

A HANDSOME BICYCLE AWARDED TO A READER THIS WEEK !

(See Page 16.)

EVERY WEDNESDAY.

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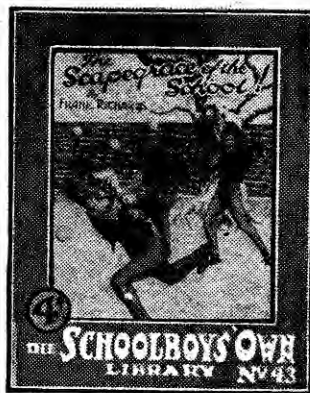
No. 983.  
Vol. XXXI.  
January 22nd,  
1927.



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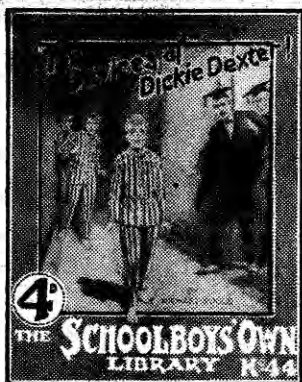
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## THE RESULT OF SPECIAL "BICYCLE" JOKE COMPETITION No. 1.

ON page 16 of this issue will be found the result of our first "Bicycle" Joke Competition. To the winner a handsome "Mead" Bicycle, costing £7 12s. 6d., has been awarded. In addition, there are consolation prizes of ripping footer games awarded to those readers whose jokes appear in print. Genites will agree that these are amazingly good prizes for jokes, and those of you whose names do not appear among the prizewinners this week may experience better fortune when you scan the list in next week's bumper issue. Readers who entered for Competition No. 2 would do well to order their copy of the GEM in advance. There's bound to be a record rush to secure it, and some of the casual fellows will be feeling cross with themselves if they arrive at the newsagent's only to be told that the GEM is sold out. Take the tip for what it is worth.

## HE WANTS TO BE A BOXER!

A very interesting letter reaches me from a chum in Devon who is extra keen to take up the Ring as a livelihood. He tells me that he's "pretty hefty" with his fists, and he thinks that if he took up the "game" seriously he would knock his way into fame. But here's the rub—his mater is dead against it. Well, my chum, I don't think you ought to let this craze for the Ring come between you and your mother. After all, you are not yet of an age to be seriously thinking of taking up any profession, for you say that you won't be thirteen until next June. Why not wait a bit before you begin to worry yourself and your mother about a profession in which it must be said more hard knocks are taken than given. Don't run away with the idea, either, that a youngster has only to don the gloves and put up a good performance and his fame and fortune as a boxer are assured. Not a bit of it. Boxing is perhaps one of the hardest means of earning a livelihood these days, and promotion from the rut is more a question of luck than many people imagine.

## HOWLING!

A chum from the Midlands tells me that he's friendly with a fellow in his district who is charming in every way but one. The one bad feature in his make-up, apparently, is that he "blubs" too easily. "What can be done to cure him?" asks my correspondent. "I suggest, my Midland chum, that you talk pretty plainly yet kindly to him on the subject. Again, set him an example wherever you can. From your letter I gather that your chum has been spoiled at home. Well, perhaps that accounts for his weakness in the tear line, in which case it is not his fault. In time he will grow out of that wretched habit, providing you stand by him. If you like him for all his other good traits, don't desert him for just that one weakness.

## NEXT WEDNESDAY'S PROGRAMME:

### "STANDING BY A SCAPEGRACE!"

Martin Clifford will keep you enthralled in his story for next week. Reginald Talbot, better known as the Toff, plays a very prominent part—and Talbot is popular with you all, I know. Don't miss this yarn.

### "WHITE EAGLE!"

Look out, too, for another instalment of this adventure serial. You will enjoy it no end. And then, in addition to these attractive items, is another jolly poem by the St. Jim's rhymester, entitled "A Dirge of the Sanny!" It goes with a swing. Chin, chin, chums!

Your Editor.

**THE VOICE OF THE TEMPTER!** It is to his cousin, whom he hates bitterly, that Gerald Crooke turns in the hour of his need, and Talbot, good-natured to a fault, offers to do his best! But fear of expulsion brings out all that is worst in Gerald Crooke! He cannot wait to hear the result of Talbot's efforts on his behalf, for the voice of the tempter whispers in his ear: "Steal! Thou shalt not be found out!"



# THE BLACK SHEEP OF ST. JIM'S!

A Magnificent New Long Complete  
Story of Tom Merry & Co., at St.  
Jim's, with Gerald Crooke and  
Reginald Talbot filling the principal  
roles.

BY  
MARTIN CLIFFORD.

## CHAPTER 1.

When Rogues Fall Out!

**CRASH!**

And a yell.  
"Bai Jeye! That sounds like a wow!" remarked  
Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the St. Jim's Fourth.

There was no doubt that it did.  
Half a dozen fellows, who were talking football in  
the Shell passage in the School House, jumped as that  
sudden uproar proceeded from Study No. 7, close at  
hand.

Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther of the Shell,  
were exchanging views on Soccer with Blake & Co. of  
the Fourth, and Tom was leaning on the door-post of  
No. 7, as it happened. He detached himself very quickly  
from the door-post as there was a terrific crash in the  
study, followed by a yell that ran the length of the  
Shell passage.

Study No. 7 in the Shell belonged to Racke and  
Crooke.

Racke and Crooke, the two black sheep of the Shell,  
were not popular in their Form or in their House.  
They were slackers in class, slackers at games, smokers  
in their study, and more than suspected of playing  
banker and nap there behind a locked door. But they  
seldom or never ragged. If they snarled at one another  
occasionally, that was all they generally did in the  
way of quarrelling. So it was quite a surprise to hear  
a royal row going on in No. 7.

And it was a royal row—quite royal. Following the  
crash and the yell came scuffling and  
trampling of feet, a panting of  
hurried breath, and a sound of  
heavy punching. For some reason or  
other unknown to the juniors in  
the passage, Racke and Crooke were  
fighting hard.

"Well, that's something new," re-  
marked Monty Lowther. "My hat,  
they're going it!"

"They are!" grinned Manners.

"Quarrelling over the loot,"  
chuckled Blake. "Racke has been  
chiselling Crooke, or Crooke has been  
swindling Racke."

"Let's look in," suggested Herries.

"I've never seen those merchants  
scrapping; never knew they knew how  
to scrap."

"Let's!" said Digby.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Tom Merry turned the handle of the door. It  
opened, and the captain of the Shell pushed the door  
wide. The seven juniors gathered round the doorway,  
extremely interested spectators of the startling scene  
within.

Tramp, tramp, tramp!

Aubrey Racke and Gerald Crooke were "going" it:  
there was no doubt about that. Racke's head was in  
chancery, and he was struggling and fighting franti-  
cally to release it. Crooke, his usually pasty face  
flushed crimson, was fairly hammering at his pal.  
Evidently there was a very serious break in the friend-  
ship of the two black sheep of St. Jim's!

"Go it, ye cripples!" sang out Lowther encouragingly.  
"Go it—both sides! This will do you both good!"

"Yaas, wathah!" chuckled Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Pile in, Crooke!" encouraged Blake. "Another for  
his nose! That's right! He's tapped the claret, you  
chaps."

"Go it, Racke!" chortled Herries.

"Hurrah!"

Crooke did not seem to need encouragement. He was  
going it hard. Aubrey Racke seemed to be chiefly bent  
on breaking away. But his erstwhile chum had him  
fast, and there was no escape for Aubrey. Crooke  
punched and hammered, and hammered and punched  
with an energy of which the School House fellows had  
never believed him capable.

The din from No. 7 brought other  
fellows along the passage from the  
other studies. Kangaroo and Glyn  
and Dane came along, and Gore and  
Talbot of the Shell. Talbot's face  
was serious as he looked in. The  
other fellows were laughing. There  
seemed something comic to Tom  
Merry & Co. in these two slackers,  
who always avoided scraps with great  
care, suddenly breaking out into a  
terrific scrap with one another.

"Stop them!" exclaimed Talbot,  
making a movement to enter the  
study.

Monty Lowther pushed him back.

"Not in your lifetime!" he said.  
"Let 'em go it! Nobody ever thought  
either of these wasters had pluck

RESULT  
OF  
"BICYCLE"  
JOKE  
COMPETITION No. 1.  
ON  
PAGE 16!

enough to punch anybody. More power to their giddy elbows!"

"Bat what's the row about?" asked Talbot.

"Goodness knows," said Tom Merry. "It started all of a sudden. One of the duffers bumped the other off a chair, I think. It sounded like it. Then they started punching."

"Ow!" Racke was roaring. "Leggo! Draggimoff!"

"Don't you worry about your jolly old cousin, Talbot," grinned Manners. "He's getting the best of it."

Crooke certainly was getting the best of it. Physically he was as seedy a waster as Racke, but he seemed to be, for some mysterious reason, in a towering rage. For the time at least he was full of vim. Racke's frantic struggles were in vain, and he was now yelling to the grinning spectators for help.

"Ow! Help!" shrieked Racke. "Pull him off!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Rats! You put a little beef into it," said Blake.

"He will crumple up if you punch him."

"Yaroooh! Ow! Rescue!"

"Look here. They'd better be separated," said Talbot. And he pushed past the juniors in the doorway and entered the study.

Crooke glared at him as he entered.

"Mind your own business, Talbot," he snarled. "Don't you meddle here."

"You'll have the prefects up here soon, Crooke," said Talbot mildly.

"No business of yours."

"Ow! Draggimoff!" shrieked Racke.

Punch, punch, punch!

Talbot of the Shell hesitated. Crooke was his cousin, though there was no love lost between them. They were not friends, and, indeed, hardly acquaintances, so far apart were their ways and their interests. School House fellows hardly ever remembered that Talbot and Crooke were related at all. Talbot's friends, in fact, did not care to remember it, for the decent fellows of the House barred Crooke and his shady companions. From Crooke, on the few occasions when they came into contact, Talbot of the Shell had nothing to expect but sneers or malicious dislike. But the tie of blood was never wholly forgotten by Talbot, little as he could possibly like his blackguardly cousin. As the Shell fellow stood hesitating, Racke suddenly hacked his adversary's shin, and then Crooke released him, with a howl of agony.

Gerald Crooke staggered back, his crimson face whitening with the pain. Racke jumped clear, panting.

"Keep him off!" he gasped. "I—I think he's gone mad. Keep the mad brute off, you fellows!"

Crooke was springing towards him again, but Talbot interposed. His strong arm barred Crooke's way.

"That's enough," he said quietly. "You've hurt him a good bit."

"Stand aside!"

"Keep him off!" yelled Racke, in alarm, and he dodged behind Talbot's stalwart figure.

"Yaas, wathah! There's weally been enough, you know," said Arthur Augustus. "There's a limit, Crooke."

Crooke of the Shell did not heed.

His eyes were blazing at his cousin.

"Will you stand aside?" he shouted. "I'm going to smash him. Stand aside, Talbot!"

Talbot shook his head.

"Keep cool," he said. "He's had enough, whatever he's done."

Crash!

The infuriated Crooke struck full at Talbot's face with his clenched fist. Talbot reeled under the blow.

"Why, you rotter!" shouted Tom Merry, his eyes blazing. "Mop up the study with him, Talbot!"

Talbot's face for a second flamed, and Crooke backed away, terrified by what he had done. The sturdy and stalwart Talbot could have handled three or four of Crooke without undue effort. Perhaps it was for that reason that he did not return the blow.

He did not return it. He put up his hands, but he did not hit out.

"That will do, Crooke," he said very quietly. "That's more than enough. This shall go no further."

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Racke staggered to the door. Among the crowd of juniors outside the study he felt safe; and he cast back a malevolent look at the fellow who had thrashed him.

"You rotter!" he panted. "Don't you ever speak to me again! I'll change out of the study, by gad, you rotter, you beggar, you sponging, cadging' outsider! All this because I won't lend you money! And I won't—not a shilling, by gad! Not a red cent!"

And Aubrey Racke tramped savagely away down the passage, seeking the nearest bath-room to bathe his damaged face.

The juniors looked at one another.

Racke's words enlightened them as to the cause of the strange and sudden outbreak of hostilities in Study No. 7.

Crooke's face set pale and dogged. He gave the crowd at the doorway a glare, and then fixed his eyes bitterly on Talbot.

"Get out of my study!" he muttered thickly.

"I'm going."

Talbot stepped out among the juniors.

Slam!

The door closed after him with a crash.

"Well, my only hat!" said Jack Blake, with a whistle. "This takes the cake! Who'd have thought that funk Crooke would put up a terrific fight like that? Wonders will never cease!"

"Why didn't you slaughter him, Talbot?" demanded Tom Merry hotly, his eyes on a red mark on Talbot's cheek.

Talbot smiled faintly.

"You—you ass!" said Tom. "You let him punch you, and you could knock him into a cocked hat with your little finger!"

"Yah!" came a howl from Baggy Trimble of the Fourth. "Funk!"

Talbot glanced at Trimble and walked away to his own study; and Baggy, greatly encouraged by impunity, allowed himself the liberty of yelling after him again scornfully:

"Funk!"

The next moment Trimble of the Fourth was wriggling, with Tom Merry's grip on his collar.

Tom did not speak. He did not think that words were needed. He proceeded to prompt action.

Bang!

Trimble's bullet head collided with Crooke's door. A fiendish yell rang along the Shell passage.

"Yaroooh!"

"Give the fat wottah anothah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Bang!

"Whoooooop!"

"Now all kick together!" said Manners.

Baggy Trimble fled for his life. Evidently Baggy was alone in the opinion that Talbot of the Shell had "funked"; and Baggy, as he rubbed his bullet head, wished from the bottom of his podgy heart that he had kept that valuable opinion to himself.

## CHAPTER 2.

### Asking for It!

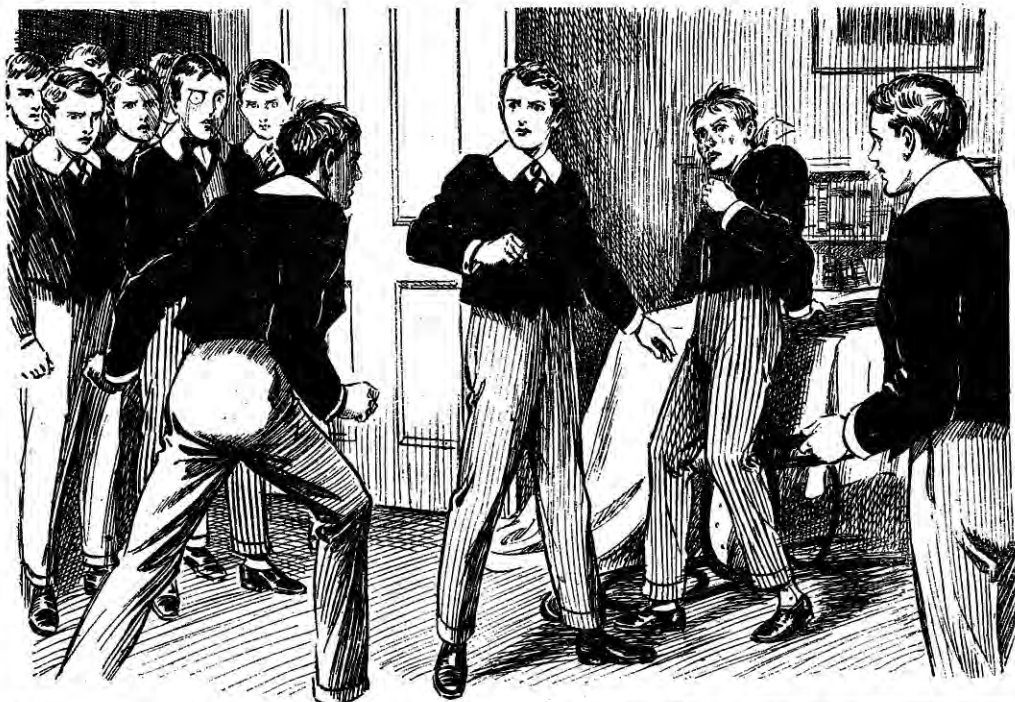
**T**OM MERRY glanced rather curiously at Crooke when the Shell fellows came into the Form-room the following morning.

The "shindy" in Crooke's study had caused considerable comment in the Shell. Crooke and Racke had always been as thick as thieves," but their friendship seemed to have come to an end. It was a case, as Monty Lowther had remarked, of rogues falling out. And great was the fall thereof!

The manners and customs of the two black sheep were pretty well known in the Shell, and it was a common opinion that it was only a question of time before one or both of them received the "order of the sack."

Certainly, both of them deserved it, and would have received it had their headmaster known as much about them as their Form-fellows knew.

The fierce quarrel in the study and Aubrey Racke's bitter words as he went showed pretty plainly how the matter lay. It was probable that Gerald Crooke had backed one of his favourite "geegees" not wisely but



Crooke was springing towards Racke again when Talbot interposed. His strong arm barred Crooke's way. But Crooke did not heed, his eyes were blazing. "Will you stand aside?" he shouted. "I'm going to smash him! Stand aside, Talbot." (See Chapter 1.)

too well, and found himself hard pushed in consequence. Generally he had plenty of money—more than was good for him, in fact; and if he was seriously hard up it showed that he must have been "going it" very recklessly. No doubt Aubrey Racke, the richest fellow at St. Jim's, could have helped him if he had liked. No doubt Crooke had expected it, as Racke was his pal. But Racke was not exactly the kind of pal to rely upon in a time of difficulty or stress. Neither, as a matter of fact, was Crooke himself. Racke had let him down, as doubtless Crooke would have let down Racke had the situation been reversed. That the matter was, however, of very unusual seriousness was shown by Crooke's savage outbreak of temper. He was quite the reverse of a fighting-man, as a rule.

The captain of the Shell wondered whether, at long last, Crooke had gone a little too far and gone into his sporting speculations a little too deep for safety. In that case it was possible that the "sack" was at hand. That was a contingency which left Tom Merry quite unmoved. His opinion was that St. Jim's would have been greatly improved by the departure of George Gerald Crooke of the Shell.

But as he looked at the fellow in the Form-room that morning, Tom felt a touch of compassion.

Crooke certainly did not look as if he were enjoying life.

His sporting speculations with Mr. Lodgey, at the Green Man, perhaps provided him with a little excitement. He did not play games; he never joined in a "House" rag; he was seldom seen on the playing fields, and hardly ever in the gym. But for the rule of compulsory practice twice a week, he would never have touched a football. All his tastes ran to shady and vicious amusements, and he affected a cynical contempt for more manly occupations. Tom, as he glanced at the fellow's pasty, troubled face, could not help thinking that football would have done him more good if he had only understood as much. Certainly, he looked now as if his favourite entertainments had not increased his happiness or contentment.

Crooke was early in the Form-room that morning,

and he sat at his desk, as the other fellows came in, with a sullen brow.

Many of the juniors glanced at him, some with smiles. Racke gave him a savage scowl, but no other sign of recognition.

Crooke did not heed it.

He seemed plunged in deep and gloomy thought, and unconscious of his surroundings. His face was so wretched and depressed that the most casual eye would have noticed it.

Tom paused as he was going to his place and spoke to him. Repugnant as the black sheep of the Form was to him, Tom hated to see a fellow down on his luck, and he did not want to see Crooke land into more trouble than he was in already. Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell, was an extremely keen and observant gentleman, and it behooved Crooke to pull himself together a little before the Form master came in. Mr. Linton's sharp eye had more than once been turned suspiciously on both Crooke and Racke. And Crooke's aspect at the present moment was enough to make the most unsuspicious Form master surmise that something was wrong.

"Crooke, old bean!" murmured Tom.

Crooke came out of his reverie with a start, and looked up with glinting, hostile eyes.

"What do you want?"

"You're looking pretty seedy this morning," said Tom.

"No business of yours if I am!" said Crooke sullenly.

"Not in the least," assented Tom Merry. "But if you don't pull up a bit before Mr. Linton comes in, he will notice it, and if he asks you questions you may find it awkward."

Crooke started again.

"Oh," he said.

"That's a tip," said Tom, with a smile, and he went to his place.

Crooke stared after him, his sullen, angry face softening a little. A kind word from a fellow who had never liked him, and whom he had never liked, surprised him and had a slightly ameliorating effect on his temper.

He was in a scrape—in so terrible a scrape that Tom would have been surprised had he known it. His own friends—such as they were—had let him down. He had no help to expect from them. No sympathy, either—if sympathy would have been of any use to him. Aubrey Racke and his shady set had no concern to waste on a "lame duck." "Get on or get out" was the maxim of these sporting young gentlemen. It seemed strange enough to Crooke that the only kind word he heard in his time of trouble came from the captain of the Form, who had always been, as he considered it, "down" on him.

And Tom Merry's "tip" was not lost on him. He made an effort to pull himself together and banish the careworn, almost haggard expression from his face. He realised that he was giving himself away hopelessly. So far as the Shell fellows went that mattered little—he did not care for their opinion. But so far as the master of the Shell was concerned, it mattered a great deal. He dreaded Mr. Linton's keen eyes and searching questions.

Mr. Linton came into the Form-room, and as he glanced over his class his eyes fixed not on Crooke, but on Aubrey Racke. The damage to Aubrey's face was too conspicuous to escape notice.

"Racke!"

"Yes, sir," said Aubrey sullenly.

"You appear to have been fighting."

"Yes, sir."

"With whom?" snapped the master of the Shell.

"Crooke, sir."

Mr. Linton glanced at Crooke, who coloured under his gaze.

"Each of you will take two hundred lines of Virgil," he said.

Racke scowled and Crooke shrugged his shoulders. The latter was in a mood in which impositions mattered little to him.

Mr. Linton caught that shrug of the shoulders, and a glint came into his eyes for a second. However, he took no further notice of Gerald Crooke for the time. But a little later Crooke was called on to construe.

Crooke's "con" was never very good; on the present occasion it was extremely bad. He stumbled over it wretchedly, and Mr. Linton very soon interrupted him.

"You have not prepared this lesson, Crooke?"

"No, I haven't," said Crooke sullenly.

The Shell fellows stared round at Crooke.

Often and often a similar question had been put to the slacker of the Shell, and he had answered with a prompt untruth. Now, apparently from sheer sullenness of temper, he had told the truth, and in a very disrespectful manner.

"Is that the way to answer me, Crooke?" said Mr. Linton in a dangerously quiet tone.

"You asked me, sir," said Crooke.

"And why did you not prepare this lesson, like the other boys in the Form?" demanded Mr. Linton.

"I suppose I let it slide," said Crooke.

"My hat!" murmured Kangaroo to Manners. "Crooke's fairly asking for it!"

"He won't ask in vain!" grinned Manners.

"You let it slide?" repeated the master of the Shell. He picked up the cane from his desk. "No doubt you were too busy fighting with Racke to think of performing this task, Crooke."

"Very likely!" said Crooke.

The Shell fellows almost gasped. Crooke was anything but the fellow to rag a Form master in class. That process required nerve, especially with a Form master like Mr. Linton. But Crooke appeared to be utterly reckless now.

"Crooke," snapped out Mr. Linton, "stand out before the class!"

Gerald Crooke lounged out sulkily.

"Bend over that desk!"

Crooke hesitated a moment, as if it was in his mind to disobey. But even his sullen recklessness stopped short at that. He scowled and bent over the desk.

Swish! Swish! Swish!

"Now go back to your place, Crooke. You will remain in the House this afternoon till you have written out THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 988.

three hundred lines, in addition to the two hundred I have already given you. I shall expect the whole imposition by tea-time. Go to your place!"

Crooke squirmed back to his place. The three cuts he had received would have made a much tougher fellow than Crooke squirm.

For the remainder of morning lessons he sat with a sullen face, but there was no more "cheek" for Mr. Linton to expect from him.

Three lashes of the cane and five hundred lines to be written out on a half-holiday were more than enough to take this new reckless rebelliousness out of Crooke. He was sullen, but he was a very respectful and attentive pupil for the rest of the morning.

## CHAPTER 3.

### The Cousins!

"KICK off at two-thirty, Talbot," said Tom Merry cheerily.

Talbot of the Shell nodded.

Talbot's handsome face was very thoughtful in expression as he stood staring out of the window in the Shell passage.

He was looking at the leafless elms in the quadrangle, and the steely sky beyond the bare branches, but hardly seeing them. Tom Merry could see that he was deep in not very pleasant thought. For that reason the captain of the Shell stopped to speak.

"We're going to beat the New House this afternoon," went on Tom.

Another nod.

"I hear that Figgins & Co. are in tremendous form," continued Tom Merry. "According to the New House men, nobody will be able to get past Fatty Wynn in goal. We shall have to pull up our socks."

Talbot nodded again.

"My dear chap," went on Tom, dropping the subject of football, "chuck it! It's not good enough."

Talbot started a little.

"What isn't? What do you mean, Tom?"

Tom Merry laughed.

"Didn't you know I was a thought-reader?" he said cheerily. "Anyhow, I can read your thoughts, old bean. You've got a speaking countenance sometimes. And I repeat—chuck it!"

"I—I don't quite catch on——"

"That outsider Crooke isn't worth a thought," said Tom directly. "He's got himself into some frightful scrape. Well, it's his own funeral, not yours. If it's the sack this time, you can't help it—and he's asked for it often enough. I know he's your cousin, but he's never been a relation to you—more of an enemy than anything else. He has absolutely no claim on you, and you needn't trouble your head about him. So that's why I say chuck it, see?"

Talbot smiled faintly.

"You think I was bothering about Crooke?"

"Well, weren't you?" demanded Tom.

"Perhaps I was," admitted Talbot. "After all, he's my cousin, Tom—and blood's thicker than water. And—it would be rather a blow to Colonel Lyndon, our uncle, if anything happened to him here."

"Colonel Lyndon doesn't care much about him, so far as I can see," said Tom. "You're the favourite nephew, as you deserve to be. Why, that's one of the things Crooke has against you!"

"I know. But my uncle would feel anything like—disgrace," said Talbot. "And for a fellow to get bunked from school is an awful disgrace. I can't help thinking that Crooke is frightfully up against it this time; it's something out of the ordinary. You saw how reckless he was in the Form-room this morning. It's utterly unlike him. And his breaking out at Racke yesterday; that's unlike him, too. He's got all the look of a fellow who's desperately up against it."

"I know," said Tom. "And whose fault is it?"

"His own, of course," said Talbot, "but——"

"But what?"

Talbot's face clouded.

"You have every right to be down on him, Tom—you wouldn't touch him with a barge-pole, and I don't blame

you. You've been a decent fellow all your life. There's nothing in your record for a fellow to be ashamed of. It's different with me. There was a time—"

Tom Merry held up his hand.

"Cut that out, Talbot! That's forgotten."

"Not by me, I'm afraid," said Talbot, with a sigh. "Mind, I know there was every excuse for me when I was—what I was before I came to St. Jim's. I was a mere kid. I was landed among a gang of evil characters. I took my tone from my surroundings before I knew any better. As soon as I got a chance I chucked it all. But—but there's a stain—"

"Rot!" said Tom almost angrily.

"I know you don't think so, old chap," said Talbot, with a smile of affection at the captain of the Shell. "But what I remember of that time is bound to make me go easier with other fellows than a fellow need do whose record is quite clean. You look on Crooke as a rotter, and you're right. I'm afraid he is a rotter. But there was a time when I was a worse fellow. And—and I had a helping hand when I needed it. It makes me believe in giving a fellow a helping hand, however bad he may be. I—I wish there was some way of helping him out."

"And he punched your face yesterday!"

"That doesn't matter."

"Oh, you're too good for this jolly old world, Talbot," said Tom Merry, half laughing and half vexed. "Look here, you're not going to bother about Crooke and his blackguardly scrapes. His affairs are not fit for a fellow like you to touch. Come down to the changing-room now."

"Lots of time yet," said Talbot. "I'll follow you, old chap."

Tom Merry nodded and went down the stairs to join Manners and Lowther. Talbot remained staring out of the window at the leafless old branches outlined against the steel sky.

He stirred at last, however, and walked slowly along the Shell passage to No. 7—Crooke's study.

He had made up his mind.

He was not on friendly terms with Crooke at the best of times, and what had occurred the day before made it difficult enough for him to approach his cousin in a friendly manner. But he had made up his mind to it. Of the St. Jim's fellows who knew anything of Talbot's dark story before he had come to the school, few remembered it; but it was never likely to fade from the memory of the fellow who had once been called the "Toff," who, in early, unhappy days the victim of evil associations, had been a breaker of the law. That memory made Talbot tolerant and patient; it helped him to see what little there might be of good in a bad character; it made him anxious to see the erring footsteps of his cousin set upon the right path.

He knocked at the door of No. 7 and opened it. There was a startled exclamation in the study.

Crooke was there. He swung round from a desk in the corner of the room, with a startled, flushed face.

"Oh, you!" he exclaimed, evidently in relief at the sight of Talbot.

Talbot compressed his lips.

He knew that that desk in the corner of the study belonged to Aubrey Racke, and that Racke always kept it locked. Racke, who fairly reeked of money, was supposed to keep some of his too-ample supplies of cash in that desk. Talbot did not need telling that Crooke had feared, for the moment, that it was Racke who had arrived, to catch him fumbling with the desk. With a sickening feeling at his heart, Talbot realised what Crooke had doubtless had in his mind as he fumbled at the locked desk where Aubrey Racke kept currency notes.

"Well, what do you want?" asked Crooke.

"Only to speak to you," said Talbot.

"You needn't trouble," sneered Crooke. "You're not on visitin' terms in this study that I know of."

"I know," said Talbot, in a low voice.

"Well, then, there's the door."

Talbot stood hesitating, and Crooke watched him, with a sneer on his sallow face. But some new thought seemed to come into Gerald Crooke's mind, and his expression changed.

"Excuse me," he said unexpectedly. "I'm a bit nervy. I'm worried. I—I didn't mean to be huffy. Come in and shut the door, old chap."

Surprised as he was by that sudden change of manner, Talbot was glad to see it. His clouded face cleared a good deal, and he shut the study door and sat down in the chair to which Crooke amicably pointed.

"I—I'm sorry for what—that I did yesterday," said Crooke in a rather shamefaced way. "I was wild. That rotter Racke fairly got my rag out. I never meant to hit you, Talbot. Of course, I know you could have mopped up the room with me if you'd liked; you could afford to overlook it. But I'm sorry, all the same."

"I'm glad to hear you say so," answered Talbot cordially. "Never mind about that, old fellow. I come in now as a friend. We're not exactly friends, I suppose; still, we're relations, and I can't help seeing that you're in trouble of some sort. If there's anything I could do, I'd do it with pleasure."

"That's decent of you," said Crooke, eyeing the Shell fellow furtively. "The fact is, there is something you can do. It's just come into my mind, as a matter of fact."

Talbot smiled faintly. Crooke's words explained his sudden change of manner.

"You're not quite like the other chaps in some ways," went on Crooke, lowering his voice. "You can do a lot of things other fellows can't do, owing to your rather queer way of life before you came here."

The colour flushed deeply into Talbot's face.

"Don't mistake me," went on Crooke hastily. "I'm not twitting you. I mention it because it's in that way you can help me. Before you came here—before my Uncle Lyndon found out that you were his nephew—you were called the Toff, the prince of cracksmen. Kid as you were, they said that there wasn't a lock in the United Kingdom you couldn't pick if you liked, with your eyes shut. From what I've heard, you were made use of in that way by the gang of rascals who had you in their hands at that time. I'm not rubbing it in, Talbot. I know you turned it all down as soon as you could. But that's how you can help me if you will."

"I don't understand!"

The crimson flush had died out of Talbot's face now, leaving him pale.

Gerald Crooke pointed to the oak desk in the corner of the study.

"Crooke!" breathed Talbot.

"I'll explain. That cad Racke has taken a—a—a paper belonging to me and locked it in his desk," said Crooke, breathing hard and avoiding Talbot's clear glance as he spoke. "He—he won't give it up. That—that's why I was—was thrashing him yesterday. Will you open the desk for me, so—so that I can get it?"

Talbot's eyes were fixed on Gerald Crooke's face. Crooke's eyes looked anywhere but at Talbot.

"Well?" he muttered, as Talbot did not speak.

"If Racke has anything belonging to you I'll help you force him to give it up," said Talbot quietly.

Crooke clicked his teeth.

"That won't do. It's not a thing a fellow can make a row about. It—it's a paper I don't want any masters or prefects to see."

"I will come here when Racke is here and make him

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unlock the desk, and you shall search it in the presence of both of us."

Crooke's eyes gleamed.

"That's no good."

"Why not?"

"Because—because—well, it isn't. Will you do as I ask, or will you not?" demanded Crooke sullenly. "You said you'd do anything you could. You could open that desk easily and shut it again so that nobody would know it had been touched. Couldn't you?"

"Yes," said Talbot, with a deep sigh. The one-time prince of cracksmen had not lost his old skill. But that was no matter of pride with him; it was the reverse of that.

"Well, then," said Crooke eagerly, "you can oblige me in this, Talbot. It means a lot to me. Racke's gone out for the afternoon, so it's a good opportunity. Will you do it?"

Talbot shook his head.

"For goodness' sake, Crooke, think what you are doing!" he said in a low voice. "I want to think as well of you as possible. But can't you see that that flimsy story wouldn't impose on a child? There's no paper of yours locked up in Racke's desk, but I know what Racke keeps locked up there. For your own sake, if not for the sake of your people, take yourself in hand before it's too late, and don't risk being expelled from the school as a thief!"

Crooke gave him a bitter look.

He did not trouble to deny the imputation. He knew that Talbot had read him easily.

"That's good—from you," he said sardonically. "What were you before you came to St. Jim's I'd like to know?"

"What I was, Crooke, makes me anxious to save you," said Talbot, his face very white. "You must be mad to think of such a thing!"

"Oh, leave me alone!" said Crooke savagely. "You won't help me! You funk it, and that's the long and short of it! Get out of my study, then!"

Talbot rose to his feet.

"I was a fool to come, I suppose," he said heavily. "But at least, Crooke, you'll give up that mad idea?"

"Mind your own business!"

"It becomes my business now that you have tried to make me an accomplice in a theft," said Talbot sternly. "I shall say nothing of this, Crooke, as a matter of course—unless there should be a theft in this study. If that should happen, I warn you that I shall state what I know about it. Let that be a warning to you."

He turned to the door.

"You rotter!" muttered Crooke. "You traitor! Get out of my sight—I'm sick of you! Oh, I wish I could handle you! I'd give you the licking of your life for your cheek, you—you outsider—you cracksmen—you thief!"

Talbot winced, but he made no reply, and he left the study in silence, Crooke's glance following him with the bitterest animosity.

"Oh, here you are!" exclaimed Tom Merry, as Talbot of the Shell came into the changing-room. "You're not looking very merry and bright. Feeling fit?"

"Fit as a fiddle," said Talbot, forcing a smile.

"Bai Jove! Then you don't look it, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, turning his eyeglass upon the Shell fellow. "We've got to pull up our socks to beat the New House to-day, you know."

"Oh, we'll beat them," said Talbot cheerily.

Talbot of the Shell was looking his usual quiet, cheery self when the footballers went down to Little Side. He had dismissed Crooke and his dingy troubles from his mind, feeling that he had done all that he could—more, indeed, than most fellows would have expected of him. The fellow was a bad egg—bad all through. Talbot's cheek burned at the bare thought of what had been said in the study. The fellow was an absolute rotter. He could not be helped, and he must go to the dogs in his own way. And Talbot, feeling that there was no more to be done in that direction, drove the matter from his mind and devoted all his thoughts to the football match. And the cheers that rang round the football field, coupled with the name of Talbot, showed that he was displaying all his old form.

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## CHAPTER 4.

### Down on His Luck!

MR. LINTON held up his hand. The master of the Shell was standing in the big doorway of the School House, talking to Mr. Railton, when Crooke of the Shell came by.

The Form master and the Housemaster were deep in conversation, doubtless on some matter very interesting from a master's point of view; but Mr. Linton spotted Crooke as the Shell fellow came lounging by.

Crooke was lounging, or, rather, slouching, with his hands in his pockets and a sullen look on his face. He did not seem to see the two gentlemen in the doorway; indeed, he was too deeply engrossed in his own gloomy and morose thoughts to take much heed of his surroundings. Crooke was in very deep waters these days. Ahead of him loomed the shadow of the "sack"—not now a possibility, but a probability, and the danger made him reckless. If he was going to be turned out of St. Jim's, as it seemed only too likely in the present state of his dingy affairs, he might as well be turned out for one reason as for another. Indeed, he would rather have been sacked for rebelliousness and insubordination than for reasons still more disgraceful. And every day now Crooke was in incessant fear of the "chopper" coming down.

He did not look at the masters—did not even seem to see Mr. Linton holding up his hand as a sign to him to stop.

Whereupon the master of the Shell rapped out his name sharply:

"Crooke!"

The Shell fellow stopped then.

"Excuse me one moment, Mr. Railton."

The School House master nodded.

Mr. Linton turned to Crooke with a very severe countenance.

"Have you written your lines, Crooke?"

"No, sir," said Crooke sullenly.

"Have you written any of them?"

"No."

"Yet you are going out?"

"Yes."

"Did I not order you to hand in your imposition by tea-time, Crooke, and to remain in the House till it was finished?"

"Yes," grunted Crooke.

His manner was sulky and disrespectful.

Both the masters looked at him very curiously. There had always been a touch of sullenness about Crooke, but this open "cheek" was quite a new thing on his part.

"Really, I scarcely know how to deal with you, Crooke," said the master of the Shell. "I am reluctant to cane you again, after caning you in the Form-room this morning. Go back to your study, and do not leave it again till the whole of the lines are written out."

Crooke hesitated.

Obviously it was in his thoughts to disobey.

Mr. Linton's jaw set so grimly and such a glint came into his eyes that Crooke weakened at once. It was a case of the spirit being willing and the flesh weak. Crooke simply had not the nerve to set himself up in defiance of authority, much as he desired to do so.

"Very well, sir!" he said in a low voice, and he turned back. But on second thoughts he turned again, and spoke to the master of the Shell very civilly.

"I was going down to Little Side, sir. My cousin is playing in a House match there and I wanted to see him. I've a bit of a headache, sir, and I could do the lines later, if you'd be so kind."

Mr. Linton's severe face relaxed at once.

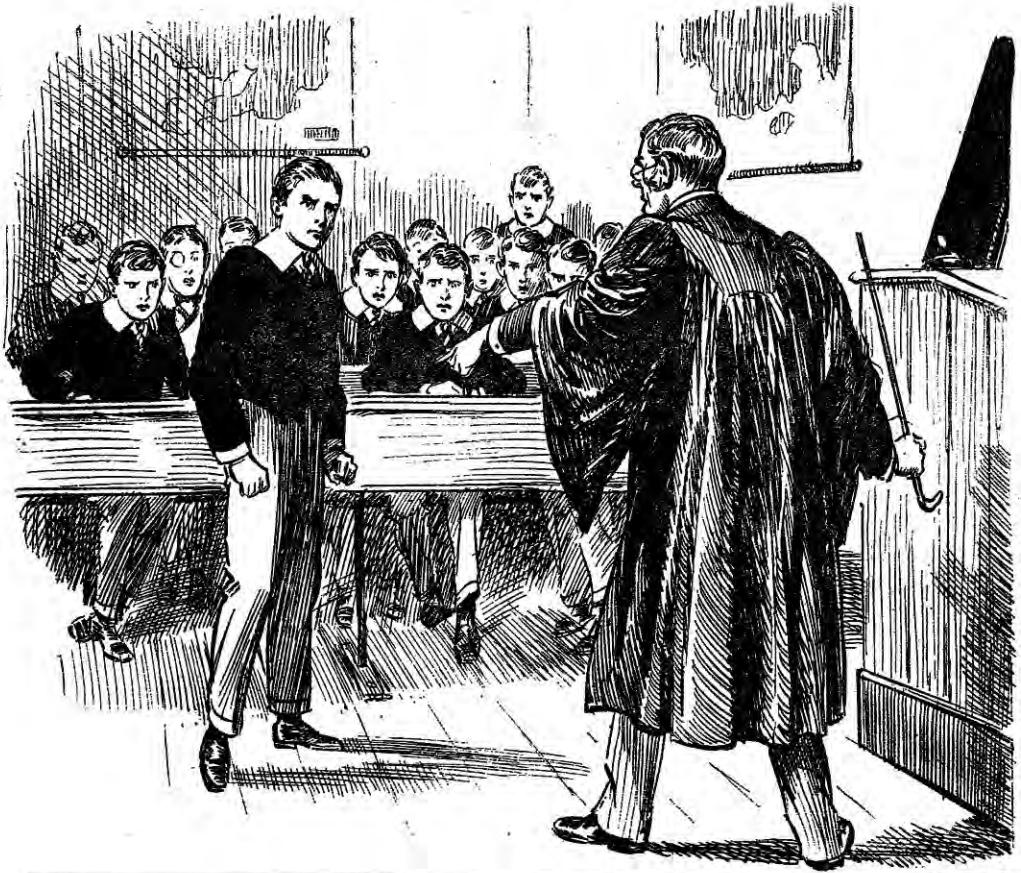
"Quite so, Crooke; but you should not have thought of disregarding my orders."

"I know, sir," said Crooke humbly. "I'm sorry."

"Very well, Crooke, you may certainly go down to the football ground," said Mr. Linton. "I am glad to see you taking an interest in the school games. The lines may be handed in this evening."

"Thank you, sir!"

Gerald Crooke walked out of the House. Both the masters stood looking after him, and Crooke had an uncomfortable feeling that they were discussing him as



"Why did you not prepare this lesson, like the other boys in the Form?" demanded Mr. Linton. "No doubt you were too busy fighting with Racke, to think of performing this task, Crooke." "Very likely!" said Crooke. The Shell fellows almost gasped. Mr. Linton picked up his cane from his desk. "Crooke!" he roared, "Stand out before the class!" The Shell junior lounged out sulkily. (See Chapter 2.)

he went. He was aware that more than once of late his Housemaster had eyed him very sharply, as well as his Form master. He realised that his sullen temper was likely to be his undoing. There was still a chance, at least, that he might pull out of his scrape with Mr. Lodgey of the Green Man, and, if that happy result ensued, it was evidently injudicious to get into the masters' black books for nothing. The difficulty was that he was feeling in such a "rotten" state generally that he could control neither his nerves nor his temper.

He slouched down to Little Side, where Tom Merry & Co. were hard at Soccer with Figgins & Co. of the New House. There was a numerous crowd round the field, and they were shouting as Crooke came lounging up:

"Goal! Good old Talbot! Goal!"

Crooke's lip curled bitterly.

Talbot was there, playing a great game, cheered by his House. Crooke looked at him as he lined up again with the School House men after the goal. His handsome face was a little flushed, his eyes bright; he looked cheery and happy, as he always did on the football field. No one, looking at Talbot then, would have supposed that the one-time "Toff" was haunted by black recollections of the past. Crooke watched him sullenly, feeling something like hatred for the handsome, healthy fellow liked and admired by all the other footballers, cheered cordially by the men of his House. He envied Talbot—envied the fellow who had in early boyhood been an outcast, a breaker of the law; whose strong character and noble heart had pulled him out of difficulties under which Crooke would have crumpled up helplessly.

The game was nearly over. Crooke waited impatiently for the finish.

"How's it goin'?"

Crooke glanced round as he heard the voice of Cardew of the Fourth at his elbow.

"I don't know," he grunted.

Cardew grinned.

"So many goals that you couldn't keep count?" he asked.

"Rot!" grunted Crooke. "Do you think I care twopence about House matches?"

"Dear man!" said Cardew. "I sympathise! I told Levison I would give the match a look in, and here I am to keep my word. Frightful bore, isn't it? But what are you doin' here?"

"Minding my own business!" snarled Crooke.

Cardew of the Fourth eyed him.

"Findin' the fresh air improvin' for your temper and your manners—what?" he inquired urbanely.

"Oh, rats!"

"Alas, those geegees!" sighed Cardew. "I sympathise; I've been there! Did yours come in eleventh, with all your spare cash on his back?"

Grunt from Crooke.

"Goal!" came another roar.

"That's Tom Merry," said Cardew. "Hefty man, Thomas! Hallo, young D'Arcy, how's the score?"

Wally of the Third looked round.

"That's three for the House," he said. "Ripping, ain't it?"

"Oh, gorgeous!" said Cardew. "I feel no end bucked to hear it. Any for the New House?"

"Two," said D'Arcy minor.

"Then we're winnin'," said Cardew gravely. "They'll never get another goal. A day worthy to be marked with a white stone!"

"Yah!" said D'Arcy minor.

Cardew stood with his hands in his pockets, watching the finish of the game, with a smile on his face. Both his chums, Levison and Clive, were in the School House team, for which reason Ralph Reckness Cardew had taken the trouble to stroll down to Little Side for a few minutes. Crooke was no longer watching the footballers, however; his eyes were on Cardew. He came a little nearer to the dandy of the Fourth.

"Cardew, old man—" he said in a low voice.

"Why 'old man'?" smiled Cardew. "Do you want me to hand you a cigarette? Can't be done here—too many eyes."

"Oh, don't be an ass!" said Crooke irritably. "The fact is, Cardew, I'm rather up against it in a way—"

"Dear man, all the House knows that!" smiled Cardew. "You carry the glad news written all over your speakin' countenance."

Crooke gritted his teeth.

"Well, listen to me a minute," he muttered. "You know my people are rich; it's only a matter of time before I can get what I want from my pater. He's shut down at present. I've been havin' too much this term, and he's kicked. But later on he will shell out; the water always makes him come round in the long run."

"It's really kind of you to confide your family affairs to me, Crooke," said Cardew, with mocking urbanity. "Believe me, I appreciate the confidence immensely."

Crooke breathed hard.

"Will you lend me somethin' to tide me over?" he muttered. "You've got lots of oof—you could do it. It's rather a sum."

"Don't name the amount," said Cardew coolly. "Whatever it is, dear man, I wouldn't be mixed up in your shady affairs for twice as much. May I mention that I think it's like your check to ask? Thanks!" And Cardew strolled away, whistling.

Crooke clenched his hands hard. He had known in advance that it would be useless—that he would be humiliating himself for nothing. But he could not afford to leave a stone unturned.

The whistle rang out—the match was over. Tom Merry & Co. came off the field victors by three goals to two. As the School House footballers came off, Crooke hurried towards them, and joined Talbot of the Shell.

Talbot's face clouded a little, but he nodded.

"I want to speak to you, Talbot," muttered Crooke.

"It's no use; that's all done with."

"I don't mean that—I've thought of something else. You said you'd help me if you could."

"Very well," said Talbot quietly; "I'll come up to your study as soon as I've changed."

"Rucke may be there—he will be in to tea. Shove a coat on and come along now."

"This way, Talbot!" called out Tom Merry. "Tea in my study, you know!"

Talbot hesitated.

"Is there any hurry, Crooke?"

"Yes, yes! Yes!"

"I'll see you later, Tom!" called out Talbot. "Don't wait tea for me, old chap!"

And having put on his coat and muffler, he walked away with Crooke.

## CHAPTER 5.

### Up to Talbot!

TOM MERRY frowned a little as Talbot went, and compressed his lips. Talbot was exactly the fellow to be landed with another fellow's troubles, and certainly there was no St. Jim's junior more capable of helping a fellow in trouble than Talbot was. But it irked Tom deeply to feel that the black sheep of the Form was dragging Talbot into his wretched shady affairs. Still, Talbot was his own master, if it came to that; and Tom Merry went his

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way with his friends, a little impatient with Talbot and feeling anything but cordial towards Gerald Crooke.

The fellow had always been Talbot's enemy—an unpleasant, insidious enemy. What right had he to urge the claims of relationship as soon as trouble came along? It was very like Crooke—and it was very like Talbot to allow himself to be victimised in this way. Tom Merry did not like it; and as he had to "jump" it, he lumped it with a rather bad grace.

Utterly heedless of the captain of the Shell and what he might be thinking, Crooke walked away with Talbot, under the leafless old elms, and stopped at a bench there. There they were secure from curious ears. Talbot went without a word, but with a slightly harassed expression on his handsome face. He wanted to be with his friends, joining in the joyous little celebration in Tom Merry's study; most certainly he did not want to be in Crooke's company, listening to the fellow's dismal tale of blackguardly disaster. But he had said that he would help Crooke if he could, and he had meant what he said.

Crooke sat down, and Talbot dropped on the old oaken bench beside him.

"You said you'd help if you could," began Crooke.

"You mean it, I suppose?"

"I hope I always mean what I say," answered Talbot quietly.

"Well, then—"

"I suppose it's money?" said Talbot abruptly.

"Of course."

"Let me know how you stand, and I'll see what can be done."

Crooke shrugged his shoulders.

"If you'd had the money, I'd have asked for it before," he said. "It's a sum miles beyond what you've got, whatever you've got."

"Oh!" said Talbot. "How much, then?"

"Fifty pounds!"

Talbot of the Shell stared at him blankly.

"Are you mad, Crooke? How can you possibly be in debt to the tune of fifty pounds?"

"Well, that's the figure," said Crooke sullenly. "I've gone in too deep—I've fairly come a mucker. The thing promised well. I could have sworn that I was on to a good thing, and I went in deep—on credit, of course. Lodgery was the man who laid the bets for me, and he advanced the money to see the thing through when it went wrong. He knows I've got lots—that I had lots, I mean. He's seen me with fivers and tenners; he thought I was made of money. But it's gone. And I've drained the pater dry—last letter home all I got was a savage letter back, asking what I did with so much money; and the pater hinted that he would have to speak to my Housemaster on the subject. That barred me off from asking him again, you can guess."

Talbot nodded in silence.

"You should have seen Lodgery's face when I told him I couldn't square," went on Crooke. "He was quite flabbergasted. In an awful rage, too. You see, he'd trusted me, thinking I was a sort of milch cow. I let him have my gold watch on account. It was all I could do. That kept him quiet for a bit. But there's fifty pounds owing, and Lodgery himself is hard up. He was hard hit on the same race. He's booked for trouble himself if he can't raise the wind, and he's as hard as nails on me. You see, he thinks I can raise the money if I try hard enough. He's suggested asking my uncle for help if my pater won't shell out. Fancy asking that grim old gorgon, Colonel Lyndon, for fifty pounds!"

Crooke laughed discordantly.

"I'm afraid that wouldn't be much use," said Talbot.

"Use! He wouldn't hand me five quids without knowing what the money was wanted for, and if he learned that it was a gambling debt he would see me sacked before he would squeeze out a sixpence!" cried Crooke bitterly.

Talbot was silent.

"Lodgery is getting furious," went on Crooke. "He thinks that if he showed me up here, my people would pay the money to save scandal. Very likely he's right; it's a chance for him, anyhow; and as matters stand he's got no chance of seeing his money at all—this

term, at least. I've had it hanging over me for days now. That cad Raacke could help me out, but he won't spring even a fiver; and Clampe of the New House makes out: that he's hard up, and Scrope says the same. I'm for it."

"It's hopeless," said Talbot. "I always have a few pounds on hand. I'm rather careful with my money, and Colonel Lyndon makes me a decent allowance. But anything like fifty pounds—that's hopeless, of course."

"I know."

Talbot looked at him. If Crooke knew that it was hopeless, it was a question why Crooke was telling him anything about it at all. Obviously, however, the black sheep of the Shell had a motive.

"It's not only myself I'm thinking of, though you mightn't guess it," went on Crooke in a low voice. "I could stand the sack—I must stand it if it comes. I can stand the pater raggin' me, if it comes to that. But the mater—it's too thick!" There was a catch in Crooke's voice. "She's always stood by me like a brick. I suppose you wouldn't understand, as you don't remember your mother, Talbot. But—but the mater would feel this awfully if I went home in disgrace, and—and it makes me feel sick to think of it. Fellows here don't think much of me, I know; but a fellow's mater—it's different. I'd cut off my hand sooner than give her such a blow if I could help it."

Crooke's voice broke wretchedly.

Talbot looked at him with a strange expression.

Few fellows who knew Gerald Crooke as he was known at St. Jim's would have given him credit for kind and tender feelings of any kind. It was a discovery to Talbot. He was quite keen enough to see that Crooke, in this at least, was in deep earnest. It made him think better of the fellow; it made him resolve to help him if he could be helped.

"Don't tell me I ought to have thought of all that earlier, before I made such a fool of myself," said Crooke, before Talbot could speak. "I know that well enough. If I get out of this awful scrape I shall keep clear in the future. Will you help me out?"

"What can I do?" asked Talbot quietly. "Five or six pounds would be of no use, I suppose?"

"There's Colonel Lyndon."

"I'm afraid he would not help, Crooke. He would ask at once what the money was for—such a large sum, too. And—and I think he would be more likely to horsewhip Mr. Lodgey than to pay him any money. That wouldn't improve matters."

"I know, I know!" muttered Crooke impatiently. "My Uncle Lyndon wouldn't listen to such a thing from me. But you—"

Talbot started.

"If" he breathed.

"Yes, you," said Crooke doggedly. "You're old Lyndon's favourite. You've quite cut me out there. I'm not reproaching you, but that's the fact. He thinks nothing of me, and he thinks worlds of you. It's only because my mater is his sister that he takes any notice of me at all—sense of duty, and all that stuff. He doesn't like me. Your mater was his favourite sister, and he treated her harshly at one time, I've heard at home, and it's still on his conscience, and he's trying to make it up to you. He will do anything you ask him. He trusts you; he doesn't trust me."

"Who's to blame for that, Crooke?" said Talbot very quietly.

Crooke shook himself impatiently.

"I'm not going into questions of right and wrong and praise and blame. I want to save my neck here. I believe Colonel Lyndon would give you the money if you asked for it for yourself. You're in a better position to ask. You can say with truth that it's not a gambling debt of yours; that you've done nothing wrong; that you want the money to help a friend out of trouble—anything you like. My belief is that he would grunt and growl a bit and then shell out. Don't you think so?"

Crooke eyed his cousin anxiously.

"I—suppose it's possible," said Talbot.

"Well, then, next term, some time, I'll let you have the money back. You'd be fifty pounds to the good in the long run. You see that?"

Talbot's lips curled.

"If you repaid me I should repay our uncle every shilling," he said.

"Please yourself about that. You'll try it on?"

Crooke watched Talbot's face with almost haggard anxiety. "It's my last chance. It's the only thing that can save me, even if it doesn't come too late, anyhow. Every day I'm expecting that brute Lodgey to break out and show me up or go to my father or to the headmaster. I can tell you, it's fairly breaking up my nerves. If I'm going to be sacked from St. Jim's, I'd rather be sacked for anything else. A fellow can hold up his head afterwards if he's bunked for cheeking his Form master or slacking at class, or making himself too much trouble for the school. I'd rather have it that way, before the chopper comes down."

Talbot sat silent.

"You can speak, at any rate," said Crooke savagely. "Can't you see I'm in torture?"

"I've never asked Uncle Lyndon for money," said Talbot, with a touch of bitterness. "I never would."

"It's not asking for yourself."

"I know. But—"

"It's to save me—your blood relation. It won't do you any good to have it said that your near relation was bunked from a school like St. Jim's. It will be a bit of a knock for old Lyndon, too. I'm his nephew, hang him, after all. You can save me—at least you can try."

"Look it in the face, Crooke," said Talbot quietly. "For your mother's sake, at least, I'd put my pride in my pocket and ask a favour. But the sum is so large that Colonel Lyndon will know it can't be for anything in connection with the school. He's bound to ask me what it is for. I might be able to satisfy him, I might not. If I do my best that's all I can promise. But keep it in mind, Crooke, that the chances are at least two or three to one that Colonel Lyndon will refuse."

"I know, I know! Don't I know him!" muttered Crooke. "But there's a chance, at least, if you'll do what you can. If you won't, say so, and I'll go back to the House now and cheek Mr. Linton and get taken before the Head and bunked. Better that way."

Talbot smiled faintly. Doubtless it was better that way, as Crooke said, but he doubted very much whether Gerald Crooke had the nerve to carry out such a scheme. He was much more likely to make the attempt half-heartedly and break down into abject submission before his Form master's wrath.

"Well?" muttered Crooke.

"Fifty pounds will see you clear, if I can get it!" asked Talbot, at last.

"Quite."

"I'll try."

"You're a good chap, Talbot," said Crooke huskily. "I've never treated you well. I've reminded you sometimes of those rotten things in the past you'd have liked to forget. I know I've no right to ask anything at your hands. But—but—"

"Never mind that," said Talbot. He rose from the bench. "I'll try, Crooke. I'll do my very best. But I warn you not to count on it too much. The chances are against anything coming of it."

"I won't blame you if it doesn't come off. Only do your best."

"My word for that!" said Talbot. "I will write to Colonel Lyndon in time for the post this evening. As soon as his answer comes I will tell you. Let it go at that."

"Thanks!" breathed Crooke.

Talbot, with an abrupt nod, left him.

He went to the House, but he did not proceed to join the cheery party in Tom Merry's study.

He was in no mood now for festive celebrations. He had a letter to write to his uncle—the most difficult letter he had ever had to write in his life. How to put the matter to Colonel Lyndon was a problem—a problem that Talbot had to think out.

He did not see Gerald Crooke again till bedtime. In the Shell dormitory Crooke gave him an inquiring, anxious look, and Talbot replied with a nod. Crooke breathed more freely—he knew that the letter was written and posted. Now it only remained to wait for the answer—to wait, hoping that the answer would be favourable; to wait, hoping that Mr. Lodgey would hold his hand until the answer came. It was Crooke's last

chance, and it was a very uncertain chance. Uncertain as it was, it was all that stood between him and the "sack" from St. Jim's.

## CHAPTER 6. Kind of Gussy!

"I QUITE undahstand."

"Eh?" ejaculated Talbot.

"Quite!" said Arthur Augustus, with a smile.

Talbot looked at him in surprise not unmixed with alarm.

It was several days since that letter had been written and posted to Colonel Lyndon, and those days had been days of torment to Gerald Crooke, and far from pleasant for Talbot of the Shell.

Only with the greatest of efforts had Talbot brought himself to write that letter at all. For himself, he would never have dreamed of asking; he coloured at the thought of doing so. For another—and that other a fellow who had never been his friend—he had put his pride in his pocket and asked. He did not regret having done so, but he felt discomfited and ashamed, and in the following days his mood was not a happy one.

Colonel Lyndon's reply had come promptly enough, and it had been as kind as Talbot could have expected.

The colonel was a rich man, and a kind-hearted man in spite of his stern and uncompromising exterior. He trusted Talbot. But no man could have received such a request for such a sum of money from a junior at school without great surprise. That he would send such a sum to a fellow in the Shell at St. Jim's, without inquiry, was not to be imagined for a moment; indeed, it would have been a dereliction of a guardian's duty to have done so.

He had replied that he was surprised by the request, but that he had no doubt that Talbot had a good reason for asking. That reply was the measure of his faith in the Shell fellow's integrity and good sense. Such a request from Crooke, for instance, would have been refused without hesitation; indeed, might have been followed by a family council on Crooke's account, to ascertain what sort of trouble he was in. With Talbot it was very different. But the colonel naturally wanted to know something about the matter before he placed such a sum in the hands of a schoolboy. He wrote that he would come down to the school to see Talbot as early as he could—which would be the following Wednesday. Then they would talk over the matter.

It was the best that Talbot could have expected—more, indeed, than he could reasonably have expected in reply to such an astounding request. The colonel gave no promise, but let it be understood that if Talbot satisfied him the money would be forthcoming. More than that even Crooke could scarcely have hoped for.

So the only thing to be done was to wait till Wednesday in the following week and hope for the best.

Crooke, in the meantime, had a secret interview with Mr. Lodgey, and begged that frowsy gentleman to wait patiently.

Talbot had plenty to think about in deciding what he could possibly say to the colonel on Wednesday.

What could he say?

He had promised to keep Crooke's connection with the matter a secret. That, of course, was understood.

Colonel Lyndon was not to know anything about his other nephew's trouble or impending disgrace.

Talbot could only tell him, therefore, that he wanted the money to help an unnamed individual who was in a scrape.

He had, in effect, told the colonel so already in his letter.

It was putting the old military gentleman's faith in him to a very severe strain.

The colonel would believe him—he was sure of that—but was he not likely to think that Talbot was being "done" by some cunning rogue? Surely he would want to know, at the very least, who was the unfortunate individual who was to be helped.

That was precisely what Talbot could not tell him.

He could imagine the colonel's grim face if he was

told that his nephew Gerald was in debt to the extent of fifty pounds.

Beyond doubt, the colonel would place the matter before the headmaster. It would be his bounden duty to do so.

Crooke was almost hysterically terrified at the bare idea of his uncle being told that it was for him that the money was wanted. That was not to be contemplated for a moment.

Talbot, therefore, had to keep the name a secret. And was the colonel likely to hand over such a sum for the benefit of a person he did not know and of whose bona fides he could form no opinion?

It was extremely unlikely.

And yet somehow or other Talbot had to get the money if he could. He knew only too clearly that it was the only way of saving Crooke.

With that worry on his mind it was not surprising that Talbot was unusually thoughtful and a little moody in the succeeding days.

Among other things, he had to cut a football match on the Wednesday, as his uncle was coming to the school that day.

Tom Merry & Co. were going over to Rylcombe Grammar School the next Wednesday to play the Grammarians, and it was rather a blow to Tom to hear that Talbot could not go with the team.

He admitted at once, of course, that Talbot could not go out of gates if Colonel Lyndon was coming to see him that day. But it was a serious loss to the St. Jim's junior eleven, and Tom was much exercised in his mind about filling the vacant place.

Fortunately he did not know and could not guess that Crooke was at the bottom of it. Certainly he would have been bitterly annoyed had he been aware that he was to lose his best winger in a hard game on account of Crooke's sporting speculations and their disastrous outcome.

Talbot thought the matter over with regard to his coming interview with Colonel Lyndon almost incessantly. The matter weighed on his mind; he felt himself up against an almost insuperable difficulty. Even in class, where Talbot was always an attentive pupil, the matter worried him, and for once Mr. Linton found him absent-minded and inattentive. Out of class, Talbot was now almost continually in a mood of deep and troubled thought. He rather avoided the other fellows for a time, feeling quite out of tune with the usual cheery life of the House.

Thus it came about that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth Form ran him down in a quiet corner of the quad in morning break, and joined him there with the statement that he quite understood—a statement that rather alarmed Talbot of the Shell. Much as Talbot liked the cheery, amiable swell of St. Jim's, he almost certainly did not want to confide to him anything concerning Crooke's shady affairs.

Arthur Augustus gave him a kind and encouraging smile.

"It's all wight, deah boy," he said, "I quite undahstand. You can always wely on a fellow of tact and judgment to see how the land lies, you know. I am goin' to help you out, old chap."

"I—I don't quite catch on," faltered Talbot. "Surely Crooke—" He broke off abruptly. It was surely impossible that Crooke had been fool enough to attempt to "touch" D'Arcy for such a sum of money, or had told him anything about it!

"Cwooke!" repeated Arthur Augustus innocently. "I wasn't speakin' about Cwooke, deah boy!"

Talbot smiled.

Evidently Arthur Augustus was not on the right track. His celebrated tact and judgment had led him on a false trail—as was not uncommon.

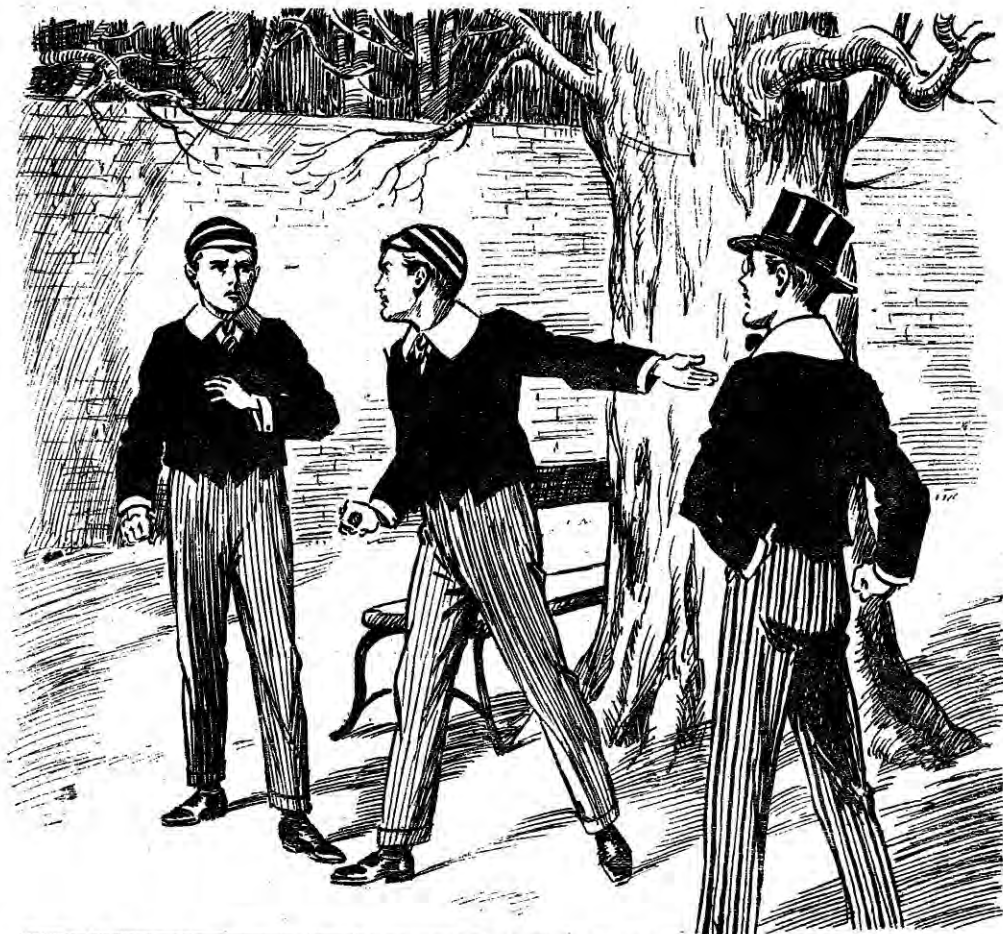
"You've been lookin' fwrightfully down on your luck lately, old bean," went on Arthur Augustus. "I know all about it—as I said, I quite undahstand. He is wathah a cwustay old bean."

"Eh! Who?"

"Your jollay old uncle."

"My—my uncle?"

"Yaas, wathah! I know what it's like, old chap," said D'Arcy. "I've several uncles myself; and when one of my uncles comes to see me, I natuwallly expect



"Talbot, deah boy, you can wely on me to see you thwough," said Arthur Augustus, "now I know how the matter stands——" "Talbot! You—you've told D'Arcy——" It was Crooke's voice, as he came striding upon the scene. "And you've told him, Talbot—told him after promising——" (See Chapter 6.)

my friends to wally wound. Blake or Hewwies or Dig always plays up, you know, and helps me thwough. Of course, I always play up in return. I stood by Dig like a weal chum the day his aunt came."

"Oh!" said Talbot.

"Now, your jollay old uncle is comin' down on Wednesday," went on Gussy cheerily. "I believe he is a vewy respectable and good-hearted old chap, but cwustay—vewy cwustay. But these old codgahs can always be put into a good tempah with the exahcise of a little tact and judgment. What you want is a friend to stand by you and help you beah it, you know. Unfortunately, all the fellows are goin' oah to Wylcombe for the football match that day. I'm in the t-am."

"But——"

"But I'll tell you what I'll do, old chap," said D'Arcy. "If you like, I'll stand out of the Gwammah School match."

"What?"

"And wally wound you while your uncle is heah. Between us, we ought to be able to manage him. We'll have him to tea in the study, and I will talk to him, you know—and listen to him, which is wathah more important. These old johnnies genevally like to do the talkin'. I've had a lot of expewience in dealin' with these old johnnies," said Arthur Augustus, with a wise shake of the head.

Talbot laughed.

"My dear chap——" he said.

"Not a word, old bean—I'm goin' to do it," said Arthur Augustus. "It will buck you up no end, to have a friend to help you thwough. I know what's wowwyin' you, and I've thought it out. Tom Mewwy can play anothah man in my place at the Gwammah School."

"Not for worlds," said Talbot. "My dear fellow, I'm no end obliged; but you're not going to cut a football match on my account."

"I insist, deah boy," said the swell of St Jim's. "I tell you it's all wight. I can stand your uncle just as I stood Dig's aunt. Uncles are no hardah to stand than aunts. Of course, the treatment is wathah diffeent. That's where a fellow's tact comes in."

"But——" stammered Talbot.

"Leave it to me, deah boy, and I guawantee to keep him in a good tempah all the time," said Arthur Augustus. "You see, I made up my mind to weigh in as soon as I saw how the mattah stood, and I assuah you that I shall set the whole thing wight. Don't you wowwy any more—wely on me to see you thwough, old fellow. You should weally have told me all about it in the first place, you know; but now I know how the mattah stands——"

"Talbot, you—you've told D'Arcy!" It was Crooke's voice, as he came up hurriedly.

Arthur Augustus turned his head, and fixed his eyeglass frigidly on Crooke's startled, scared face.

"You are intewwuptin' me, Cwooke," he said icily.

"You interfering fool!" roared Crooke.

"Bai Jove! What—"

"And you've told him, Talbot—told him, after promising—" panted Crooke.

"No!" said Talbot. "For goodness' sake, don't be a fool, Crooke! D'Arcy was talking about something else."

"I heard him—"

"You had no wight to heah what I was sayin', Cwooke," said Arthur Augustus coldly. "You are an eavesdroppin' wottah!"

"You—you fool! You meddlin' fool!" hissed Crooke, clenching his hands savagely.

"Bai Jove! Have you any objection, Talbot, to my givin' your cousin a feahful thwashin'?"

"For goodness' sake, don't row!" said Talbot anxiously. "It's all right, Crooke—all right, I tell you. You misunderstand."

Crooke stared from one to the other. He had caught only D'Arcy's last words to Talbot, and certainly they had given him the impression that D'Arcy knew all about the matter. Crooke was in a state of jumping nerves, fearful almost of his own shadow.

"He said he knew all about it," he said sullenly.

"It was something else," said Talbot. "For goodness' sake, shut up!"

"It is quite true that I know all about it, but I fail to see how it concerns you, Cwooke," said Arthur Augustus.

Crooke stared at him blankly. That remark was sufficient to show him that D'Arcy did not, as a matter of fact, know anything of the affair.

"You—you idiot! What do you mean?" muttered Crooke.

"Weally, Cwooke—"

"It's all right," said Talbot anxiously. Crooke was giving himself away hopelessly, had D'Arcy been a more observant fellow.

"I will speak to you another time, Talbot," said the swell of St. Jim's. "I weally cannot stand Cwooke. I do not wish to say anythin' against a welation of yours, old chap, but Cwooke is weally the limit." And the swell of St. Jim's ambled away, leaving Talbot troubled and Crooke staring after him savagely.

## CHAPTER 7.

### Mr. Ralton Wants to Know!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY disappeared under the elms, and Crooke turned his gaze on Talbot's troubled face.

"What was the fool talking about?" he snapped.

Talbot made an impatient gesture.

"Nothing of consequence. For goodness' sake, Crooke, pull yourself together. Your nerves seem to be in rags."

"So would yours be, if you were in the same scrape," said Crooke sullenly. "I can tell you this is driving me very nearly off my rocker. Old Linton knows there's something wrong; he watches me like a cat; and Mr. Ralton, too."

"You give yourself away," said Talbot. "If D'Arcy were a suspicious fellow, he would see that there was something wrong, too, from what you said."

"Hang D'Arcy!" growled Crooke. "Look here, I saw Lodgey last night."

"Well?" said Talbot, suppressing a sigh. Every detail of Crooke's blackguardly dilemma was repugnant to him, and the bare mention of the sharper's name jarred on him. But he had landed himself with the matter now, and it was useless to repine.

"The brute's furious," muttered Crooke. "He thinks he can get his money by threatening my people with a show-up. I dare say he could—the pater would very likely pay to save disgrace. I don't know. But I've staved it off. I've told him my uncle's coming here on Wednesday, and that he will let me have the money. Even then he wouldn't promise to wait till Thursday, but I think he will."

"You've told him it's a certainty?"

"Yes," snarled Crooke. "Even then he wouldn't promise to wait. If I'd told him it was only a chance, the game would have been up at once."

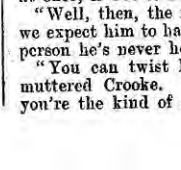
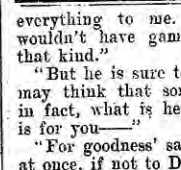
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"It is not a certainty, Crooke—very far from it," said Talbot quietly. "The more I think about it, the more uncertain it seems. What can I possibly say to Colonel Lyndon? Fifty pounds is a large sum."

"You must pitch it to him somehow. Couldn't you make out that you want to buy a motor-bike? You're his favourite, and he would stand you almost anything."

"I can't tell him lies, Crooke; and it would be useless, anyhow, as I've already told him that I want the money to help somebody out of a scrape."

"It's not much to him," muttered Crooke. "It's



## CAMEOS OF LIFE

### BOATING ON T

The sun is sparkling on the Rhyl  
With many a bright reflection;  
And lazy punters drift at will,  
Regardless of direction.  
Others, with energy imbued,  
Pull on their oars like niggers;  
And the spectators' eyes are glued  
Upon their sturdy figures!

Merry and Talbot, side by side,  
Go speeding down the river;  
With eager zest their oars are plied,  
The gleaming blades a-quiver.  
And neck-and-neck they madly race,  
With energy untiring;  
Determination on each face—  
It is a sight inspiring!

The portly Trimble may be seen,  
For Baggy's gone a-punting;  
His comrades, smiling and serene,  
Watch the fat junior "stunting."  
He clings in frenzy to the pole,  
Regretting his excursion;  
The punt then gives a lurch and roll:  
Result—a chill immersion!

everything to me. He trusts you—he knows you wouldn't have gambled money away, or anything of that kind."

"But he is sure to ask the name," said Talbot. "He may think that some impostor has got hold of me—in fact, what is he to think? I can't say the money is for you—"

"For goodness' sake, no! He would go to my father at once, if not to Dr. Holmes."

"Well, then, the name is to be kept secret. How can we expect him to hand over such a sum, to be given to a person he's never heard of?"

"You can twist him round your finger if you try," muttered Crooke. "He trusts you. He doesn't think you're the kind of an ass to be done by any impostor,

either. It's a good story, about helping somebody who's down on his luck. He knows you're that kind of silly ass."

"Crooke!"

"I—I didn't mean that, Talbot. I mean— Look here. You must get the money from him somehow." Crooke's look was almost wild. "I tell you I can't stand the strain much longer. All the fellows know that there's something the matter. I tell you I'm in a mood to grab the money wherever I could lay hands on it, if I got a chance. If I'm going to be expelled I may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. I tell you I'm not going to be particular when it's a question of

if he had chosen. But he did not choose. Perhaps he wanted his cousin to be sacked from the school; perhaps he wanted to get shut of him. Crooke was no credit to him at St. Jim's, that was certain. And such a disgrace, such an irretrievable "mucker" would have been the finish for Crooke, so far as his expectations from Colonel Lyndon were concerned.

Well he knew the old colonel's rigid ideas. If Gerald was down in his will already he would be inexorably cut out of it. Colonel Lyndon would never leave his money to a nephew who had been expelled from school for gambling and disgraceful conduct. Perhaps that was what Talbot wanted; perhaps that was what he was playing for, and only pulling Crooke's leg all the time with pretended willingness to help him.

Such suspicions were natural enough to a mind like Crooke's. But in his present state of jumpy nerves and haunting terrors he was scarcely responsible for them or for anything else. Crooke was vicious, without having the courage of his vices. From sheer idle blackguardism he had plunged headlong into a scrape, under the stress of which his weak character simply crumpled up.

He knew that he had given himself away to all the fellows. Everybody in the Shell and the Fourth knew that he was up against it in some serious way. Even fags of the Third Form had stared at him and whispered—or he fancied they had. It seemed to the wretched junior that all eyes turned on him.

"I can't stand it!" he whispered to himself as Talbot disappeared in the distance with the chums of the Shell. "I can't! I'd rather be sacked at once and get it over. And he could help me out of it if he liked. He could pull that crusty old fool's leg if he wanted to and get anything from him. But he's too particular. A fellow who was a thief before he came here—hang him—too particular now! Hang him!"

That was Crooke's kind of gratitude, and all that Talbot had to expect from him.

But the spasm of anger passed, and Crooke leaned on the elm—limp, wretched, white, his weary eyes on the ground. He was worn out with fear and anxiety and apprehension. And it was still some time to Wednesday; and even it was only a chance, not a certainty. He gave a low groan of utter misery.

"Crooke!"

The Shell fellow started violently at Mr. Railton's voice.

He looked up, his pale face crimsoning under the Housemaster's searching gaze.

Mr. Railton was walking along the path, his footsteps silent on the fallen leaves. Crooke had not seen him or heard him until he spoke.

The School House master had observed him at a little distance as he came up the path and, with a rather grim brow, had noted the junior's limp attitude of utter dejection. More than once of late Mr. Railton had glanced very keenly at Crooke, as the wretched junior knew. Now he stopped to speak to him.

"What is the matter with you, Crooke?" asked the Housemaster quietly, his penetrating eyes on Crooke's face.

"Nothing, sir," stammered the Shell fellow.

"You seem to be in trouble."

"Oh, no, sir! Not at all, sir!"

"If you have any trouble, Crooke, in which your Housemaster's advice or counsel would help you, you have only to speak to me," said Mr. Railton kindly.

Crooke shivered. His trouble was assuredly not one that could be confided to a Housemaster.

"It—it's nothing, sir," he stammered.

"I cannot feel sure of that, Crooke," said Mr. Railton.

He sat down on the old bench under the leafless branches—the bench where Crooke had sat with Talbot the previous week—and signed to the junior to do the same. Gerald Crooke dropped limply upon the bench. He was "for it" now. He had half expected it. He knew that he had given himself away. Now he was going through a course of questioning, and his brain almost reeled at the prospect. How was he to satisfy the Housemaster and dissipate his half-formed suspicions?

(Continued on page 17.)

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# OF SCHOOL LIFE!

## ON THE RHYL!

George Alfred Grundy, in a skiff,  
Causes a great commotion;  
He treats the River Rhyll as if  
It were a spacious ocean.  
And therefore it is no surprise  
To find him in collision;  
Result—two beautiful black eyes  
To mar old Grundy's vision!

There's river-craft of every sort,  
Both clumsy boats and nimble;  
And everyone enjoys the sport,  
Save Grundy and poor Trimble!  
Those sorry wights are brought to shore  
By boathooks on the collars;  
And both are feeling sick and sore,  
And both are in the dolours!

When dusk descends, we all retire  
From river recreation;  
And seated round the study fire  
We talk with animation,  
Of jolly boating days gone by;  
Fond memories we recapture;  
"Row, brothers, row!"—that famous cry  
Rings in our ears with rapture!



saving my neck. I suppose you don't want your cousin to be sacked from St. Jim's as a thief? It may come to that if you don't help me."

Talbot breathed hard.

"I shall do my best," he said; "that's all I can do. But it's no good telling you to count on it, Crooke. I think there's a chance, but that's all there is."

Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther came along the path, and Talbot moved away and joined the Terrible Three.

Crooke leaned against the trunk of the elm, his face white, and his eyes followed Talbot with something like hatred in them.

Talbot was his only hope, and the hope was faint. Somehow or other the fellow could have got the money

**LOOK!**

# A COVENTRY READER WINS A HANDSOME "MEAD" BICYCLE COSTING £7 12s. 6d.

AND SIX OTHER READERS EACH WIN A TOPPING TABLE FOOTBALL GAME!

RESULT OF "BICYCLE" JOKE COMPETITION NO. 1.

## THIS WINS A BICYCLE!

### THE GREAT UNWASHED!

The hostess was trying to get someone to fill a vacancy in the entertainment, so she went up to Professor Squall and said: "Will you help us, professor? You have a good voice." "I am afraid not," he said. "I only sing when I'm in my bath." "Oh, never mind," was the reply, "I'll tell them you're a little out of practice!"—The Special Prize of a "Mead" Bicycle has been awarded to John E. Ashby, 62, Sackville Street, Coventry.

### THEN FATHER GOT CROSS!

"A black cat crossed my path, dad," said a boy to his father at the factory gates. "That's good!" said the father. "Black cats are lucky!" "This one was," said the youngster, with a smile; "he got away with your dinner!"—A topping football game has been awarded to E. W. Allen, 36, Saltwood Grove, Walworth, S.E.17.

### CORRECT!

At an examination at the village school the kiddies were being asked questions on Natural History. Following several other questions the inspector asked: "What bird is it that comes from Africa which has wings and yet can't fly?" The class was dumbfounded. Thinking to encourage them, the inspector offered sixpence to the little girl or boy who could tell him. Presently a little girl waved her hand excitedly. "Well, my dear," said the inspector, "what bird is it?" "Please, sir," answered the little mite, "a dead 'un!"—A topping football game has been awarded to Raymond Floyd, 10, Barber's Hill, Great Malvern, Worcestershire.

### ATE TOO LATE!

Lady (to waiter in station restaurant): "Did you say I had twenty minutes to wait, or that it was twenty minutes to eight?"

Waiter: "Sure, Oi said ye had twenty minutes to ate, an' that's all ye did have, an' yer train's jus' gone!"—A topping football game has been awarded to D. Mansfield, Neavelands, Margate Road, Herne Bay, Kent.

### WHAT'S IN A NAME?

A promising young student named Fiddle won his degree as a Doctor of Divinity. But, to the surprise of his many friends, he turned the degree down. At first he refused to state why, but on being repeatedly questioned he answered: "Well, it's bad enough being called Fiddle, without being called Fiddle, D.D."—A topping football game has been awarded to James Kay, 2, Canning Street, Glasgow, C.3.

ANOTHER VALUABLE "GO-ANYWHERE" MOUNT AWARDED NEXT WEEK, CHUMS!



### NO WONDER TOMMY LAUGHED!

Bumptious "self-made" man: "Well, Tommy, my lad, what do they teach you here?"

Nephew (at boarding school): "Latin and Greek, German and Algebra."

Bumptious Man: "Dear me! What's the Algebra for turnip?"—A topping football game has been awarded to Miss E. A. Sealey, 12, Chichester Road, South Shields, County Durham.

### A HOT MEAL!

The fire had been burning furiously, and the fire-brigade were striving very hard to put it out. The crowd watching had to move back because of the great heat. At last a man entered the burning building unconcernedly, and gradually the fire sank lower, until finally it was out. A stranger watching the fire questioned the man next to him. "Who is that man?" he asked. "Oh," replied the one addressed, "that's Bimbo, the fire-eater, and that's the first square meal he's had for a long time!"—A topping football game has been awarded to Sydney F. Bean, 14, Church Street, Drypool, Hall.

## RESULT OF

# "BICYCLE" JOKE COMPETITION NO. 2

NEXT WEEK!



## THE BLACK SHEEP OF ST. JIM'S!

(Continued from  
page 15.)

"Come, my boy," said Mr. Railton very kindly. "It is clear to me that you are in some sort of trouble. Tell me what it is, and if it is in my power I will help you."

"Oh, no, sir!" stammered Crooke.

"If you have broken some rule of the school, Crooke, it may be a matter of punishment, but confession is the easiest way out," said the Housemaster.

"I—I haven't, sir."

"I have had occasion to punish you, Crooke, for smoking in your study—"

"I—I've given it up, sir—after you caned me."

"But this would seem a more serious matter, judging by your looks," said Mr. Railton. "Come, come! You had better speak out."

Crooke's heart almost failed him.

It was useless to tell his Housemaster that there was nothing the matter, when Mr. Railton obviously knew that there was. He had to make some explanation. Not the true one! Anything but the true one! Mr. Railton was the man to help any thoughtless or careless fellow who had got himself into a scrape, and to take a very lenient view. But he was the man to be hard as nails in dealing with a young rascal who had disgraced himself and his school. If Mr. Railton learned the actual facts, what Crooke had to look for was an immediate interview with the headmaster, to be followed by the clang of the school gates closing behind him. But he had to tell the Housemaster something.

"It is not a matter of money, I presume?" said Mr. Railton, with a slight smile. "You have more of that than you need. In fact, I have had to speak to your father on that subject."

Crooke felt a throb of hatred. So that was partly the reason why his pater had refused to shell out once more. The Housemaster had told him that Crooke had too much pocket-money for his good!

But Mr. Railton's words gave Crooke a clue.

"Yes, sir," he stammered. "The—the fact is, I—I've spent rather too much lately, and—Mrs. Taggles at the tuckshop, sir, is rather dunning me for my account. It worries me rather, sir. I—I knew I shouldn't have run it up as I did, but I thought I was getting a remittance from my—my father, and—and I'm rather stranded, sir. I—I think Mrs. Taggles is going to complain to you, sir, if I don't pay her."

So much was true. Crooke had left his account at the school shop unpaid, and Dame Taggles had certainly reminded him more than once that the money was due. But most assuredly that little matter had not worried Crooke very much.

Mr. Railton smiled. He was relieved to hear that the matter was no worse.

"It was thoughtless, Crooke, but it is no crime," he said. "I am glad you have told me. How much do you owe Mrs. Taggles?"

"It—it's rather a lot, sir," faltered Crooke. "Two pounds, sir."

"That is a very great deal for a junior boy, Crooke," said the Housemaster gravely.

"I—I know, sir," mumbled Crooke. "It's worried me frightfully, sir, now—now my father won't give me anything over my allowance, sir."

Mr. Railton pursed his lips.

From a Housemaster's point of view it was a serious matter for a junior schoolboy to run up a bill he could not pay. But, knowing Crooke as he did, Mr. Railton had feared that the matter was very much worse than that. On the whole, he was relieved and pleased.

"You must be more careful in the future, Crooke," he said. "The fact is you have had more pocket-money

than was good for you, and you have become careless and extravagant. No doubt you will be a rich man some day, but you must learn the value of money. Wealth is of very little use to a man who expends it carelessly."

"Yes, sir," said Crooke meekly.

"This little matter must be settled at once," went on Mr. Railton. "I will myself advance you the money to pay Mrs. Taggles, Crooke, and you shall return it to me from your allowance."

"Oh, sir!" gasped Crooke.

Mr. Railton took a pocket-book from his pocket and extracted from it two pound notes. These he passed to Crooke, and then he rose from the bench.

"Go to the shop and pay your debt at once, Crooke," he said, and with that the Housemaster walked away towards the School House. It was time for him to be in the Sixth Form-room.

Crooke sat with the two currency notes in his hand, a bitter smile on his face.

He did not care twopence whether he paid Mrs. Taggles or not. It was his debt to Mr. Lodgey that was tormenting him. But at least he had satisfied the Housemaster and staved off inquiry. Still, he had to carry out Mr. Railton's instructions. It was quite likely that Mr. Railton would inquire whether his account at the school shop had been settled. Crooke rose from the seat at last, and as he did so a gleam of steel in the dead leaves that lay thick by the seat caught his eye.

It was a little steel key that lay there.

Crooke picked it up, thinking for the moment that it must be one of his own keys that he had dropped.

He realised the next moment that it must belong to Mr. Railton. The Housemaster had dropped it, without noticing it, in taking out his pocket-book. The key had made no sound, falling on the dead leaves, and Mr. Railton had set his foot on it in rising, as the imprint on the leaves showed.

Crooke stood with the little key in his hand, staring at it.

He knew that key. He had seen Mr. Railton open the desk in his study with it—the desk in which he kept the House money. Twice or thrice Crooke had seen that desk opened and had had a glimpse of little shelves and compartments inside, with little bundles of notes in elastic bands.

Crooke's throat felt dry, he scarcely breathed. He gazed at the key as if it fascinated him. He started at last, glancing round him uneasily, fearful lest a chance look should read the terrifying thought that had risen in his mind.

He drove that thought away. He dropped the key into an inside pocket. He could not return it to Mr. Railton now—the Housemaster was already out of sight. He told himself that he would return it to him later. A shout reached Crooke from the distance.

"Time!" shouted Tom Merry. "Can't you hear the bell?"

It was time for third lesson in the Shell room.

Crooke did not heed. The St. Jim's fellows were going to the Form-rooms; Crooke walked away to the school shop in the corner behind the elms. There he surprised Dame Taggles by paying his account. After that he walked across to the School House and went to the Shell-room, where he arrived several minutes late, and was transfixed by a stern glare from Mr. Linton.

"Crooke, you are late for class!"

"Sorry, sir! I—"

"You have been extremely unsatisfactory of late, Crooke—unsatisfactory and disrespectful! Now you are late for class. I—"

"If you please, sir, Mr. Railton told me to go to the school shop and pay my account there," said Crooke meekly. "He said I was to do so at once."

"Oh! Very well, if you have been acting on Mr. Railton's instructions," said the master of the Shell, "you may go to your place, Crooke."

"Thank you, sir!"

Aubrey Racke glanced at him as he sat down—so did Clampe and Scrope. If Crooke was in funds again his old pals were quite willing to take him up once more and let bygones be bygones. They did not want to be

burdened with a lame duck and bothered by a fellow with a tale of trouble and a desire to borrow money. But old Gerald in funds was quite a different fellow.

When the Shell were dismissed Clampe joined Crooke as the juniors came out with quite a friendly air.

"Come on, old bean!" he said amicably.

"Go and eat coke!" retorted Crooke.

And he tramped away by himself, leaving Leslie Clampe staring. His fair-weather friends were of no use to Gerald Crooke—not at present, at all events.

## CHAPTER 8.

### The End of His Tether!

"I'VE a jolly good mind—"

Tom Merry paused and half-smiled.

It was Tuesday, and Talbot and the captain of the Shell were walking towards the school after a stroll following dinner. Tom Merry had been talking about the Grammar School match, which was to take place on the morrow. He had finally decided to put a New House man into the junior school team in Talbot's place—Owen of the Fourth. That decision was greeted by the New House juniors as a judgment worthy of Solomon at his very best, and considerably enhanced Tom's merits as junior football captain in their eyes. In the School House there were shakings of heads over it. Indeed, in Study No. 6 it was remarked upon as a symptom of softening of the brain—the opinion of Study No. 6 being that a member of that famous study could have filled the vacant place remarkably well. Blake and D'Arcy were already down to play, but Blake asked emphatically what was the matter with Herries and Dig? To which Herries and Dig rejoined, "What indeed?"

New House praise and School House blame both passed the junior football captain by like the idle wind which he regarded not. Tom had picked out what he considered the best man to replace Talbot, and that was enough. But he was extremely discomfited at losing Talbot from the team all the same, and disinclined to bless Colonel Lyndon for choosing that particular half-holiday for visiting his nephews at St. Jim's. However, that could not be helped, and Tom, during that after-dinner stroll, had talked rather at length on the subject of the match and on the form Owen of the Fourth had lately shown in games practice and in the late House match, only to discover at length that Talbot was not listening.

Talbot was deep in thought and he had allowed his mind to wander. The nearer his uncle's visit came the more it troubled him. Tom Merry ceased to speak, and then Talbot looked up rather guiltily.

"I—I beg your pardon, Tom! I—I— What did you say?"

"Never mind," said Tom, laughing. "Only football jaw, old chap. But I've a good mind—a jolly good mind—to punch Crooke's head."

"Why Crooke's?" asked Talbot, with a smile.

"Oh, you're an ass!" said Tom. "You've been in the bluest blues for a week now, looking as if you had the Old Man of the Sea on your shoulders, like jolly old Sindbad the Sailor. So you have, in a way—and the name of your Old Man of the Sea is Crooke, isn't it?"

Talbot coloured and did not reply.

"All the House knows he's gone in over his depth in some of his blackguardly games," said Tom. "And I can see jolly well that he's dragged you into it."

"Not exactly, Tom. But—"

"That's what you've got on your mind!" growled Tom Merry. "It's too thick, really, Talbot! The fellow's no friend of yours!"

"He's in rather deep water, Tom."

"No reason why you should go in for him," said Tom. "If a fellow takes the plunge he must sink or swim on his own."

"You wouldn't think so if you saw him out of his depth in the river, old chap," said Talbot, smiling. "You'd go in without stopping to think that he was no friend of yours."

"Well, that's different," said Tom. "The giddy simile

doesn't hold. He's deep in some disgraceful affair—not in the river—and you can't go into his blackguardly affairs to pull him out. Can't touch pitch without being defiled. I don't like seeing you down in the mouth like this, Talbot."

"I never meant—"

"You never meant to let it be seen, I know. But I can see it, and the reason for it," said Tom crossly. "I think it's like Crooke's cheek to bother you, and I've a jolly good mind to punch his head. Still, I suppose it's no bizney of mine. Bless Crooke!"

"About the football," said Talbot. "You're playing Owen of the New House—what?"

Tom laughed.

"I've been speaking about that for ten minutes, and your giddy mind was wandering somewhere else," he said.

Talbot coloured deeply.

"I'm sorry, Tom! It's too bad. I—I was really thinking about my uncle coming to the school to-morrow."

"No worry in that, is there?" asked Tom. "Only it keeps you away from the football match. By the way, Gussy's told me he's scratching the match to-morrow, to see you through with your uncle."

"Dear old Gussy!" said Talbot, with a smile. "Don't let him scratch, by any means. Tell him he can't be spared."

"Right-ho!" said Tom, laughing.

"Hallo! Talk of angels!" he went on the next moment. "There's your precious cousin. Know that man with him? That's Lodgey, of the Green Man! Crooke must be a reckless fool to meet him so near the school."

Through a gap in the hedge by the lane Gerald Crooke had come into view.

He was standing under a tree not a dozen yards away, in talk with a squat, red-faced man in horsey-looking clothes, with a bowler hat on the side of his head.

Talbot breathed quickly.

He knew Bill Lodgey by sight. He knew, too, what Tom did not know, that Crooke had not met the man willingly. In his most reckless moments Crooke would not have risked being seen with Lodgey so near the school if he could have helped it. He could not help it, that was certain—and, indeed, his white, scared face showed as much.

Tom's lip curled as he looked at him.

Crooke's manner was that of a frightened rat; Lodgey's that of a menacing bully. The sharper was making a threatening gesture, and his beery face was purple with ill-temper.

"Come on!" muttered Talbot.

"The silly ass!" said Tom, as they walked on, and the hedge hid Crooke and his companion from their sight. "A master or a prefect might come along and see them. Crooke seems to be asking for the sack."

Talbot did not answer, and they walked on to the school in silence. There Tom went to join Manners and Lowther, and Talbot remained near the gates, waiting for Crooke to come in.

The look on his cousin's face as he stood talking with the sharper had moved Talbot strangely. He was himself incapable of fear, and it was difficult for him to understand a fellow being frightened. But if he could not understand Crooke's miserable fear and dismay, at least he could feel for the wretched fellow. Crooke had been taking a bullying from the ruffian under whose grimy thumb he was—listening to angry abuse, and murmuring abject apologies and excuses, deprecating the wrath of that beery rascal, whom a decent fellow would hardly have deigned to kick. And the white, strained look on the wretched Shell fellow's face showed, to Talbot's keen eyes, how near he was to the end of his tether. Crooke was not built to stand such a strain as was now placed on him.

Crooke came in at last, looking so wretched and downcast that even Taggles, the porter, stared at him curiously. He gave Talbot a dull look as he joined him.

"Pull yourself together, old man," whispered Talbot. "You'll know the worst to-morrow, anyhow. Keep a stiff upper lip till then."



Crooke rose from the seat at last; and as he did so, a gleam of steel in the dead leaves that lay thick by the seat, caught his eye. It was a little steel key that lay there, and Crooke realised, with a peculiar thrill, that it was the key to Mr. Railton's cash desk! (See Chapter 7.)

Crooke laughed mirthlessly.

"To-morrow! That may be too late," he muttered. "I—I've seen Lodgey. The brute came up to me; he didn't care if all St. Jim's saw him speaking to me. He's got the upper hand now, hang him! He says he can't wait—he's being dunned for money. And I believe that's true, too; I know he's had bad luck lately. I—I believe he was coming to the school to-day, only I've staved him off once more. I've promised him the money definitely for to-morrow. If uncle doesn't shell out, I'm a goner. I—I don't know how I can stand it till to-morrow, either."

"Keep your nerve, at any rate," urged Talbot. "No good can be done by knuckling under."

"He was coming to the school—he said he was," muttered Crooke, with dry lips. "I tell you, if he drinks a little too much this evening he's quite capable of coming up to see the Head. I wouldn't care if it was only his word—Dr. Holmes wouldn't take that scoundrel's word against a St. Jim's man. But he's got my paper—he's got my signature. If he loses patience, and comes to see the Head, I'm ruined. Whether he gets his money from my people or not, I'm ruined. Oh, what a fool I've been!"

He broke off.

"There's the bell for classes," said Talbot.

"Hang classes! Look here, Talbot!" Crooke stopped and faced his cousin. "What chance do you think

there is? Do you think really you can get the money from Uncle Lyndon?"

"I'm going to try hard."

"But you don't think you'll succeed?"

Talbot was silent.

"You don't!" said Crooke. "I—I believe you'll try, but you won't succeed. If the old fool was going to shell out, he would have sent you the money—you told him it was urgent. He's coming to jaw, that's all—to ask questions, and give you the money if you can give him a good explanation why you want it. That's it—don't you think so? And you can't!"

Talbot nodded silently. Crooke had, in fact, read his thoughts. There was a chance that Colonel Lyndon might give him the sum he had asked for, but without an adequate explanation as to why it was wanted the chance was slim. Crooke had barred off the sharper by making him a definite promise, but there was only a very slim chance that he would be able to keep the promise if it depended on Talbot's luck with Colonel Lyndon.

"That does it!" muttered Crooke. "There are other ways—other ways. A fellow can't be particular when he's up against it like I am. If I'm going to be bunked, I'm not going to be particular."

"What do you mean, Crooke? What—"

Crooke laughed harshly. In his pocket, his hand

was closing almost convulsively on a little steel key hidden there.

"Never mind what I mean. No bizney of yours. You can't help me, can you? Leave me alone."

Crooke hurried into the School House.

Talbot followed him more slowly, deeply troubled in mind. In the Form-room passage, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy stopped Talbot.

"Old bean, I'm in wathah a difficult posish," he began.

"Eh?"

"I was goin' to cut the footah to-morrow, you know, to see you through with your cwustay old welayon—"

"Oh!"

"But Tom Mewwy says I can't be spared frowm the eleven," said Arthur Augustus. "He says he has lost his best man, and cannot afford to lose the next best as well. It is vewy flatterwin', you know, but it's doocid awkward, too, isn't it?"

Talbot smiled faintly.

"It's all serene, Gussy; you stick to the football," he said. "You can't let the side down, you know."

"Yas, but—"

"Can't spare you, old man," said Tom Merry, coming along the Form-room passage with Manners and Lowther. "We're depending on you for a dozen goals at least."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"You simply must play, Gussy," said Monty Lowther. "We want to give the Grammar School chaps a chance, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wogard that wemark as asinine, Lowthah. But if you weally think that the game will be a gonah without me, Tom Mewwy—"

"Going—going—gone!" said Monty solemnly.

"An absolute fizzle," said Tom Merry. "Without you in the ranks, Gussy, we may as well shut up shop at once."

"Bai Jove! You weally think so, Tom Mewwy?"

"Sure!" said Lowther. "You see, we rely on you to put the wind up the other side, Gussy. Your face—"

"What?"

"Your features, you know, will shake their nerve, to begin with—"

"You uttah ass!" roared Arthur Augustus.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you weally think you cannot spare me, Tom Mewwy—"

"Couldn't think of it," assured Tom.

"But I have promised Talbot, you see—"

"I'll let you off, old fellow," said Talbot, with a smile. And he went into the Form-room.

The smile faded from his face as he passed Crooke at his desk. The look on his cousin's face startled him. What desperate thought was working in the goaded junior's mind?

"Crooke!" whispered Talbot.

"Leave me alone."

"But—"

"Leave me alone, I tell you!"

Mr. Linton came into the Form-room, and Talbot went to his place.

When classes were over he would have joined his cousin, but Crooke avoided him.

Talbot did not see him again till the Shell went to their dormitory that night, and then Crooke did not glance at him, did not seem conscious of him. Crooke's hope in Talbot's help seemed to have faded away. The chance, such as it was, could not sustain his hope. The meeting with Lodgey that day had given the finishing touch to Crooke's terrors. Desperate thoughts were in his mind now, thoughts that kept him wakeful long after the rest of the Shell had gone to sleep.

## CHAPTER 9.

### A Terrible Temptation!

"SURE it's all wight?"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy asked that question anxiously the following afternoon as the St. Jim's footballers were mounting into their brake for the drive over to the Grammar School.

Tom Merry & Co. were already in the vehicle, and Talbot of the Shell was seeing them off. Gussy lingered to speak a last word to the Shell fellow, with misgiving in his noble countenance.

"Right as rain!" said Talbot, smiling.

"Come on, Gussy!" bawled Blake.

"Weally, Blake—"

"Do you want us to start without you, fathead?" inquired Monty Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Leave him behind," suggested Figgins of the Fourth. "Play another New House man instead, Tom Merry. Why shouldn't we win the match if we can?"

"You uttah ass, Figgins!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus.

"I can recommend two or three New House men," went on Figgins cheerily. "Any one of them miles ahead of School House form."

"Bow-wow!" said Blake.

Tom Merry laughed.

"I think we'll stick to Gussy," he said. "If he doesn't get into the brake, will you pick him up and pitch him in, Talbot? Never mind if you damage him."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Good-bye, old chap!" said Talbot, laughing.

"Wight-ho! But just a last word of advice, you know," said D'Arcy. "You can rely on the advice of a fellow of tact and judgment, old bean. When your uncle comes, give him the glad hand and let him wip. Give him his head, you know. These old johnnies like to hear the sound of their own voices. I've got a wathah watty uncle into a good tempah simply by lettin' him talk and listenin' with vewy gweat attention. They like it, you know. Wemembah that."

"I'll remember," promised Talbot.

And Arthur Augustus followed his comrades into the brake at last, rather to Talbot's relief. He would not have hurt the noble feelings of Gussy for worlds or whole universes, but the idea of Gussy on the spot while he was dealing with Colonel Lyndon was quite dismaying. Gussy entered the brake, and was about to sit down when Crooke came out of the House.

Gussy's eyeglass turned on the pasty, clouded face of the black sheep of the Shell.

"Hold on a minute, you fellows," he said.

"My hat! What is it now?" asked Kerr.

"I want to speak to Cwooke."

"Great pip! Do you want to hold a conversation with everybody at St. Jim's before we start?" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Wats! Cwooke, deah boy!" shouted Arthur Augustus.

Gerald Crooke stared round, and then came over towards the crowded brake. D'Arcy smiled down at him genially.

"Like to come ovah to the Gwammah School with us, Cwooke?" he asked. "We'll find you a seat in the bwake."

"What rot! No."

"I was thinkin' that it would do you good, Cwooke," explained Arthur Augustus. "It's a vewy fine aftahnoon, and you could stand wound and cheerah while we get the goals, you know, an' get some fwesh air and a little exahcise. Evah so much bettah for you than

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wottin' aound in your usual style, or sneakin' in at the back door of the Gween Man to play billiards."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly idiot!" roared Crooke.

"Weally, Cwooke—"

"Go and eat coke, you dummy!"

"But I am quite sewious, Cwooke," said Arthur Augustus. "You are vewy unpleasant company, of course, but I would be willin' to stand you for a little while, you know, for your own good."

"You silly chump!"

"Fathead!" said Tom Merry. "Crooke's uncle is coming down to the school this afternoon. He can't go out of gates."

"Bai Jove! I had forgotten that old Talbot's uncle was Cwooke's uncle, too. But I suppose Colonel Lyndon does not want to see you, does he, Cwooke?"

"Mind your own bizney."

"Weally, you cheeky ass, I was only askin' a civil question," said Arthur Augustus warmly. "I wegard you as a wude wottah, Cwooke. Don't start the bwake yet, Tom Mewwy. I am goin' to get down and give Cwooke a feahful thwashin' before we go, for his wotten cheek."

But the brake started, and Arthur Augustus was carried off without administering that deserved punishment to Crooke of the Shell.

Crooke stared sullenly after the brake and turned away, driving his hands deep into his pockets. Talbot joined him.

"Colonel Lyndon will be here about four," he said. "Are you going to see him when he comes?"

Crooke sneered.

"Does he want to see me? No, I shan't see him. Anyhow, I should be in the way while you're talking to him. Not that your talking to him will be any good."

"You will see him before he goes, anyhow?" asked Talbot. "He will expect it, Crooke."

"Let him!" grunted Crooke.

Mr. Railton came out of the School House, and Crooke's eyes fixed on him with a strange expression.

The Housemaster walked away in the direction of the garage.

Crooke's eyes followed him with that strangely fixed expression. It was a half-holiday for the Housemaster as well as for the St. Jim's fellows, and apparently Mr. Railton was going to take a run in his car.

Crooke felt his heart beat faster.

It seemed as if Fate was playing into his hand. In his pocket his nervous fingers closed on the steel key. So far there had been no inquiry about the missing key. Obviously, the Housemaster had not yet needed to open the desk and had not missed the key he had dropped under the elms. It was still in Crooke's pocket. And now—now, on a half-holiday, when St. Jim's was half deserted and Crooke was at liberty—Mr. Railton was going out for the afternoon. Before Crooke's eyes there danced a vision of the little packets of currency notes he had seen in Mr. Railton's desk when once that desk had been open in his presence. Enough—more than enough—two or three times enough to see him through, very likely. And he had the key and the coast would be clear.

Gerald Crooke was scarcely himself now. Blackguard as he was, in his normal state he would have shrunk with horror from the bare thought of theft. But terror and anxiety, endless apprehension and worry, had worn down his nerves till he was no longer fully responsible for what he thought and did. Every hour, every minute, he dreaded to see the evil, threatening face of Bill Lodgey at the school gates. And then the crash would come. Anything—anything rather than that!

"What are you thinking of, Crooke?" asked Talbot, alarmed by the strange look on his cousin's face.

Crooke started violently.

Immersed in his black thoughts, he had forgotten that Talbot was at his side. He gave his cousin a savage look.

"No business of yours!" he snarled.

Talbot bit his lip hard.

"Railton's going out, it seems," muttered Crooke.

"He is going to pick up Colonel Lyndon at Wayland in the car," said Talbot. "They will get here together."

Crooke laughed—a strange, jarring laugh.

"You staying in?" he asked.

"I'm going for a stroll to fill in time till the colonel comes," said Talbot. "Like to come with me?"

"No."

"Very well," said Talbot quietly.

Certainly he did not want Crooke's company. But in his cousin's present strange mood Talbot would have been glad to keep him under his eye. Crooke perplexed him and alarmed him a little. But after that savage negative there was nothing more to be said, and Talbot left the black sheep of the Shell. A few minutes later Crooke watched Mr. Railton driving his car away, and a few minutes after that he saw Talbot going out in coat and hat.

Crooke went into the House.

His heart was beating painfully.

His hand, in his pocket, held the steel key. It seemed almost to burn his fingers. That way lay safety; at least, it seemed so to the wretched, tormented fellow who was paying so terrible a price for his wrongdoing. Who could know?

The Housemaster did not even know that he had lost his key. Had he known, inquiry would have been made for it as a matter of course. No inquiry had been made.

To slip into the vacant study, to unlock the desk, to take what he needed, was the work of a few minutes. Where there is no sense of honour it is opportunity that makes the thief, and Crooke's sense of honour, such as it was, had yielded wholly to his terrors.

Who could know?

He would leave the key in Mr. Railton's study. He would drop it into a pocket of the old Norfolk jacket which he knew hung there—the old jacket Mr. Railton sometimes slipped on in the evening when he was at work in his study. When it was searched for it would

be found there. Who could say, who could guess, that it had even been in any other hands? When the money was missed it would be an utter mystery how it had been taken. Certainly not the slightest suspicion could be attached to Crooke. At least, so it seemed to him, thinking it over feverishly.

If the worst came to the worst, it was only the sack. They would never prosecute a St. Jim's boy. And it was the sack anyhow if he did not save himself.

Only in the extreme of desperation could such terrible thoughts have passed through Crooke's mind. He was not in a state to realise what he was contemplating in its full iniquity.

"Crooke!"

Like a fellow in a dream, Crooke heard his Form master's voice. He turned round to Mr. Linton.

"Have you written out your lines, Crooke?"

Crooke had forgotten that he had lines. He almost laughed. Lines—had he written his lines? Lines, when he was thinking of an action that would cut him off for ever from all decent fellows!

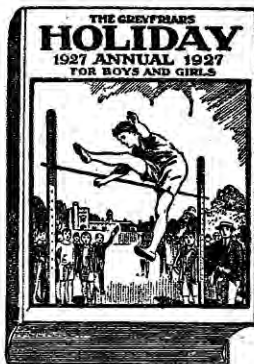
"Do you hear me, Crooke?" snapped Mr. Linton.

"I—I haven't done them, sir."

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"I understand that your uncle is coming to the school this afternoon, Crooke?"

"Yes, sir," said Crooke dully.

"You will go into the Form-room at once and write out your lines before Colonel Lyndon comes," said the master of the *Shall* severely. "I am going out now, Crooke, and I shall expect to find your imposition finished when I return."

"Very well, sir."

Crooke smiled grimly as he went to the Form-room. So Mr. Linton was going out that afternoon also? Certainly Fate was playing into his hands!

Crooke went to the Form-room. Still like one in a dream, he sat at his desk and began to write lines from the *Æneid*. He was scarcely conscious of what he did; only from habit the lines ran from his pen. Subconsciously, for he was incapable now of consecutive thought, he realised that he had better get his lines done as a proof, if needed, that he had been busily occupied that afternoon. The Latin flowed from his pen with facility, but Crooke could hardly have told what he was writing. He laughed two or three times as he sat writing, and any fellow who had looked into the Form-room would have supposed that the junior under detention was in remarkably good spirits. The lines were finished, and Crooke picked up the sheets, left the Form-room, and proceeded to the masters' passage to lay the *impost* on Mr. Linton's table, as was usual when the Form-master was out. Again subconsciously, he realised that this was a good pretext for being near Mr. Railton's study if he happened to be seen.

He entered Mr. Linton's room and laid the finished *impost* on the table there.

When he came out he paused in the masters' passage.

On that fine, sunny half-holiday the school seemed deserted.

A crowd of juniors had gone over to the Grammar School with Tom Merry and his team. On Big Side Kildare and the senior team were playing a visiting eleven from Abbotsford. Mr. Railton was out in his car. Mr. Linton had, as Crooke knew, gone for a walk. He could hear a sound or two in Mr. Selby's study, but the door was shut. From a window in the passage he could see Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth, strolling in the quadrangle with Monsieur Moray, the French master. There was no eye to see Crooke. Never could an opportunity have been more favourable. No eye fell upon him as he stood lingering and loitering in the corridor; no eye was upon him as, on tiptoe, with white, scared face and thumping heart, he crept into the Housemaster's study.

## CHAPTER 10.

### The Way of the Transgressor!

"GERALD!"

Crooke's heart gave a fearful bound.

For a second everything seemed to be swimming round him.

It was done—done, past undoing. All had been easy—ridiculously easy. The little steel key had turned without a sound in the lock of the Housemaster's desk. The House funds lay at the mercy of Crooke's trembling fingers. He had taken what he needed—exactly fifty pounds. Somehow or other it seemed to the wretched pilferer a shade less dishonest to take only the exact sum he required to save him. There was much more that he could have taken had he been a thief. It was a miserable subterfuge, but it helped to deaden his conscience a little. Exactly fifty pounds in currency notes, neatly secured in elastic bands.

Crooke slipped them into his pocket—an inside pocket—and locked the desk again. Then he looked round the study. There was the old Norfolk jacket hanging on its peg, as he had seen it a score of times. He fumbled over it and slipped the key into a pocket. It was done, and he was clear now. He crept with trembling footsteps to the door of the study and listened. All that remained now was to go, to creep away as stealthily as he had come—unseen, unheard, unsuspected. Then a rapid rush on his bicycle and a brief interview with Lodgey, and all was safe—safe.

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He stood at the study door and listened, to make sure—absolutely sure—that the corridor was clear before he ventured out of the study. And then, with sickening fear at his heart, he heard a footstep in the passage. Was it Mr. Railton returning to find him still in the study? That heavy, steady, tramping footstep seemed familiar somehow, but it was not Mr. Railton's step; and Crooke, in relief, waited for it to pass the door and die away. But it did not pass; it stopped at the door. The handle turned and the door opened, almost striking Crooke as he stood there. A tall, soldierly figure stood in the doorway; a rather grim-featured, bronzed face looked at him; a deep voice, in a tone of surprise, pronounced his name. The room swam round the wretched junior as he stood and stared stupidly at Colonel Lyndon.

His uncle!

Colonel Lyndon had arrived, then. Mr. Railton was not to be seen. And what in the name of all that was horrible had brought the colonel at once to the Housemaster's study? Crooke stood and stared at the tall, bronzed gentleman with difficulty. The wad of currency notes hidden in his pocket seemed to be burning his skin. It seemed to him in those awful moments that the colonel's clear, steady eyes could see the stolen money, see it and recognise it as stolen, through the jacket. Crooke put his hand on the door as he felt his legs giving way beneath him.

"Gerald!"

The colonel looked at him in amazement.

He had arrived at St. Jim's in Mr. Railton's car, and had walked to the School House while Mr. Railton was putting up the car. The two were old comrades of the War—long ago they had stood together in danger in the days when death stalked in the stricken fields of Flanders. Colonel Lyndon had come directly to his old friend's study, to be rejoined there in a few minutes by Victor Railton. He intended to smoke a cigar with his old comrade before seeing his nephew, and he intended, also, to ask the Housemaster a few questions concerning Talbot. For great as was his trust in Talbot, the junior's request for such a sum as fifty pounds had startled him and made him uneasy. He had not been thinking of his other nephew, though he had intended to see Crooke, as a matter of duty, before leaving the school. He was surprised to find Crooke in the Housemaster's study, and utterly amazed by the junior's consternation and terror.

"Gerald!" he repeated.

Crooke did not answer—he could not.

If only it had not been too late; if only he could have replaced what he had taken; if only he had not made himself a thief—that was hammering in Crooke's tormented mind. Too late—too late! And in his terror, in the utter failure of his nerve, it seemed to the poor wretch that his uncle knew—that the colonel's clear eyes read him through, and penetrated to the wad of stolen notes hidden in his pocket.

"What are you doing here, Gerald, in your Housemaster's study in his absence?"

Crooke muttered something, he knew not what, incoherently.

Colonel Lyndon stepped into the room, his face growing very stern. Crooke's knees knocked together.

"Pull yourself together, boy!" snapped the colonel, with a tone of scorn in his voice. "I am your uncle, not your headmaster; it is no concern of mine if you have been playing some foolish trick."

Crooke's brain seemed to clear a little.

"A—a—a trick!" he stammered.

Of course, what was the colonel to suppose? Some trick—some jape such as a junior schoolboy might play on an absent master? It was natural for the colonel to think so, finding Crooke in the study, and seeing his terror at being discovered. Crooke breathed more freely.

"Well?" rapped out the colonel.

"I—I—I—"

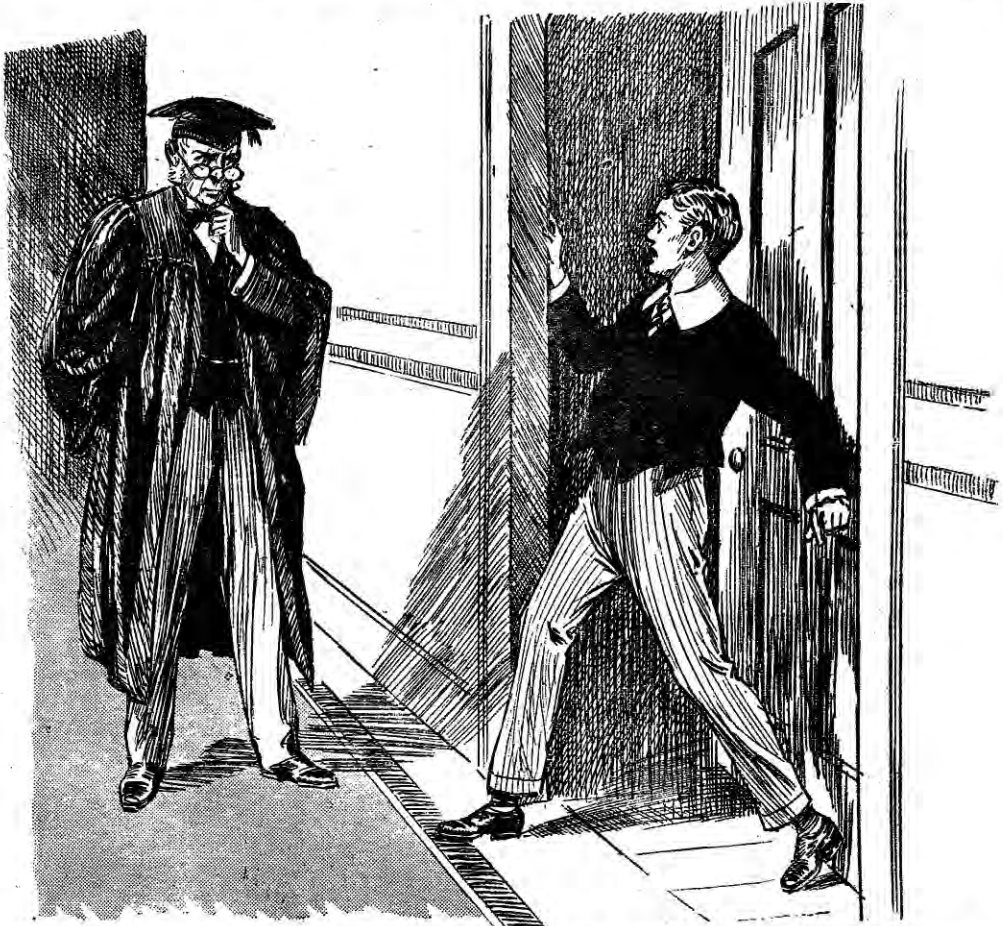
"What have you been doing?"

"Nothing."

"You did not come here for nothing, I suppose?" said Colonel Lyndon sharply.

"N-no!" stammered Crooke. "I—I— The—the fact is, uncle—"

"Well?"



Crooke tip-toed to the Form-room door, opened it silently and peered out. He started back at the sight of Mr. Linton coming up the passage. The Form master's eyes glinted at Crooke's dismayed face. "You were about to leave the Form-room, Crooke?" "N-n-no!" gasped Crooke. "I—I—" "Go back to your desk at once!" thundered Mr. Linton. (See Chapter 10.)

"I—I came—"

"To play some disrespectful trick on your House-master during his absence—what?" rapped out Colonel Lyndon.

He had supplied the way of escape that Crooke was in no state to have thought of for himself.

"I—I never meant any harm, uncle," stammered Crooke, pulling himself together more and more.

"Mr. Railton is not a master to be treated with disrespect, Gerald," said the colonel, frowning.

"I—I know, uncle. But—but there's no harm—" Crooke tried to think out a plausible falsehood. If only he could satisfy the colonel and escape before Mr. Railton appeared!

"Well?" repeated the colonel.

"I—I was only going to—to—to put gum in the inkpot, uncle. There's no harm in—in a jape—" "You young donkey!"

"I—I never meant—" stammered Crooke. "It—it was only a joke. And—and I haven't done it, uncle. I've done nothing. You—you won't tell Mr. Railton that you saw me here?"

Grunt, from the colonel.

"It is not my business to report you to your House-master, Gerald," he said. "But let there be no more of this. Mr. Railton is a gentleman whom I respect highly, and my nephew must not treat him with dis-

respect, by Jove! You had better clear off before Mr. Railton comes in."

"Yes, uncle," gasped Crooke.

Only too gladly he edged out of the study.

"Tell your cousin that I am here," added the colonel. "I will come up to his study presently to speak to him."

"Yes, uncle."

"I wish to speak to you, too, Gerald, before I go. You will be staying within gates, I suppose?"

"If—if you want me."

"Very well, then."

Colonel Lyndon made a gesture of dismissal, and Crooke hurried away down the corridor.

His uncle suspected nothing. It had only been Crooke's abject terror that had made him suppose that the colonel could possibly suspect anything. The meeting was unfortunate; but it was fortunate—very fortunate indeed—that it had been the colonel and not Mr. Railton who had found him there. The colonel would be gone from St. Jim's in an hour or two, and he would not mention that he had seen his nephew there. All was safe—safe! Crooke hurried out into the quadrangle, and came on Talbot of the Shell. He gave Talbot a sardonic grin.

"Dear uncle's come!" he said.

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"I know," said Talbot quietly. "I saw the car. You've seen him?"

"Oh, yes," said Crooke. "He's going to jaw to Railton now, and then he's coming up to your study. I wish you joy of him."

The sneer faded from his face and he turned white, as Mr. Railton passed, going into the School House. Talbot looked at him uneasily. He could not understand Crooke that afternoon.

"You're not going out?" he asked, as Crooke turned away.

"I'm going for a spin on my bike."

"But Uncle Lyndon—"

"Hang him! I—I mean, you needn't mention that I've gone out. I shall be back in time to see him before he goes."

"It would be better not to go out," said Talbot uneasily.

"Oh, rot!"

The wad of currency notes in his pocket weighed on Crooke. He was anxious, feverishly anxious, to be rid of them. Once they were handed over to Lodgey—once he had received back his tell-tale paper and burned it—he would feel a new man. He was in a fever to be rid of the stolen notes.

He was hurrying away from Talbot when Mr. Linton came up from the gates. The master of the Shell called to Crooke at once.

"Crooke!"

Crooke stopped and gritted his teeth. With an effort he answered the Form master respectfully.

"Yes, sir."

"Have you written out your lines, Crooke?"

"Yes, sir, and taken them to your study."

"Very good. Come with me, Crooke."

"I—I was just going out, sir—"

"I shall not prevent your going, Crooke, if your imposition has been satisfactorily written out," said Mr. Linton frigidly. "For the moment, you will come with me to my study."

Crooke breathed hard, suppressing his rage and uneasiness, as he followed the master of the Shell into the House. Every minute was precious to him now. But there was no help for it, and he followed Mr. Linton to that gentleman's study. The master of the Shell picked up the imposition, apparently surprised to find that it really was there. His face grew grim as he looked at it.

"What is this, Crooke?"

"My—my lines, sir," stammered Crooke.

"Disgraceful!" said Mr. Linton.

Crooke gnawed his lip.

"I have never," said Mr. Linton, raising his voice a little—"in all my career as a schoolmaster, Crooke, I have never seen an imposition so disgracefully written. There are mistakes in spelling in every line—yet you had your copy of Virgil under your eyes. Do you imagine for one moment, Crooke, that I shall allow you to impose upon me in this way?"

"I—I'm sorry, sir!" gasped Crooke. "I—I had a—a headache, sir—"

"Nonsense! You will write these lines over again," said Mr. Linton. "Go to the Form-room and rewrite this imposition at once, and bring it to me when it is finished. And unless it is written very much better, Crooke, I shall double it and cane you as well."

Crooke panted.

"If—if you please, sir, my—my uncle's here! If—if you'd let me leave it till to-morrow, as—as my uncle's here to-day—"

"Did you not tell me you were going out, Crooke, when I spoke to you?"

"Yee-es, sir," stammered Crooke.

"If your uncle's presence does not prevent your going out, it need not prevent your writing out your lines," said Mr. Linton dryly. "You need not attempt to impose upon me with a subterfuge, Crooke."

"I—I—"

"Take warning, Crooke," said the master of the Shell sternly. "For some time past you have been careless, inattentive, disrespectful—indeed insolent. You are wearing out my patience, Crooke. Go to the Form-room at once and write out your lines, and if you venture to leave the Form-room before your task is completed I shall report you to Dr. Holmes for a flogging. Not a word more—go!"

Crooke limped from the study.

He went to the Form-room with a sickening sense of defeat. He sat at his desk and dipped his pen in the ink, but he could not write. He had to go—he had to get rid of the currency notes, the evidence that he was a thief. He tiptoed to the Form-room door at last and peered out into the corridor. After what his Form master had said, it was risky enough to "bolt," but Crooke was desperate.

He opened the door silently and peered out. He started back at the sight of a severe face. Mr. Linton had just come up the passage.

His eyes glinted at Crooke's dismayed face.

"You were about to leave the Form-room, Crooke?"

"N-n-no," gasped Crooke, "I—I—"

"Go back to your desk."

Crooke limped back to his desk. The severe glance of the master of the Shell followed him.

"I did not trust you, Crooke, and it appears that I was right," said Mr. Linton. "Your imposition is doubled, and you will remain here until every line is written—and correctly written. If Colonel Lyndon should inquire concerning you, I shall be bound to inform him that you are under detention for disrespect and disobedience."

He changed the key to the outside of the lock.

"I am sorry—and ashamed—to be compelled to turn a key upon a St. Jim's boy!" said Mr. Linton in scathing tones. "But I cannot trust you, Crooke, and you will be locked in the Form-room until your task is done. I shall come back in one hour."

The Form-room door closed behind Mr. Linton and the key turned in the lock.

Gerald Crooke sat at his desk as if stunned.

The click of the turning key sounded like the knell of doom to his ears. He was locked in the Form-room—there was no escape now—and in his pocket, almost visible to the eye, bulged the wad of stolen currency notes. Crooke leaned his elbows on his desk and dropped his face into his hands and groaned aloud in the bitterness of despair.

THE END.

(Mind you read the sequel to this splendid yarn, entitled: "STANDING BY A SCAPEGRACE!" by Martin Clifford, which will appear in next week's Bumper Number of the GEM.)

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# REALM

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**ASKING FOR IT!** It's Solomon Slack's intention to starve the Indians under his control at the Reservations in the hope that they will break out. Having made all the mischief, the charitable Solomon reckons to put all the blame on to Tom Holt in order to get rid of him. But Solomon looks like waking up a regular hornet's nest!



# WHITE EAGLE/

A Grand Story of a young Britisher's  
Adventures with a Tribe of Apache Indians  
in New Mexico.

Told By

**ARTHUR PATTERSON.**

## The Seed!

**T**OM arrived in Trantville in October. A month later the winter began and lasted five months.

It is a time that he will never forget though he lives to be a century old—the hardest, sternest discipline of his life. He learnt what he was up against one evening some weeks after the first meeting with Mr. Solomon Slack. He had come back from a long ride through the Reservations in company with Black Hawk and Badger Head, and found Mr. Jeremiah Mush in his—Tom's—rooms. Mr. Mush was reclining on three chairs, reading a copy of the weekly edition of the London "Times," which, in those days, was the solace and refreshment of Englishmen in all parts of the habitable globe. Tom's mother sent it to him regularly.

"Tom, I am grieved for ye," Mr. Mush said in a very mournful tone, rising as Tom entered and putting the paper aside. "The sooner you quit readin' that darned thing the better."

Tom looked sharply at Mr. Mush, and Mr. Mush looked keenly back.

"What's the matter with the poor old 'Times'?"  
"Pison—that's what! It's all British, every line of it! Lord sakes, boy, ef you continue a-readin' that paper you'll be an Englishman for the rest of your life, an' that won't be long, the way you're goin'!"

Tom's answer was to cast himself down in the rocking-chair vacated by his landlord, point to another, and throw his tobacco-pouch at him. They were on those terms now.

Mr. Mush sighed.

"Tom, I swar' you're a fool!"

He had caught the pouch with one hand, and with the other drawn his chair up to a table, upon which he restfully placed his feet.

"It came to me when I saw you and your dawg the day you arrived. That was why I took you in. It's the way I make my livin'! But, sure's death, boy, I did not heft ye to be such a fool as ye are!"

Tom grinned contentedly. He was very tired and rather worried, and this hook-nosed American, with his kindly grey eyes and strong face, straight and hard as brown rock, was refreshing to him as water to a thirsty man.

"You've been drinking, Miah," he drawled, "with Solomon Slack."

The hotel-keeper lit his pipe and threw the pouch back.

"I sure have," he said gravely. "I've made fur to do it every day since I saw how you'd fixed him that first mornin' of all."

They smoked in silence for some minutes.

"Well," Tom said lazily, "get to it! Tell me why I'm a fool."

Miah Mush frowned and pulled Hunks' ears. The dog had just laid his head upon his knee.

"A man I know," he began—"leastways, a kind of half man, half boy, yet all of a man some ways, calculates to set himself up agin Government, common sense, and human nature. I ask you—ain't that feller a fool?"

"That's the fellow I am, is it?"

"It just is, Tom. I'm in earnest."

Tom frowned thoughtfully.

"Government, you said. That means—Slack. But he's a skunk!"

"Government all the same here. Crombolt ain't worth a wag of Hunks' tail, and Sol's a Jew, don't forget. He's got every last thing framed up agin you!"

"As how?" Tom drawled.

"This way. You hev a dandy tongue and hand with them Reds. They're talking of you in camp, hut, and tepce—bucks, squaws, and papooses. They know that you and Solomon ain't no kind of cousins, and they banks on a reg'lar bust-up between you two. When that comes, they'll sail in and strip that old storehouse bare. Badger Head will lead that raid himself. If they can, they'll scalp Solomon and nail him cross-wise over his own front door. That's Reds, when they run amok. You ain't seen that side of 'em. Well, Sol knows this, and is a-shakin' his fat sides fit to bust with joy at the prospect of settin' in first and sendin' for troops and arrestin' you."

"He's a puttin' it up to the Bureau now—Crombolt is in Washington, remember—that the Indians is gettin' disturbed, and he's sent your description. The saloon slam your first night went East as a dangerous riot organised by a rampin', tearin' Britisher, whose objec'—mark this!—whose whole obje' is to make Apache Indians rebel against Government authority, and insurrect. That's how I believe you want to do it, too!"

"I don't think so!" Tom said sharply. "Why should I? I have stopped all hard drinking. That was the real danger. Every saloon is watched by a sub-chief, with orders from Badger Head himself. Gambling is down, too, though we can't stop that altogether. But the warriors have something to do now since I arranged a big gymkhana for February or March—rodeo, as the boys call it—with prizes for trick-riding, roping, and the rest. The missionary is getting people to do some plays at Christmas, and we shall have weekly concerts. He's a decent little chap, and if he weren't afraid of Slack—"

"Ah!" Mush ejaculated. "But he is, and there'll be nothin' doin' that a-way!"

Tom's jaw set hard.

"Won't there?"

"Who's to put in the money? Them things want dollars. Sol won't give leave."

"Nope."

"He will. I saw him this morning. As to money, I find that."

Miah Mush blew his nose.

"Je-rusalem the Golden!" he murmured. "You're goin' some!"

"I'm tryin'," Tom said wearily. "But I guess you are right. I am, no doubt, a fool!"

The American's face softened.

"Pshaw! I said that 'cos I must chip any coon who gets upon the razzle-dazzle like you for the sake of other folks. But I ain't sure. Can you keep your backs to heel? That's the pint."

"I think so. But tell me, Miah, is it true that after Christmas Slack cuts the food ration in half?"

The American's lips pinched grimly.

"Who told ye that?"

"The chiefs. They say it's been done before, and that this year it's certain. I don't know why they think so, but it is in their heads. And if it comes, there will be bad trouble."

Miah scratched his chin and frowned.

"The store-house is filling up with goods. You've seen that."

"I know. Therefore it can't be true. But—I wonder—"

Tom sighed uneasily.

"I wonder!" Miah echoed dryly. "It rests with Sol. He has the key, and the stuff. I have noticed—" He spoke very slowly now, gazing at the ceiling. "I say, I hev noticed, Tom, in other years, that a deal of goods get sold by Sol somewheres in the spring."

Tom almost leapt from his chair, then sat stiffly, his hands grasping his knees.

"Do you mean he holds it back from the people to make profit for himself?"

Miah coughed.

"I mean, Tom, what I said. No more, no less. The rest I leave to you."

There was a long silence, the American furtively watching the boy's face.

"Spit it out!" he said suddenly.

Tom shook his head.

"I said spit it out!" the other exclaimed, raising his voice. "You've a plan. If you have, let me know it. P'raps you don't savvy that I'm all in with you over this thing. There is not one fool, Tom Holt, in Tranterville. There's two!"

The words came as crisply as if bitten out of steel. Tom smiled.

"I savvy, friend, and I'd trust you with my soul. But I have no plan—yet. I have been trying to find out where I stand. You've told me. Now let's reckon it all up."

He began counting on his fingers.

"One—Slack is sole agent of the Government. Two—Slack holds the stores for feeding and clothing Indians through winter. Three—Slack owns the saloons. Four—Slack pays half the stipend of the missionary, and the land of the church and school belong to him. Five, and last—Slack, seeing that I am getting to know too much, and have the Apaches in hand, is going to do me in by maddening the warriors with ill-treatment after Christmas and putting the blame on to me if they break out—unless he gets me shot before that on a dark night."

The hotel-keeper's feet swept from the table.

"What makes you say that?" he demanded.

"Oh, experience."

Tom's face was coolly casual, but his face was grim. He took up his hat and tossed it to his companion.

Mush examined it and found two holes in the crown. A bullet had gone through.

"When was that?" he asked, with a snap.

"Last night."

"Where?"

"Half-way between town and mission-house."

"You were alone, of course?"

Tom gave a boyish laugh.

"I ought to have been. All day White Cat, Long-Leg—that's the fellow I told you of who tried to kill Hunks once—and I had been riding around working out this gunkhana show. Dog-tired we all were. I can tell you, so I sent the boys back and hoofed it to the mission-house by myself. You had Hunks here. The cuss who was trailing me—they are doing that now—thought he had a soft thing, and so took a snipe. But he made a bad break. I heard the crack. That old sombrero fell off. My hair curled a bit, and I felt queer. He could have plugged me with a second chamber, but, bless you, something ran for him, wherever he was, and he bunked for his life. But it was wolf after cotton-tail. I heard a sort of scuffle, a snap, and a choke. I thought of going forward to find out about it, but it was dark as pitch, and I came on here instead. Just as I got to your door there was the Kitten wiping his knife on his sleeve, and grinning like a mandarin."

"An Apache saved ye?"

"White Cat. He'd never left me. Somehow he suspected foul play, and that's what he did."

Jeremiah Mush began to walk up and down the room.

"Thunder an' lightnin'! Tomm'n, you take it cool enough. Who was the cuss who shot at ye?"

Tom shook his head.

"I can't get at him. White Cat won't open his mouth."

I wondered—though I knew it could not be—whether it was Slack himself. But I saw him this morning, as I told you. He looked queer, though, when he saw me, and White Cat gave a nod when I mentioned Slack being in it. That was all the news he would part with."

The hotel-keeper laughed suddenly and slapped his leg.

"My sakes! But old blubber-face will be sick! He'll be figurin' now on coffins whenever he sees a Red. They love you! Golly! If I ain't beginnin' to think an Indian is human after all. I never did before."

Tom sighed.

"Some are the best," he said slowly. "Some aren't. But, Miah—he put both hands on the American's shoulders—"what worries me is this food business. The squaws and the children must be fed. The Government guarantees that to the nation."

Jeremiah laughed bitterly.

"Gov'ment, boy, cares that"—and he snapped his fingers—"for Redskins! Mind ye, they send the stuff, but it goes to Sol. He keeps it; gives what he thinks, and sells the rest. Criminal? Yes! But there's no proof. S'pose you goes to Washington and reports, who's goin' to believe ye? Ask the missionary to back you up, you'll find he dursn't. No! He sees no way out but one." He grinned sardonically. "If you'll only take it and be sensible—"

Tom turned questioningly.

"I mean," Miah continued, pursing his lips solemnly, "git out of it. Quit. Will ye?"

"Talk sense, man!"

"No use to a man who ain't got any. But say, Tom"—he was grave now—"I got a hunch. Why don't yew hike up some white boys from somewheres for your rodeo? You met a good few in Servita. If you do it before the spring round-up they might take a holiday here. That would give you witnesses."

Tom's face brightened.

"A grand idea! Now, come and let's have some grub."

While Tom and Jeremiah Mush were talking over Mr. Solomon Gunther Slack, that gentleman, smoking a large and particularly strong cigar all alone in his private room, was thinking about Tom. Mr. Slack considered that he was a thoroughly ill-used man. He, a trusted Government servant, who had kept order and peace in the Reservations under his charge, and sent in admirable returns—on paper—of the conditions of the Indians there for three years past, and had never a complaint from any living soul—which he allowed to reach Washington—was now worried to death. And the cause of it all was a long-legged, curly-haired British boy, with a short, square chin and fiery, blue eyes.

Mr. Slack was a man of clear insight, and quite sharp enough to see where he made mistakes, and a hundred times he cursed himself for the reception he had given to Tom at their first meeting at the storehouse. He had tried to make up for it since by consistent civility and an apparent readiness to grant any request Tom made. But he knew that this was all quite useless. The boy's fearless blue eyes—he hated those eyes—watched him when they met, with an expression which made his sleek hair creep. Even that beast of a dog growled when he tried to pat him. This Britisher had now got the cursed Apaches into his hands and had surrounded himself with spies. Surely he had a devil in him—he was the devil—and Solomon Slack thought it very hard.

So thinking, he had set himself—as Jeremiah had said—with all his cunning, experience, and the power that lay in his hands, to destroy the influence which Tom had won, and to make what he was striving for not only fail of its purpose, but cause his undoing.

It was true that Slack had tried to kill Tom. It was the shortest way of getting rid of him. He had put an Indian on to do it—after making him intoxicated. The fool had missed, and then—Slack was not sure what had happened—

#### WHO'S WHO IN THE STORY.

**TOM HOLT**, a sturdy young Britisher of seventeen who has lived for a time amongst a tribe of Apache Indians in New Mexico.

**SOLOMON SLACK**, sub-agent in charge of the Indian Reservations.

**BADGER HEAD**, supreme head of the Apache Nation.

**BLACK HAWK**, a chief.

**WHITE CAT**, his son.

**COLONEL CHAPIN**, a wealthy rancher.

**SADIE**, his daughter.

**HUNKS** and **MALINKA**, Tom's dog and horse respectively.

Tom makes friends with Colonel Chapin and his daughter, Sadie, and for the time being Calumet Ranch becomes his home. Later, Badger Head is caught plotting about the colonel's ranch by Hunks.

The sagacious animal pins the trespasser to the ground. Enraged beyond measure Badger Head is about to shoot the dog when White Cat intervenes. For daring to disobey his chief, White Cat is sentenced to the "fire." Tom gets to hear of this terrible punishment and offers to accompany the tribe to the Reservations for the winter—a request with which he has previously refused to comply—providing Badger Head will rescind his sentence. The bargain is made. Thereafter Tom is known as White Eagle—one of the chiefs of the tribe. Arriving at the Reservations Tom quickly realises that Solomon Slack is furthering his own ends at the expense of the Apaches under his control. Tom at once demands to see the places where the Indians will live during the winter, and thereafter he and Solomon are at loggerheads.

(Now read on.)



Solomon Slack handed an official letter to Tom, sighed like a grampus, and rubbed his greasy hands together while the youngster read the missive. "In six weeks, then," said Tom quietly, "the Indians will be starving, the children near death? Why?" (See page 28)

then, for he had not seen that Indian any more; but he made up his mind that it would not do to try again. There were other ways, however, and one day he sent for Badger Head privately, and, thereafter, met him regularly without the knowledge of any other member of the Council of the Nation.

Meanwhile, Tom worked for his gymkhana, and by the New Year began to feel that he was making good headway. He wrote to Colonel Chapin, and got permission for Sandy Bowker to come down with a party of cowboys in February. He wrote, too, to Old Billie, of the Saloon, Servita, and had a great epistle in return, saying that he was coming himself, and that Jim Trent had just blown in, and declared he'd find a score of boys, at least, to come. All promised to be there for the rodeo, which was fixed for the first week in March. The winter would have broken then, but the spring round-up would not have begun.

Tom's object was to keep the Indians busy doing something, and to prevent them from falling into a state of lethargy and demoralisation which the enforced idleness of the winter months always brought hitherto.

It was not his mission or intention to criticise the Government. The idea mentioned by Jeremiah that he was organising insurrection against authority was so absurd that he gave it no thought—which was a mistake, as it turned out. But he saw clearly, as everyone must who was on the spot, that the methods of governing Indian tribes in the United States, by letting them hunt all summer and feeding them all winter, without giving them employment of any kind, was a policy that was bound to have fatal results.

Men who have no occupation for some months in the year except to nurse their grievances, who conceal their weapons when they are supposed to give them up, and continue privately old brutal tribal customs—handed down for centuries, do not cease to be savages because their children go to missionary schools and learn to read the Bible.

It was true, Tom found, that of late years there had been few raids, and those only small ones, but the talk he had with Black Hawk on the way to the Reservations, and many more since, convinced him that a spirit of unrest was spreading throughout the nation. Badger Head, he had been warned, and now felt certain, was secretly stimulating and encouraging the wild bloods.

Tom scouted the idea that his own influence could be of any weight in so serious an issue, or that if an outbreak came he could do anything personally; but he strove with all his might to add to the happiness of the people, and as he saw the drinking among the warriors cease and the gambling shrink to very small proportions, when he found that, so far at least the allowances of food and clothing to the families by Solomon Slack were larger than they had been in previous years; when every day now the young bucks went out and practised sports and athletic exercises of all kinds in training for the rodeo in the spring, he felt comforted, and life grew less weary and disappointing than it had been at first.

Tom was among friends whose number was increasing every day. No matter where he went among the Apaches in the Reservation he was greeted with smiles and cordial grunts of recognition. Even Badger Head never worked openly against him, and was practising hard himself for the rodeo; while Solomon Slack kept quiet and gave no cause now for complaint.

So matters rested until Christmas came and went; and but for a great and increasing home-sickness for Calumet and all belonging to it, Tom was fairly happy—until the New Year came.

#### Orders from Washington!

ON New Year's Day there was a blizzard. All the afternoon the wind blew hard from the north-east, driving rain before it, which turned to ice the moment it touched anything. The squaws who came for their rations to the storehouse were nearly frozen on the way, and but for a party of bucks organised by Tom and White Cat, many would not have reached home.

But this was not the worst. The report ran through the camp that the week's rations were reduced by a quarter, that the next week a further reduction would follow, and by February the supply would be only half—or less—than they had received hitherto.

Tom upon hearing the news went straight to Mr. Solomon Slack. He found that gentleman, as before, in his private room, but he got in this time without difficulty. Indeed, the clerk almost pushed him there when he entered the store, for rows of dark figures sat or stood about in the place, mute, menacing, and the boy was in fear of his life.

Mr. Solomon Slack was in a most benignant mood, tempered with sadness.

"I know your errand, White Eagle, young sir," he said, with a resonant and ingratiating snuffle.

"The order is from Washington direct. Read it!"

He handed an official letter to Tom, sighed like a grampus, blew his nose with the sound of a trumpet of war, and rubbed his greasy hands.

The letter was signed by Mr. Crombolt and was on official paper. As Mr. Slack stated, it gave precise instructions on the matter, and these instructions bore out all that Tom had heard.

"In six weeks, then," he said, handing the letter back, "the Indians in the Reservations will be starving, their children near death. Why?"

He did not intend to be rude. The calamity was too terrible, and the outlook too hopeless for mere rage; besides, on the face of it, the man was not to blame. But the question was certainly abrupt, and Mr. Solomon Slack became frigidly polite.

"I regret that it ain't within the province of my official duties, Mr. Holt, to give you any information."

Then he ponderously rose to his feet.

"Bein' occupied with much business, I will ask you to excuse me—unless there's anything you'd like to say."

The thick lips parted an inch; the huge nose curved downwards, and in the agent's dull eyes there was a vindictive spark. He had the situation in his hands, and this Britisher was cornered at last. It would be good business to make him lose his temper and become abusive. The clerk, Mr. Slack had taken care, was well within hearing.

But Tom did not swear. He appreciated Mr. Slack's delicate intentions at their full worth. He had been well schooled, too, by Jeremiah Mush. Besides—what was the good? The only thing which would have given him any pleasure at all would have been to punch the agent's head hard, and that would not bring food to the Indians. Therefore, to Mr. Slack's disappointment, he took his leave quietly, and went back to the hotel to talk over the situation with Jeremiah.

The hotel-keeper had no comfort to give.

"Seems he's drivin' straight for an almighty bust-up," he said. "Do you remember what I told ye about putting things on your back? Waal, I don't know, but from what I hear, and things which blows about that other folks hears, it is in my mind that Mr. Solomon is tired of his job and intends quitting it this spring. It may be that the Indian Bureau has got a tooth into him somewhere. They ain't all fools in Washington. You may have shook Myra Crombolt. Your boss, Colonel Chapin, may have 'started drillin' holes.' However it is, the old porpoise is considerable on the jig, and his ob'ect, I'll swar, is to hoist ye to Kingdom-come, young Tom, with your own magazine."

"You mean the rodeo?"

"I do mean it. Look at what you've done. Never in the experience of any man in the Reservations have these Apache bucks been so much alive as this year. No loafin'; very little drinking; gamblin' now a regular frost—you've lost Sol hundreds of dollars!—and in place of it ridin', runnin', and jumpin' all the time. You'd think Apaches was a new kind of grasshopper. Look at them concerts, too, and how you got the bucks to do their own tum-tummings and dance. I thought Badger Head would have thrown a fit as he watched the show. I'm a watchin' him, mind! So should you. I swar he's up to mischief. But to come back. All I knows is this: Sol has put it that the whole Nation is seethin' with discontent and rebellion, owing to you, of course, and he's asked for these orders which you've seen, havin' written to Crombolt that starvation is the only thing which will bring the warriors' temperatooor down to normal."

Tom gritted his teeth.

"But he must know that it will do the opposite."

"He do." Miah drawled. "An' he's bankin' on just that fact. But the moment they start gettin' threatenin' what's he do? Why, send slick for troops! They'll arrest the chiefs; turn machine guns on the tepees, and put a diamond hitch on you. It will take all the influence and money and every other thing your friend Colonel Chapin's got to keep you out of the penitentiary for life. Young Eagle."

(Now look out for next week's grand instalment, chums. It's full of thrills!)

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