeless. Sharpe is thrown into a trunk.

Iron Hand orders his men to get a porter, and then dump the trunk in the river. Anne watches, helpless. With a sudden idea she slips out to the hall, lures Iron Hand from the room by a false message, and then returns and unlocks the trunk. She is frightened by a noise in the hall, and goes to her room. Sharpe rises, freed of the gas-bag, and quickly substitutes some rugs and logs from the fireplace, putting them in the trunk, so as to make up the weight. Hartmann and others remove the trunk.

Sharpe and some troops under Captain West chase Iron Hand and the gang to Eagle's Nest. Later, Sharpe discovers a plot to steal some valuable jewels, and he tracks the gang to a "house of mystery."

Iron Hand and his gang make a clever attempt to work the big jewel robbery; but they are foiled by John Sharpe, and all their elaborate scheming is of no avail. Iron Hand is furious at being beaten, and he is determined to get the jewels he covets sooner or later. He kidnaps Amidon, the proprietor of the shop, and places him in a strange subterranean chamber. Sharpe eventually rescues him.

(Now read on.)

A Daring Scheme.

A NOTABLE gathering filled the auction-room in which the famous Ittlesbach jewels were to be sold. It was a long room full of objects of great interest and value. There were pictures, elegant pieces of furniture, rugs, tapestries—and, in short, a large collection of articles of the most luxurious character, which collectors prize so much.

At the back of the room was the small raised platform upon which the auctioneer stood behind a small desk. At the farthest corner of the room was a large, old-fashioned safe, upon which appeared the name "Leaghurst, Auctioneer."

The gentleman in question was at the present moment engaged in placing up for sale a painting, and alongside his desk, acting as his clerk, was the renowned detective, John Sharpe. He was disguised in a pair of smoked glasses and a beard, and nobody could have easily discovered his real identity. There were several other attendants in the room employed in carrying away the purchased articles and bringing the new ones to the auctioneer.

In the body of the room, some seated on chairs and some standing behind, was a fashionable group of prospective customers. Some were paying attention to the auctioneer, and others were examining articles in the show-cases and on the tables.

The sale commenced, and the auctioneer received bids on the painting.

The scene outside the auction-rooms was almost as busy as that within. Several handsome motor-cars were drawn up near the shop, and there was a considerable crowd of people passing to and fro.

Soon after the sale had started a motor-lorry was driven into the scene, and three or four men alighted and proceeded to carry a large cabinet into the shop. It was very heavy, and had four legs at the bottom, which permitted a view beneath it.

The cabinet was carried into the auction-room just as the auctioneer knocked down the painting to a buyer. When he saw that the cabinet was being brought in he paused and directed the men to stand it just behind his desk and near the safe. This was the only place where there was any room for such a big article.

John Sharpe watched the proceedings very intently—and well he needed to. It was plainly evident to the alert detective that some, at least, of the so-called attendants were in reality members of the gang in disguise.

In the rear of the crowd two men were standing together. They paid no attention to one another, and were seemingly only interested in the bidding. A moment later, however, a third man entered, and, coming close to them, he whispered hurriedly. All this was observed by John Sharpe.

The two men who were addressed nodded slightly, indicating that they understood their duties, and one of the party then left the group and went towards the front door. Soon there was another startling development.

There was a newcomer in the person of Anne Crawford; she was handsomely dressed, and carried a large muff. The girl surveyed the scene casually for a moment, endeavouring not to attract any attention to herself; and then the same man who had given the warning to the others walked over to her and whispered. Anne nodded slightly.

After selling off one or two other items the auctioneer looked at his watch, and the crowd leaned forward eagerly, hoping that it was time for the sale of the much-valued jewels.

The man disappointed them, however, by announcing that it was not yet time, and he stated that he would place on sale the beautiful cabinet which had just been brought in.

The members of the gang looked more interested in the proceedings, and Anne Crawford and her escort quietly made their way as near to the auctioneer as they could. Going over to the cabinet the auctioneer commenced to explain its advantages, and directed the attendants to open the doors. His instructions were obeyed, and the cabinet was seen to be empty.

The auctioneer returned to his seat and asked for bids. John Sharpe watched the proceedings very attentively. There were at once several offers, and one came from Anne Crawford's escort. The cabinet was finally knocked down to him; and the man, rising from his seat, went

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over to Sharpe, who was posing as the clerk, and paid him the amount of the bid.

"I'll take the cabinet after the sale of the jewels," he said.

Sharpe gave him his receipt.

Great excitement was now caused by the auctioneer announcing that the sale of the jewels would commence, and the crowd leaned forward with eager anticipation.

The attendants commenced to move the cabinet out of the way. It was moved in a line with the safe, and one of the attendants commenced to work the intricate combination lock on the safe. Soon the door opened, and the interior of the safe was disclosed.

On a shelf was a large black box containing all the jewels. One man opened the box and removed a handsome diamond and ruby bracelet, which he handed to the other attendant, who at once proceeded to carry it to the auctioneer, while the other man remained on guard before the open safe.

Sharpe's eyes were more alert than ever now—he was watching every movement from the time the almost priceless jewels left the safe until they were handed up to the auctioneer.

He noticed that two members of the gang, who had stayed at the rear of the crowd, were now pushing their way to the front, and that they were showing marked interest in affairs.

Bids for the bracelet were coming fast, and the two members of the gang—one standing behind the other and pretending not to be associated with each other—were joining in the bidding.

After a spirited conflict between a large number of intending purchasers, the bracelet finally went to one of the members of the gang.

"Sold to the gentleman on my left," announced the auctioneer, in a loud voice, "for five thousand pounds. Why, ladies and gentlemen," he continued, "the ruby alone is worth more than that! I am actually giving this piece away."

There was a roar of laughter. It was all part of his game, of course, and the crowd took his banter good-humouredly.

The purchaser stepped forward to pay a deposit on the bracelet. This was the signal for a protest on the part of his colleague, who pretended to be very angry and surprised.

He grabbed the arm of the successful bidder and addressed the auctioneer:

"You're mistaken, Mr. Longhurst! The last bid was mine. The bracelet belongs to me!"

All eyes were turned in his direction. The other member of the gang was ready to play his part. Turning round, he heatedly told the other that he was mistaken. But the other was insistent, and he used very strong language to support his claim.

For a few minutes a wordy battle ensued, and it looked as though blows would soon be exchanged.

The auctioneer tried to quieten them down, and begged them to be peaceful. Suddenly one of the men struck the other, and instantly there was what was apparently a very fierce struggle.

The men swayed to and fro, and in their mad fight succeeded in upsetting chairs, and causing the utmost confusion in the place.

Attendants rushed to separate the fighters. The man who was standing on guard by the safe, noticing the trouble that was going on, also rushed to the scene of the combat, but the auctioneer called him and handed him the bracelet to hold while he plunged into the fray, and with the weight of his authority attempted to separate the men.

Women in the room were alarmed, and there was excitement and dismay on every one of the faces of the assembled crowd.

Detective John Sharpe, the coolest person of the whole lot, remained behind his desk watching carefully. He did not see any reason to interfere yet. He was shrewd enough to know that the struggle between the two members of the gang was a planned affair, and that they had some other object in view besides the mere possession of this bracelet.

When the confusion was at its height, a panel in the rear of the cabinet quietly slid open, and a small man concealed under a false bottom in the cabinet looked carefully out.

Making quite sure that he was not observed, he started to worm his way out. All eyes were riveted on the fighters, who were growing more and more desperate.

A gangster had now succeeded in getting out of the cabinet unobserved, and he slipped quickly and stealthily over to the safe.

It was the work of a few minutes for him to secure the black box, and then return to his hiding-place, and as silently as it had opened, the panel closed again.

Meanwhile the two fighters realised that sufficient time had elapsed for the man in the cabinet to perform successfully the work which had been allotted to him, and they now allowed themselves to be separated by the auctioneer and his attendants.

The eyes of the auctioneer were flashing with rage at the unseemly manner in which this important sale had been interrupted.

"Put these men out!" he thundered. "I declare there has been no sale."

Very roughly the two men were bundled out of the front door, and the auctioneer, looking very hot and flurried, returned to his platform. He took the bracelet from the attendant, and announced loudly:

"I must apologise for this outrageous exhibition, ladies and gentlemen. I am putting the bracelet up again. How much am I offered?"

He looked around the room. The customers now began to settle down again after the excitement of the past few minutes, and one or two bids were given. Then Colonel Bledson, a man well known as the Western Cattle King, stepped forward.

He was a big, burly, good-natured sort of man, of the free-and-easy kind. First obtaining silence, and then getting the attention of all, he said in a breezy manner:

"Let's quit this chicken-feed game. I'm Joe Bledson, the Cattle King, and I offers one million dollars cash for the whole lot of these 'ere trinkets. I got an old woman at home and two mighty fine gals that'll adorn them sparklers when I gets 'em."

There was a buzz of excitement.

Colonel Joe Bledson liked it. He was always pleased when he created a sensation. He looked around as though to challenge anyone to bid against him, and was quite prepared to double his offer, if necessary. He looked at the auctioneer and waited for his answer.

The auctioneer was delighted, and announced that he would accept the offer, and that the jewels were his. Thereupon he ordered one of the attendants to go and get them. Meanwhile, Colonel Bledson took out his cheque-book and started to write.

The attendant walked over to the safe, reached for the box of jewels, and was dazed to find them gone.

In a terrified manner he shouted the alarm, and rushed back to the auctioneer's platform again. What a day of excitement it was!

Everyone in the crowd was amazed to hear the news. The auctioneer's voice rang out:

"Close the door at once, officer!" he said. "No one must leave this room without being searched. The jewels must be in this room, and I'm going to get them!"

The policeman promptly obeyed his instructions, and immediately closed the door, in spite of the protest of some of the spectators, who disagreed with such treatment.

The auctioneer next turned to his clerk, and requested him to take the names and addresses of everybody in the room. Then he politely requested all the ladies to go into the side room, while he and the attendants commenced to search all the men present.

The search proceeded most carefully, but the careful scrutiny failed to reveal the jewels. Soon all the men had been searched.

In the meantime Colonel Bledson was fuming at being done out of his jewels.

"By hec!" he thundered. "I promised the old girl and two kids I'd get 'em for 'em, and there'll be hell to pay if I don't!"

In spite of the seriousness of the position, the crowd could not help laughing at this. No one noticed Anne Crawford walk over to the man who had bought the cabinet and whisper something to him.

While the crowd was still discussing eagerly the extraordinary disappearance of the jewels, Anne and her escort went to the auctioneer, and, addressing him, the gangster said:

"Now that you know neither my wife nor I have the jewels, we would like to take our cabinet and go."

This seemed a reasonable enough request, and the auctioneer asked his clerk if the cabinet had been paid for.

Sharpe nodded, and the auctioneer gave his attendants permission to carry out the cabinet, and they at once proceeded to move it towards the door, with Anne and her companion following.

Sharpe looked at the procession queerly. He considered for a moment, and then very casually made his exit.

The auctioneer turned to the cattle king and addressed him.

"I can't fathom it," he said, scratching his head. "Maybe those two men who started the fight got them. The chief of police will soon be here."

The men had succeeded in getting the heavy cabinet through the door, and they laid it down in order to take a rest from their labours. When they were ready to resume, however, Sharpe had something to say.

"This cabinet is not to be moved any farther," he said dramatically.

The buyer demanded to know what right the clerk had to interfere with him now that he had bought and paid for it, and he denied that he had any right to prevent him from taking it away.

By this time two policemen had arrived on the scene, and when Sharpe addressed a few words to them, they immediately ordered that the doors of the cabinet be opened in the name of the law.

The buyer took on an expression of injured innocence, and allowed the door to be opened, then, pointing with the stick he carried, he said, "Empty, of course!"

He directed a freezing look at the interfering clerk, and said in a sarcastic strain:

"Are you satisfied now?"

But the detective was not satisfied. He snatched the man's walking-stick away,

and deliberately smashed the mirrors in the cabinet.

There was now a crowd of interested sightseers, and they crowded forward.

Sharpe directed another heavy blow towards the bottom of the cabinet, and the thin partition which made the false bottom gave way. Beneath it was revealed the crouching figure of a member of the gang!

Everybody was astonished to see him there, and Annie's escort, realising that the game was up, pulled a heavy weapon from his pocket, and hit the policeman nearest to him a stunning blow. Then he rushed away as fast as he could go.

Anne Crawford followed him, and before the crowd could get at them, the two had swept into a waiting motor-car drawn up at the kerb.

The chauffeur was ready to start, and as Anne and the gangster leaped into it, he pulled the lever, and the car dashed off.

The chief of police and several more constables had now arrived on the scene, while Sharpe proceeded to drag the man from the interior of the cabinet, taking the black box containing the jewels from him.

The detective turned the man over to the policeman, and handed the box of jewels to the now smiling Colonel Bledson. The jovial old colonel turned to the man who had presented him with the box.

"Who in thunder are you?" he asked, in amazement.

It was a dramatic moment. John Sharpe pulled off his beard and glasses.

"I am Sharpe, of the Secret Service, Colonel Bledson," he replied modestly. "I knew, of course, that there was no other place where the jewels could possibly be. My discovery is really not so wonderful as it appears to be."

But there were others besides Colonel Bledson who marvelled at the detective's cleverness. This was the first knowledge they had of the real identity of the clerk.

Sharpe now made his way over to the chief of the police, who was somewhat surprised to see him there.

"There they are, chief," he said, pointing to the black box. "A woman warned me to be close on the spot. That's why I fixed up this disguise."

The chief smiled knowingly, and replied:

"Our mysterious friend—eh?"

Sharpe admitted that this was the case.

The auctioneer completed the sale of the jewels with Colonel Bledson, and that breezy gentleman walked off delighted with his bargain. He intended to take no risks, and in company with the police officer entered his motor-car and rode straight to his bank.

Iron Hand Again!

JOHN SHARPE was reclining lazily upon a rest-chair in his luxurious suite of rooms. His eyes wandered over the morning newspaper which he held, and he paused as an item of interest attracted his attention.

There were several flaring big headlines, and the paragraph went on to say:

"Attempt of the Great Crime Trust to Steal Valuable Jewels.—Colonel Bledson, the world-famed Cattle King, who bought the whole collection at what turned out to be an exciting auction, will take them to San Francisco to-night on a special train guarded by himself and some of his bravest cow-punchers whom he declares are ready for anything.

"To our representative the jovial Cattle King smilingly said that 'he would be very sorry for anybody who attempted to take the jewels from him. They would sure have a rough time at the hands of my boys from the Wild West.'"

Sharpe finished reading the news, and after a somewhat hurried breakfast picked up his hat and stick and went out.

He was attired in a fashionable morning suit, and looked quite a different man; not at all like a clerk to an auctioneer.

The same item of news also interested Iron Hand, who was at the present moment in a somewhat shabbily-furnished room, which he was using as a temporary headquarters.

The leader of the gang believed in constant change. He knew that if he stayed in one place too long he would be bound to be caught sooner or later.

Iron Hand tossed the newspaper over to his second-in-command.

"Read that!" he said.

Potsdam picked the paper up and commenced to read.

"We'll show that blackguard!" sneered Iron Hand. "Call Marna Black in!"

Potsdam went out to the hall. Opposite the den occupied by Iron Hand was Anne Crawford's room. Potsdam was preparing to enter when Black Flag came along, and the two men exchanged greetings. Then Potsdam knocked at Anne's door and informed her that the chief wished to see her. She followed the second-in-command to the door.

Potsdam still showed no friendly feeling towards her, but his former suspicions had been somewhat lulled to sleep by the recent developments. She had certainly acted well on the night of the auction sale, and it was not her fault that their cleverly-planned scheme failed to come off.

Iron Hand outlined his plans to the other three, and they all laughed with glee.

Behind Anne's forced laugh, however, there was deep concern. She did not like what was being said at all. When the conference ended Potsdam and Black Flag made for the door, and Anne, glad of an excuse to get out and warn Sharpe, followed them. But she was doomed to disappointment. Iron Hand stopped her.

"Wait till I fix up a disguise, Miss Black," he said. "We can't pull this off till the evening."

Anne could think of no excuse to get away, and she felt very uneasy. Iron Hand started to get out his disguise, and kept up a conversation all the time.

Colonel Bledson, accompanied by two of his faithful cowboys, was seated in a luxurious room in his hotel. The three men were examining the jewels.

The Cattle King was still very proud of his purchase. And one of the cowboys, addressing his master, said:

"Gee, your wife will be proud of them! That is, if we gets them to 'er."

Colonel Bledson glared when he heard this. He turned on the cowboy and roared out:

"If! There is no if about it. Not with three men guarding them that's quickest on the draw and surest on the shoot west of the Rockies or anywhere else!"

The Cattle King turned to the third cowboy for confirmation, and in order to answer this declaration he whipped out his revolver with lightning-like rapidity, aimed it at an imaginary robber, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Done for, just that way. If he wuz there," he said briefly.

Bledson nodded with approval.

"That's just the way," he replied.

Further discussion was stopped by a knock at the door, and the Cattle King shouted "Come in!"

A pageboy entered with a card, and a moment later John Sharpe entered the room. There was a warm exchange of greetings between the two men, and Bledson introduced his two friends.

"These are my friends, Honeydew and Cactus Bill. We're aiming to take the glimmers to 'Frisco to-night, and then to my ranch."

Sharpe nodded, and then stated the purpose of his visit.

"We have a desperate gang to deal with, and a master-mind," he said slowly and deliberately. "Don't you want any assistance?"

Bledson laughed good-naturedly at the very idea, and boasted of the cleverness of his cowpunchers.

Sharpe smiled. He did not wish to criticise them, and admitted that they were probably as good revolver shots as anybody.

Then Colonel Bledson felt in his pocket and took out his cheque-book, saying:

"I appreciate your offer, Mr. Sharpe, but it ain't necessary. You did a smart thing yesterday, and I'm wishful to make you a little present."

He prepared to write a handsome cheque, but the detective stopped him.

"I can take no pay for my services," he said. "I am very glad to be of any service to you."

He still looked a little worried, and, addressing the Cattle King again, he said:

"At least let me travel on your special train. I really don't think you realise the desperate men who are on your track, and whom you have to deal with. They are determined to get the jewels, and are perhaps even now planning the job."

But Bledson again refused. He had such great faith in the skill of his sharpshooters from the Wild West.

"No, thank you, Mr. Sharpe," he said politely but firmly. "You see, it's a kind of reflection on me and the boys."

There was no more to be said.

The detective wished them luck and withdrew, leaving Bledson and his cowboys, who were more confident than ever of their power to keep off a whole army of crooks if necessary.

In his den Iron Hand had completed his disguise. He put on his motor-coat, cap, and goggles, and Anne Crawford was dressed in a complete outfit of a chauffeur.

The girl was feeling more worried than ever. Having been in the leader's company all day, she had had no opportunity of informing either Sharpe or the Chief of Police of his plans.

At that moment Potsdam entered and reported to Iron Hand.

"The car's all ready," he said, "and Black Flag has rounded up three of the best men left. We ought to get those jewels easy!"

Outside the house Black Flag and three other gangsters were waiting beside a large touring-car. The whole party entered, and Anne took the wheel, with Iron Hand sitting beside her, and the car moved off to the scene of their next great adventure.

(Order next week's "GEM" early in order to read the continuation of this amazing story.)

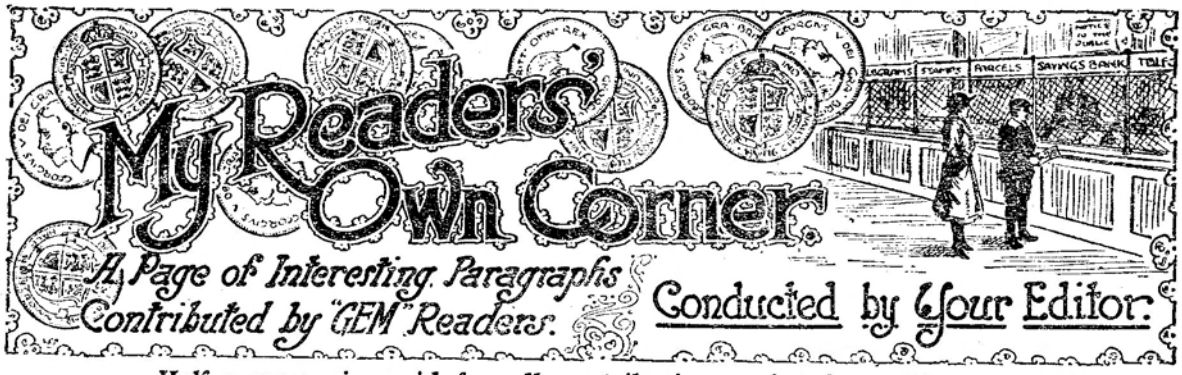
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HEADS OR TAILS.

The room was full of little girls in pink pinnies and pigtails; they sat in rows at wooden desks as quiet as mice; over them presided a sweet-faced damsel. The lesson concerned coins of the realm, and they had been through the entire range, from farthings to sovereigns. One little miss, however, was singularly inattentive; her gaze was fixed upon a playful sparrow on the window-sill, and she had no thoughts for coins. Suddenly the teacher pounced upon her; placing half-a-crown on the pupil's desk, she demanded, "What's that?"

"Eads," came the instantaneous reply.—Miss K. Weston, Greystone Street, Carrick-on-Suir, Co. Tipp., Ireland.

LUCKY.

As it was Christmas-time, an old lady was raffling a fowl and a goose at a shilling a chance, and was only taking three chances. Her son had one chance, her daughter had another, and a neighbour had the third. When the neighbour called to buy his chance, he had no money, so he promised to pay the next day. A few days later he met Mrs. B——, and asked if the things had been raffled yet.

"Yes," said the old lady. "Our John had the goose. Wasn't he lucky?"

"Yes," replied the man. "Who had the fowl?"

"Oh, our Mary had the fowl! Wasn't she lucky?" smiled the old lady.

"Yes," said the man, and he was about to move away when the old lady said:

"By the way, you haven't paid your shilling yet."

"No," said the man, with a laugh. "Aren't I lucky?"—F. Studden, 27, Rose Row, Redruth, Cornwall.

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON.

"Lenny, you're a pig!" said a father to his five-year-old boy. "Now, do you know what a pig is, Lenny?"

"Yes, sir; a pig's a hog's little boy."—Alec. Madeloff, Wingham House, Cowper Street, Chapeltown, Leeds.

A "HEARTLESS" DRAMA.

The tall, proud girl stood before the fierce-looking man, with a glittering knife in his hand.

"Have you no heart?" she asked.

"No," he answered

"Then give me a pound of liver, please."

The man cut off the required amount, wrapped it up, and, handing it to the girl, turned to the next customer.—Ernest Kinsey, 33, Frances Street, Fulford Road, York.

THE OLDEST INHABITANT.

"May I ask the cause of all this excitement in your village?" asked a visitor of a countryman. "Certainly," was the reply. "We are celebrating the birthday of the oldest inhabitant. She's a hundred and one to-day." "Indeed! And who is the sad-looking woman by the side of the lady?" "Oh, that's the centenarian's niece, sir, her brother's daughter, who has been keeping up the payments on her aunt's life insurance policy for the last thirty years!"—Wm. Dickinson, 48, Dunton Street, Woodgate, Leicester.

FAINT PRAISE.

Critic: "I tell you honestly, Mr. McDaub, that those ostriches are superb! You should never paint anything but birds."

Artist (disgustedly): "Those aren't ostriches, they're angels!"—Master J. M. Johnson, 22, Aglionby Street, Carlisle.

WHICH WAS SHOT.

Two men resolved to have a duel. The name of one was John Shott, and the name of the other John Nott. The shot that Shott shot shot Nott, but the shot that Nott shot shot not Shott. It is difficult to understood which was shot and which was not.—Arthur Kimber, 13, Harford Street, St. James, Bristol.

TO MAKE BOYS REMEMBER.

Anciently in many parts of France, when a sale of land took place, it was the custom to have twelve adult witnesses, accompanied by twelve little boys; and when the price of the land was paid, and its surrender took place, the ears of the boys were pulled, and they were beaten severely, so that the pain thus inflicted should make an impression upon their memory, and if required afterwards they might bear witness to the sale.—W. W. Davis, 459, Commercial Road, Mile End, Portsmouth.

8 2 MUCK.

I often sit and medi8
Upon the scurvy trick of F8
That keeps me still a celib8.
Oh, cruel F8!

I want a 10der maid sed8
To love me and be my m8.
My 40 2de is not so gr8.
I cannot w8!

Oh, F8, be9! Be4 2 i8
Relieve my awful single si8;
And when I've 1 this maid sed8
We'll oscul8.

H. L. Boutillier, 257, Bleury Street, Montreal, Canada.

THE FORGETFUL PROFESSOR.

A forgetful professor of Tottenham,
Took his boys to the big school at Caterham.
On reaching the station he found, with vexation,
He'd stupidly gone and forgotten 'em!
—Miss L. Foster, 15, Aughton Road, Swallownest, near Sheffield, Yorks.

"NEW LAID."

A young man sitting in a restaurant noticed some words written on the "new-laid" egg set before him. Adjusting his monocle, he read: "If this should meet the eye of a respectable young man desirous of marrying a pretty girl, he should communicate at once with Miss——" Rushing out in great excitement, he sent off his proposal. Next day he received this reply: "I am sorry to disappoint you, but your telegram came too late. I have been married seven months."—Nora Hunt, 26, Whyke Road, Chichester.

DETAILED.

An old dame from the country was in a large town for a short stay for the first time, and while looking for lodgings she noticed a large letter "D" displayed in many windows of houses along each street, and inquired of a youth passing by the meaning of the letter D's. The youth, taking a deep breath, and looking as innocent as a babe, replied: "Those letter D's denote that the despairing domestics of the detached domiciles are desirous that the distinguished dustman do deem it his delightful duty during his daily diversion to dislodge that disgraceful, dirty dust deposited in the disgusting dustholes!" The old dame came round in about ten minutes.—G. D. Richardson, 127, Ferry Street, Stapenhill, Burton-on-Trent.

HOW THE FLY DIED.

Patron of the Restaurant: "How comes this dead fly in my soup?" Waiter: "To tell you the truth, sir, I don't know for certain how the poor thing came by its death. Perhaps it had not taken any food for a long time, dashed upon the soup, ate too much of it, and contracted an inflammation of the stomach that brought on death. The fly must have had a weak constitution, for when I served up the soup it was dancing merrily on the surface. Perhaps—and the idea presents itself only at this moment—it endeavoured to swallow too large a piece of vegetable, this remaining in the windpipe, and entailed asphyxiation. These are the only reasons I can suggest, sir, for the death of that unfortunate insect."—H. C. Currin, Location Office, East London, Cape Province, South Africa.

HIS PAST AGAINST HIM.

Continued from page 12.

And Wildrake went on to the Fourth Form dormitory, and turned in. A sleepy voice came from a neighbouring bed.

"Who's that makin' a wow?"

"Little me, I guess."

"I thought I heard a wow downstairs," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Was I wight?"

"Right as rain, old scout."

"What's happened?" asked Jack Blake.

"A burglar's happened, and he's caught."

"Ow!" came from Baggy Trimble. "I—I—I say, Wildrake, are you certain he's caught?"

"Ha, ha! Yes."

"Is it the same burglar who burgled the tuckshop last night?" asked Trimble eagerly.

"Nope. Quite a different gentleman," chuckled Wildrake. "He was after something a bit more valuable than a loaf and a chunk of cheese. But he's bagged, safe as houses!"

"Bai Jove! I hope they have got the wascal weally secure," said Arthur Augustus thoughtfully. "Pewwaps I ought to go down and see. Do you think I ought to go down, Blake?"

"I think the Head will rag you, if you do, you ass!"

"Who's in charge of the wuffian, Wildwake?"

"Some of the Sixth."

"I weally hardly think the Sixth are to be twusted in such a sewious mattah, you know. Pewwaps I had bettah go."

"Ass!" grunted Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies——"

"Fathead!" put in Digby.

"Weally, Dig——"

"Mr. Railton's there, too, with his Army gun," said Wildrake. "I really don't reckon you're needed, Gussy."

"Oh, all wight! If Mr. Wailton is there, pewwaps I can go to sleep again, and leave it to him."

"Perhaps you can, old scout," agreed Wildrake, with a chuckle.

"Yaas; but——"

"And perhaps you'll let me go to sleep, too," yawned Wildrake.

"Weally, you know——"

But Wildrake's eyes were already closed: and not another word was drawn from him that night.

* * * * * *

Mr. Silky Smith spent the latter portion of that night in a cell at Wayland, where Inspector Skeat was happy to give him a warm welcome. The following day the affair was the talk of St. Jim's, though few of the fellows knew the exact details of the story. Tom Merry & Co. told as much as they considered judicious, and no more.

But to the Head the whole story was told. The secret weighed on Talbot's mind, and he confessed all to the Head. By that time the Weasel was far away. Dr. Holmes listened very gravely indeed to what the Shell fellow had to say. But later there came news which brightened Talbot's face, and greatly relieved the Head. Once the prisoner was in his hands, Inspector Skeat had been very active, and Mr. Silky Smith's career for the past few weeks was laid open to the daylight. Silky Smith's "country tour" had been a busy one, though it had ended disastrously for him. His steps were traced, and a large quantity of loot was recovered, including valuables taken in the robberies at Abbotsford and at Lantham. And that discovery cleared the Weasel with regard to the Lantham affair. It did not damage Silky Smith much further—he was already booked for a long term of penal servitude—but it lifted the shadow of fear from the unhappy Weasel.

Talbot had stood by him, and Talbot had been right. After Silky Smith's trial and sentence, the Weasel was able at last to emerge from his slinking flight and show his face again. And now that his innocence was proved, he found a friend in the Head of St. Jim's, and a new chance in life. St. Jim's saw no more of him; but in another quarter the old "lag" took his place among honest men, with the knowledge that he would not be left unfriended so long as he kept to the straight path.

And at St. Jim's one more was added to the list of the friends of Talbot of the Shell—Kit Wildrake, the boy from the Boot-Leg Ranch.

THE END.

(There will be another grand long complete school story of Tom Merry & Co. next week, entitled: "GUSSY GETS GOING!" By Martin Clifford.)

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CHAT ABOUT ST. JIM'S AND GREYFRIARS.

William George Bunter, of the "Boys' Herald," I feel sure, will never make a naturalist. He has just been inquiring of me as to what moths feed on. Well, as far as I am aware, porpoise, they eat nothing but "holes."

Claude Hoskins, the Greyfriars musician, we are told, is shortly to be termed the "mad musician." Sure, his father wrote and promised to send him a "violin," and he's been "harping" on it ever since!

Monty Lowther tells me that he feels disgusted with Arthur Augustus D'Arcy for having lowered himself to communicate with Miss Bunn. "I dislike her so much," he tells me. So do I, "loathe-her."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy has just informed me that he contemplates taking a trip over to Greyfriars in a "bwand-new toppah." How beastlay wediculous of him!

From information received, I hear that Dr. Richard Holmes has deemed it necessary to severely chastise Herbert Skimpole for being out of bounds after "call-over." On making inquiries regarding Skimmy's wrong, we were informed that he ventured to purchase a new pair of boots and found walking rather difficult. Probably he'd forgotten to cut the strings.

I have just been informed through an official circle that Paul Pontefex Prout of Greyfriars is likely to attend another shooting expedition at an early date. We warn "Wild-Drake" to steer clear of his offending firearm, as the worthy master of the Fifth Form is "game" for anything.

Aubrey Racke, having written and asked his father to forward him some money, has received a reply; to the effect that his father is unable to visit his bank, having ricked his knee. A "lame" excuse is better than nothing.

Having been besieged with letters of thanks from all quarters for the magnificent Art Plates of the favourites of St. Jim's, we decided to use a like feature of all the popular "lights" of Greyfriars, the first of which appeared in last week's issue of the "Boys' Herald." We fear no contradiction in stating that these will prove the finest galleries of your chums yet published.

We are told that Baggy Trimble is unable to hold his own against anybody at St. Jim's. We are fully aware of the fact that he cannot hold his own tongue.

Fisher T. Fish prides himself on being a bit of a fortune-teller, having the capabilities of being able to look into the future. What a "neck" our worthy friend must have!

George Alfred Grundy has just told me in confidence that he has every hope of becoming a great ventriloquist later on. We have all heard the great George Alfred talk "doll" before.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 687.

Printed and published every Wednesday by the Proprietors, The Amalgamated Press, Limited, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Advertisement offices: The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Subscription rates: Inland, 11s. per annum; 5s. 6d. for six months. Abroad, 8s. 10d. per annum; 4s. 5d. for six months. Sole Agents for South Africa: The Central News Agency, Ltd. Sole Agents for Australia and New Zealand: Messrs. Gordon & Gotch, Ltd.; and for Canada, The Imperial News Co., Ltd.—Saturday, April 9th, 1921.

EDITORIAL.

My Dear Chums,—

During the last few weeks certain changes have been made, and new features introduced into your favourite paper, and I am glad to say that the result has been a big increase in our already large circle of friends. A much better "Gem" aptly sums up the opinion of all readers who have written to me, and our paper is going stronger now than ever before. This is very encouraging news, indeed. We must keep the good old "Gem" right at the top of the tree, and I must thank all my chums who have helped me in various ways in introducing the paper to their chums, sending me suggestions, and so on. It is a splendid thing to have so many loyal and helpful readers. This week you have another excellent story dealing with Talbot, Wildrake & Co., entitled, "His Past Against Him!" and I am sure you will like it.

YOUR EDITOR.

NOTE.

The Editor of the companion papers ('Magnet,' 'Gem,' 'Popular,' 'Boys' Herald,' and 'Boys' Friend') finds that some of his readers have received a letter regarding the publishing of a new weekly paper. He wishes to inform his chums that he has no connection whatever with this new publication.

ANSWERS TO READERS.

"FRANKY R." (Gladstone Avenue, Toronto, Canada).—You have got some troubles, and no mistake! I agree with you that Dane and Pons are only "breeds," as you call them out there. What do you think of Kit Wildrake? He's a thorough-bred Canadian all through. You and your fellow GEM readers in your vast country ought to be very proud of him. I think you will be satisfied with the "Boys' Herald" now. Most boys in British schools are being taught a more accurate description of your land. I will answer the rest of your questions whenever space allows.

"ANON" (Brighton) says: "As an old reader of the GEM, and I am getting on in years, I consider that Cardew is the best drawn character in the stories. He does not show his real character in a hurry. You never quite know what he will do and say next. It is this touch of mystery which adds so much to the interest of any tale in which Cardew figures. Please do not think that I am crying down Tom Merry, or D'Arcy, or the others because of this partiality for the brilliant Ralph."

H. ROSS THOMPSON (Australia) writes: "Sometimes, in English papers, there are stories about Australia which are liable to give people a false impression of the country—such as stories about bushrangers, wild aboriginals, etc. I remember reading one of bushrangers and aboriginals which was supposed to have taken place within recent years. The district in which the scene was laid is not far from here, and no wild blacks have been seen there since it was settled, about sixty years ago, while bushrangers never favoured it with their presence. I think that the best place for writers to lay their bushranging stories is in the New England districts of New South Wales. That district used to be the haunt of many of our most famous bushrangers. I believe that many people in the Old Country think that we are all black in Australia. Well, I do not think they can be blamed, considering that there are folks in Victoria and Tasmania who think that Queenslanders are niggers."

Many thanks to my correspondent for his splendid letter. He is a staunch supporter of the GEM.

S. BADEN-POWELL (Clapham) writes: "I cannot understand why some people do not like the GEM. I know they do not read it, or they would speak differently. My signature is my real name. I was called after General Baden-Powell. I like 'Joy's Gossip' very much, but I am sure she is wrong in saying that girls seem as if they must have something to ridicule. If I were a girl I would write to her and tell her all girls were not like her chum, Betty Smith. I quite agree with her about hearing more of girls in the GEM. I shall read 'Joy's Gossip' every week and write my views on it. I only hope if girl readers of the GEM see anything they think isn't right they will send to Joy. I wish her the best of luck."

"A NEW READER" (Cardiff).—There is not a great deal to know about Gerald Cutts. He belongs to the School House Fifth, and shares his palatial study with St. Leger and Gilmore. He is 5ft. 9ins. tall, and will appear in our portrait gallery very shortly. His outdoor pursuit is, chiefly, horse-racing. His people, who are very wealthy, keep him well supplied with pocket-money, and he goes to London theatres with his study-mates fairly frequently. At St. Jim's he apes the man about town, and our portrait will show him dressed in his most immaculate racing attire. The First Eleven at St. Jim's are: Kildare (captain), Baker, Macgreggor, Darrel, Mulvaney, Lefevre, Knox, Gray, Cutts, Langton, Monteith. The senior rowing eight are: Kildare Baker, Langton (stroke), Mulvaney, Lefevre, Darrel, Rushden, and North. D'Arcy minor or Oliver Watson is usually chosen as the cox. I think this was what you wanted to know, my chum; and I sincerely hope you will continue to remain a loyal supporter for many a long day.

"POSTAL ORDER" (Kidderminster).—Jerrold Lumley-Lumley no longer belongs to Study No. 8. He moved to Study No. 1 some time ago, and shares it with George Durrance. Splendid yarns of all the characters you mention will appear in due course. Keep your eyes open, and don't miss a single number.

"AN ENTHUSIASTIC GEMITE" (Tooting).—Gerald Knox is turned eighteen. He is 6ft. 1in. in height. Baggy Trimble is a fat fibber. Arthur Augustus has about one hundred and eighty ties of divers colours. He has six cream-coloured waistcoats, four grey ones, and about a dozen with assorted colours and patterns.

"SOUTHERN CROSS" (Auckland).—It strikes me that before I could answer any of your questions I should have to set the whole of St. Jim's fighting one another. Yes, Aubrey Racke is very fond of kissing the ground in a scrap, as you express it. Arthur Augustus has fallen in love with about seventeen young ladies since he has been at St. Jim's.

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