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(Result of Joke Competition No. 3—inside.)

EVERY WEDNESDAY

The GEM 2^d

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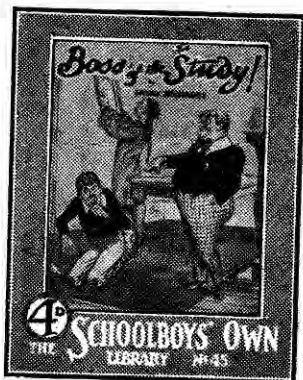
No. 990.
Vol. XXXI
February 5th,
1927.



BAGGY TRIMBLE'S AMAZING DISCOVERY!

(When Trimble hunted under the loose board in the box-room for a tin of pineapple he had hidden there, he little expected to find fifty pounds in notes! Read the grand school story of Tom Merry & Co., inside.)

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A book-length story featuring the early adventures of Harry Wharton & Co. at Greyfriars that will make you split your sides with laughter.

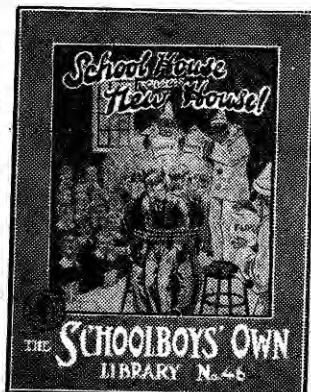
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Address all letters: The Editor, The "Gem" Library, The Fleetsway House, Farrington Street, London, E.C.4. Write me, you can be sure of an answer in return.

CARDEW IN LOVE!

A LOYAL reader from Willoughby writes me a very fine letter in praise of the GEM, and winds up with a request for Martin Clifford to give us a special yarn with Cardew in love. Now I wonder how the complex character of Ralph Reckness would be affected by feminine wiles? It opens up an interesting train of thought, you will agree. I'm passing the notion on to Martin Clifford, so my Willoughby chum may yet see Ralph Reckness falling a victim to the fair sex. In any case, I will refer to this matter in a future chat—when I have heard what our favourite author has to say about it.

HE'S DOWN!

From Gloucester comes a long letter telling of a boy who had entered into an arrangement to fight another fellow on a certain date. I don't know the rights of the quarrel, for a quarrel it was that led to this arrangement; but one of the principals tells me that his opponent got the "sack" from his job the day before the scrap was due to "come off." Now my correspondent has a good heart, for he says that the other chap is looking so down and out, that he hasn't the nerve to approach him and ask him "what about it?" Meantime, certain boys who know of this "arrangement," are making a little unpleasantness for my correspondent because he won't go "through" with the fight. As I said before, my correspondent has a good heart; he hasn't it in him to give this chap a "good hiding" when he's down. There's no question of funk, for according to a footnote to the letter that reached me, another Gemite remarks that "X" could lick "Y" to a frazzle. Apart from that statement, I think my correspondent ought to postpone indefinitely that arrangement to fight. He says that he's forgotten the bitterness of things that led up to the quarrel. Then why fight? These cold-blooded arrangements only lead to more bitterness. And if one of the parties is down and out, it isn't very sporty to add a black eye to his troubles. I think you're right, "X," to let things slide, or, better still, go and have a straight talk with "Y" and see if you can do him any good. If he's any sort of chap at all he will appreciate your friendly overtures at a time when he feels that the world is a rotten place to live in. Drop me a line and let me know how things go, will you?

THE SCHOOLBOYS' OWN LIBRARY.

Just a mention of the two 4d. libraries on sale Friday of this week. No. 45 is entitled: "Boss of the Study!" and it features Harry Wharton & Co. of Greyfriars. No. 46 is entitled: "School House versus New House!" and it deals with the state of friendly rivalry that exists between Tom Merry & Co. and George Figgins & Co. Both these volumes are well worth reading, chums! 'Nuff said!

NEXT WEDNESDAY'S PROGRAMME:

"TRUE AS STEEL!"

This story concludes the remarkable series of "Talbot" yarns Martin Clifford has given us. I know you won't want any urging from me to read it.

"WHITE EAGLE!"

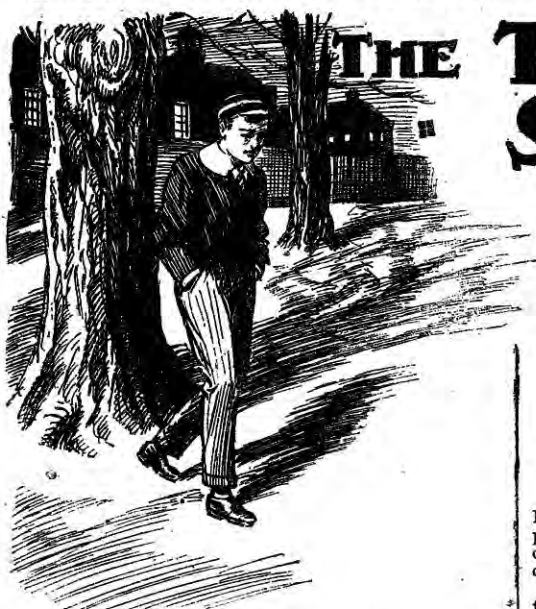
Look out, too, for another instalment of this adventure serial, also another "cameo" from the St. Jim's Rhymester, entitled: "Tea With the Head!" and last, but not least, the result of

BICYCLE JOKE COMPETITION NO. 4.

That 27 12s. 6d. "Mead" Bicycle may be yours, chum, for all you know. Order your GEM early. Chin, chin.

Your Editor.

BOUND BY HONOUR! When Talbot promises to keep his cousin's shady secret he little realises at the time into what depths of bitterness and misery that good-natured promise is to lead him. But when the worst comes along the Toff remembers that he has promised—that his lips are sealed!



THE TOFF'S " " " SACRIFICE!

A Powerful and Dramatic
Long Complete Story of
Tom Merry & Co., the
Chums of St. Jim's.

BY

Martin Clifford.

CHAPTER 1! Tracking Trimble!

"COME on, Tom!"

"Tea, you know!"

Monty Lowther and Manners spoke together.

Tom Merry wore a rather worried look.

He had stopped at the foot of the staircase in the School House; and his chums turned round on the stairs to call to him. The Terrible Three had changed after a football match; and Manners and Lowther, at least, were thinking of tea. Football in the keen wintry air had made them hungry.

"What's the trouble, Tom?" asked Monty.

"It's jolly odd!" said Tom Merry.

"Eh? What?"

"About Talbot."

"What about Talbot?"

"Kildare's taken him to Mr. Railton's study," said Tom. "Did you notice that he waited at the door of the changing-room while we changed? Then he marched Talbot off. There's something up."

"My dear man, fellows have been taken in to see their giddy Housemaster before, and no bones broken," said Lowther.

"Kildare looked jolly serious."

"Case of 'bend over,' I suppose," said Monty.

"Talbot has done that which he ought not to have done, or else left undone that which he ought to have done. But we sha'n't help him by being late for tea. Come on, old bean."

"Oh, all right!"

Tom Merry followed his comrades up the stairs.

He looked worried, and he felt troubled. Kildare of the Sixth, the captain of St. Jim's, had looked uncommonly grave as he waited for Talbot of the Shell to change after the House match, and then walked him off to the Housemaster's study. Talbot of the Shell, too, had seemed strangely grave and quiet. Tom Merry could not help feeling that something was "up"; something of more than usual seriousness. He was anxious to see Talbot again, but the Housemaster's door had closed on him, and it did not reopen.

"Why worry?" said Monty Lowther cheerily, as the three juniors went along the Shell passage to Study

No. 10. "Talbot's all right. Even old Talbot isn't a perfect character, you know, and must expect to be called over the coals sometimes. Hallo, somebody's in our study."

There was the sound of a movement in Study No. 10 in the Shell, as Monty Lowther turned the handle of the door.

Lowther threw the door wide open and stepped in. He glanced round the study, and was surprised to see that it was empty.

"Blessed if I didn't think I heard somebody in the room," he said. "If that fat villain Trimble knew we had a pineapple, it would be like him to drop in and sample it."

"Just like!" agreed Manners.

"You get the fire going, Tommy, while Manners fills the kettle," said Monty. "Get a move on! Famished, old chaps!"

"I wish I knew—" muttered Tom Merry.

"How to get a fire going?"

"No, ass—just what's the row with old Talbot?"

"Bless old Talbot! Blow old Talbot!" said Monty Lowther emphatically. "Don't I keep on telling you I'm hungry?"

"But it's jolly queer," said Tom. "Talbot's been a bit—well, a bit unusual for a week past or more. I don't like the way he seems to have chummed up with that rank outsider Crooke—"

"Well, Crooke's his cousin," said Manners tolerantly. "Perhaps he can see some good in him that other fellows can't see."

"There isn't any in him!" grunted Tom.

"That fire isn't going yet," said Lowther. "Likewise, the kettle isn't filled. Where are the eggs? If you fellows want to see an old pal perish of hunger—"

"And then there's that queer yarn that's been going round about Talbot," said Tom, ruthlessly regardless of Monty. "Trimble of the Fourth started it—he heard some talk between Talbot and his uncle, Colonel Lyndon, when the colonel came here. The story was all over the House that Talbot was hard up, and asked his uncle for money."

"But Talbot told us there was nothing in that."

"Yes; but—"

"I'll tell you what, Tom," said Monty Lowther suddenly, as if struck by a very bright idea. "I can make a suggestion on the subject of Talbot."

"What is it, Monty?"

"Give him a rest."

"What?"

"Give him a rest till after tea," said Lowther cheerily.

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"I've mentioned that I'm hungry—famished, in fact. Look here, I can't find the eggs. And where's the cake?"

"Bother the eggs, and blow the cake," said Tom. "I tell you I'm jolly worried—there's something really wrong somewhere."

"There is!" roared Lowther. "Where's the pineapple?"

"Bother the pineapple!"

Monty Lowther was staring into the study cupboard. Three eggs, a cake, and a tin of pineapple should have been there. Three eggs, a cake, and a tin of pineapple were not to be seen there. There was no sign of any of them. Monty breathed fury.

"That villain Trimble!"

"Oh, bother Trimble!"

"You remember how he raided the studies when we went over to play the Grammar School!" roared Lowther. "Now he's been at it again! There's nothing for tea!"

"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Manners.

"Oh, give Trimble a chance!" said Tom Merry, laughing. "If he's scooped the tuck, I suppose he hasn't devoured the tin as well as the pineapple. Look again!"

"I tell you it's gone!" yelled Lowther, in great wrath. "He's scooped the eggs and the cake, and put the tin in his pocket; I suppose—taken it away to open somewhere else—"

Lowther broke off suddenly.

"I heard somebody moving in the room as we came in," he said. "Why, the fat burglar's still here, and he's dodged out of sight. Trimble! Shove the end of the poker under the table, Manners!"

"What ho!"

"Yaroooooh!" came in a wild roar from under the study table. As Manners shoved the poker under it on one side, a fat junior rolled out from under it on the other.

It was Trimble of the Fourth.

Evidently the grub-raider of the School House had been in Study No. 10 when the Terrible Three arrived there; and he had dodged under the table as he heard them coming.

"Where's our tuck, you fat villain?" roared Lowther.

"I—I haven't seen it!" gasped Trimble. "I—I haven't touched it. I—I say, I came here to—to ask you fellows how the House match had gone. I—I never—I mean I wasn't—"

Monty Lowther glared at the fat Fourth-Former as if he would eat him.

"It's too late for the eggs and cake," he said. "I know where they are—inside that fat rascal. But he can't have swallowed a tin of pineapple—he's got that in his pocket. Hand it over, you podgy burglar!"

"I—I haven't—"

"Give me that poker, Manners!"

"Yaroooooh!"

Baggy Trimble made a wild leap for the door, as Lowther grasped the poker. He tore the door open and fled, barely escaping a vengeful lunge of the poker.

"After him!" shouted Manners.

Baggy of the Fourth was speeding down the passage at a terrific rate, with Lowther on his track, brandishing the poker. Four juniors of the Fourth Form appeared ahead—Blake & Co., going to Study No. 6 to tea.

"Stop him!" yelled Lowther.

"Bai Jove, what—" ejaculated Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Stop thief!"

Blake & Co. lined up across the passage, grinning, to stop the fugitive. Baggy Trimble halted in dismay.

"Now!" gasped Lowther.

His outstretched hand was almost on Baggy's shoulder, when Trimble turned from the passage and bolted up the box-room stairs. Fear lent the fat Baggy wings, and he fairly flew up the stairs.

"Stop!" yelled Lowther.

But Baggy Trimble did not stop. He was not a bright youth, but he was much too bright to stop just then. He raced up the box-room stairs, and bolted into the box-room like a fat rabbit into his burrow. Lowther was after him swiftly—but not quite swiftly enough. As the Shell fellow came breathlessly up to the landing

the box-room door slammed and a key turned in the lock. And the next moment Monty Lowther was hammering on a locked door—while Baggy Trimble, safe from vengeance and the poker, gasped with relief.

CHAPTER 2.

Not Guilty!

"O H dear!" gasped Baggy Trimble.

He sat on a box and gasped for breath.

Thump! Thump! Monty Lowther was at the box-room door, raging.

"You fat rotter!" roared Lowther.

"Oh dear!"

"Open this door!"

"Ow!"

"Are you going to let me in?" bawled Monty.

Baggy Trimble gasped, but he grinned while he gasped. Really, he was not likely to let Lowther in just then. He had no desire whatever to come to close quarters with the exasperated Shell fellow and the poker from Study No. 10.

There were more footsteps on the box-room stairs. Tom Merry and Manners had followed Lowther, and Blake and Herries and Digby and D'Arcy had followed them. Two or three more juniors joined up. Outside the box-room a dozen fellows gathered to deal with Trimble. Half a dozen sets of knuckles rapped on the door, and as many voices called out to Baggy to show up. Baggy sat on the box and gasped. He had not the remotest intention of showing up while the enemy were at the gate, so to speak.

"Bai Jove, you know, it's weally too thick," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Only the othah day that fat wotnah waided our studay cupboard. We kicked him all wound. But kickin' doesn't seem to do Twimble any good."

"I'll burst him!" gasped Lowther.

"He's cleared us right out," said Manners. "Absolutely nothing for tea in our study."

"What about tea in Hall?" asked Tom Merry.

"Not till we've slaughtered Trimble."

"Open the door, you fat brigand!" shouted Blake.

"I—I say, listen to me, you chaps!" quavered Trimble.

"I—I haven't touched the grub, you know! I wouldn't! I—I went to Study No. 10 to—to speak to Tom Merry and—"

"Why, you villain, you've got the tin of pineapple about you now!" roared Lowther.

"Oh dear!"

Baggy had forgotten that for the moment. The tin of pineapple was hidden under his jacket. He drew it from its hiding-place and blinked at it. Baggy had looked forward with great satisfaction to opening that tin and devouring the contents thereof. Now he would have been glad to be relieved of it. That pineapple was proof positive that he had visited Study No. 10 in the Shell on a "grub raid."

"I—I assure you, Lowther—" he stuttered.

"Have you got Lowthah's pineapple, you fat wascal?" demanded Arthur Augustus sternly.

"Certainly not!" gasped Trimble. Truth and Trimble were strangers. They were not even distant acquaintances.

"I saw it bulging under his jacket!" hooted Lowther.

"Oh dear!"

Bang! Bang! Bang!

"Open this door, you villain!"

"I—I—I say—"

"Oh, let him rip!" said Tom Merry. "Let's get down to tea in Hall before it's too late."

"And let that fat villain get away with it!" snorted Lowther. "No fear! I'm going to burst him!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"He won't open the door till we're gone," said Tom, laughing.

"That's all right," said Blake. "Fasten the door, and you'll find him here safe after tea."

"Good egg!"

"Anybody got a cord?" asked Lowther. "I'll tie the handle of the door to the banisters here."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Oh dear!" gasped Trimble. "I—I say, Lowther, old chap—"



"Why, the fat burglar's still here!" cried Monty Lowther. "And he's dodged out of sight! Trimble! Shove the end of the poker under the table, Manners!" "What-ho!" "Yaroooh!" A wild roar came from under the table, and as Manners shoved the poker under it on one side, a fat junior rolled out from under it on the other! (See Chapter 1.)

There was no answer from "Lowther, old chap," only a chuckle from the juniors on the landing. Digby had started off to fetch a cord from Study No. 6. Baggy was to be imprisoned in the box-room till after tea, when the hungry juniors would have more leisure to attend to him.

"I—I say, Lowther, if—if you think I've got your pineapple—"

"I know you have, you fat rascal!"

"If you can't take my word, Lowther—"

"I'm going to take the pineapple!"

"Bai Jove, you know, if Twimble hasn't weally got the pineapple, deah boy, this is wathah wuff on him," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Pewwaps, you are makin' a mistake, Lowthah."

"Fathead!"

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Ass!"

"I wufese to be called an ass, Lowthah. Even that fat wottah Twimble is entitled to fair play," said the swell of St. Jim's firmly. "He waided our studay the othah day, but that is no pwoof that he went to your studay to waid it. Twimble, if you haven't got Lowthah's pineapple you can open the door in perfect safety. If you have got it, we shall wag you bald-headed!"

"Oh dear!" murmured Trimble.

He blinked round the dusky box-room in search of a hiding-place for the tin of pineapple. He blinked at the window, but shook his head. That was one way of getting rid of the proof of guilt, but it was rather too risky. If it fell upon somebody's head outside the House it was certain to lead to trouble. He blinked at the boxes in the room, but he realised that the juniors would look in the boxes. He thought of the chimney, but it was only too probable that they would examine the chimney. There really seemed no means of disposing of the body, so to speak.

But terror sharpened Baggy's obtuse wits. It occurred to him to prise up a board in the floor and hide the tell-tale tin underneath. He blinked over the box-room floor, looking for a board looser than the rest.

"Oh, good!" he ejaculated breathlessly.

In a corner of the room, in an alcove by the fireplace, he found a short length of board that was obviously loose to a close examination. He took out his pocket-knife and prised it up with ease. Not a single nail held it, and Baggy realised that somebody must have raised that board on a previous occasion for some reason. Possibly some of the black sheep of the House had hidden a secret supply of cigarettes there—some fellow like Croke or Racke of the Shell. Anyhow, the board was loose and easily lifted. Baggy lifted it and shoved the tin of pineapple underneath and replaced the board in position. Then, with great cunning, he shifted a box into the corner, concealing the loose board from sight. Then he rolled back to the door.

"You fellows—"

"Here's the cord!" said the voice of Robert Arthur Digby.

"You fellows, give a chap a chance!" hooted Trimble.

"Don't I keep on telling you that I—I didn't—"

"Let us in, then, you fat villain!" said Monty Lowther. "If you haven't got the pineapple, you're all right!"

"I—I haven't, you know."

"Then open the door!"

"Yas, wathah!"

"I—I say, no rags, you know," said Trimble. "I—I'll trust you, you know!"

And he unlocked the box-room door and threw it open.

"Bai Jove!"

The juniors crowded into the room. Monty Lowther gripped the fat Fourth-Former by the collar.

"Now then, cough it up!"

"I—I haven't—"

"Weally, Lowthah, give Twimble a chance!" said Arthur Augustus mildly. "If he is tellin' the truth—"

"As if he could!" snorted Lowther.

"Yaroooh! Leggo!"

"Well, we'll soon see if he's got the giddy pineapple!"

apple," said Blake. "Turn out your pockets, Trimble!"

It was soon ascertained that the fat junior's plunder was not concealed about his fat person.

"He's hidden it, of course!" snapped Lowther.

"Let's look!" said Manners.

"Mind that fat villain doesn't get away, then."

"I—I don't want to get away!" gasped Trimble.

"I—I don't know anything about your rotten pineapple. If you find a pineapple here I'll eat it, tin and all! I can't say fairer than that!"

"Oh, cheese it!"

Monty Lowther proceeded to search the box-room, with the help of the other juniors, while Manners kept watch on Baggy to see that he did not bolt. Every box was looked into, the chimney was examined, and it was ascertained that the window had not been opened. And no sign was discovered of the missing goods.

Lowther looked puzzled.

He knew nothing about a loose board in the floor, and it did not occur to him to move the box that stood in the alcove. All the floor-boards that he could see were obviously too firmly fixed to be pried up in a hurry. Baggy watched him, with a glimmer in his little round eyes. He was feeling safe now.

"Well, it beats me!" said Lowther. "I know he had it."

"Weally, Lowthah, if he had it, he would have it now," said Arthur Augustus. "I pwesume you do not suspect Twimble of swallowin' the tin?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I can make it out! Anyway, he had the eggs and the cake," said Lowther, with a wolfish look at the fat Baggy.

"Wats! You have been pwoved w'ong about the pineapple, Lowthah, and you are pwobably w'ong about the west," said Arthur Augustus. "Twimble is a howwid boundah, but he is entitled to faih play."

"I tell you—"

"Oh, let him rip!" said Tom Merry. "He hasn't got the loot, Monty, and it looks as if we've got the wrong pig by the ear. Let's go down to tea before it's too late!"

Monty Lowther gave a grunt. He was perplexed, but he had to give it up. The Terrible Three left the box-room, and Baggy Trimble grinned. Blake & Co. followed them. Baggy Trimble gave a fat chuckle as the footsteps of the juniors died away below.

He did not follow. Tom Merry & Co. were hurrying down to tea, and they gave no further thought to the fat Baggy. Trimble waited till the coast was quite clear. Then he closed the box-room door softly and locked it again. Then he rolled to the alcove, dragged aside the box there, and proceeded to lift the loose board. Having proved his innocence, the fat Baggy was going to enjoy the fruits of guilt. And he chuckled a fat chuckle as he knelt beside the opening in the floor and groped for the tin of pineapple.

CHAPTER 3.

Under Suspicion!

"TALBOT, sir!"

"Come in, Talbot!"

Kildare of the Sixth stepped aside, and Talbot of the Shell entered Mr. Railton's study.

The captain of St. Jim's gave him a curious look as he went in. Then he drew the door shut, and Talbot was left alone with his Housemaster.

Mr. Railton rose from his chair and fixed his eyes upon the grave, quiet face of the Shell fellow.

Talbot of the Shell faced him calmly.

His heart was beating painfully, his face was a little pale. But he was cool and calm. Only too well he knew that he needed all his coolness now. But from of old the fellow who had once been known as the "Toff" had learned to face danger with a cool and an impassive face.

For a moment or two there was silence. Mr. Railton's glance was keen and penetrating. Talbot waited for him to speak.

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"Talbot," said the School House master at last, "I have sent for you—do you know why?"

"I am waiting for you to tell me, sir."

"Something has occurred—a very strange and mysterious thing," said Mr. Railton. "It has not yet been made generally known, but it will soon be known to the whole school. Unless—" He paused. "I will come to the point. There has been a theft in this study, Talbot."

"Indeed, sir."

"Fifty pounds in currency notes have been taken from my desk."

Talbot did not answer.

His face expressed nothing.

"My desk is kept always locked," said Mr. Railton quietly. "The key is still in my possession; there is no trace of violence on the desk—it has not been broken open. Obviously, it has been opened with a key, yet there exists only one key to the desk and that has not, to my knowledge, been out of my keeping. I do not use the desk for papers. It is where I keep the House money, as you are probably aware."

"Most fellows are aware of that, I think, sir."

"Quite so."

There was another long pause. Talbot's face was still impassive; but a flush was coming into Mr. Railton's cheeks. It was clear that the Housemaster had something to say which he found it very difficult to utter. He coughed and dropped into his chair again. Talbot remained standing, facing him across the writing-table.

"Now, Talbot," went on the Housemaster at last, "you are aware, my boy, that I have always had a high opinion of you, and that, in spite of your unfortunate life before you came to this school, I have always regarded you as a credit to St. Jim's."

"You are very kind, sir."

"You must not, therefore, take offence at what I am about to say," said Mr. Railton kindly.

A bitter smile for a second crossed the handsome, pale face of the junior standing erect before him.

"I have no right to take offence at whatever you may say, Mr. Railton," he answered. "I am no fool, sir—I know that I am called here under suspicion. I do not take offence, because you have a right to suspect me—if you choose. I have not forgotten what I once was, and I cannot expect that you should forget it, either."

There was a bitter accent in the junior's voice, and the colour deepened in Mr. Railton's cheeks.

"That is scarcely just, Talbot," he said, kindly and patiently. "That your early unfortunate life should be forgotten is scarcely possible. But certainly it is not remembered against you. I have remembered it, to admire the steadfast courage with which you have thrown it behind you, and there is no boy at St. Jim's in whom I have had a more complete trust and faith."

"And yet," muttered Talbot, "there has been a theft in your study, and you call me here, sir, to tell me of it before it is made known in the school."

"The circumstances are so very peculiar, Talbot, that I have no choice in the matter," said Mr. Railton. "Had it been possible for any boy in the school to pilfer from my desk, you are almost the last whom I should have thought of in connection with such a matter. But the money was taken from a locked desk—and no trace was left. It may have been taken days ago, for all I know to the contrary. I have not needed the money until to-day, and when I unlocked my desk to take it out I was simply astounded to find that fifty currency notes were missing. It seemed an impossible occurrence. I searched through my desk, thinking that I must have placed the bundle of notes inadvertently in some other recess. But they were missing—they are missing. Only one key exists, and that is in my keeping. I examined the lock of the desk—it shows no trace whatever of having been forced or tampered with. The desk was opened by a skeleton key, or some such contrivance—that is the only possible explanation. Talbot! You cannot fail to be aware that you are the only boy at St. Jim's capable

of opening a locked desk without leaving a trace of having done so."

"I am aware of it, sir."

"That is why I have sent for you," said Mr. Railton gravely. "I do not suspect you, Talbot—I cannot! My faith in you has been founded as if upon a rock. I am utterly perplexed and puzzled. But the fact remains, Talbot, that you could have done what has been done, and that no one else within the walls of the school could possibly have done it. I myself, if I had lost the key, should have been compelled to send for a locksmith to open the desk. To you it would, I think, have been easy."

"Quite easy, sir."

Talbot spoke now without bitterness.

He could see the distress in the face of the Housemaster; he understood the conflict of feelings in Mr. Railton's breast—doubt struggling with faith.

A locked desk had been robbed. Whom could the Housemaster suspect, if not the junior who had once been known as the Toff, the prince of cracksmen?

Of all who dwelt within the walls of St. Jim's—masters and boys and servants—only one was capable of having done what had apparently been done. Only the light fingers of the Toff could have picked the lock. Whom else, in the name of common sense, was to be suspected?

Talbot no longer felt bitterness; but he felt a heavy, dreary sinking of the heart.

Once more his troubled past had risen against him. Was that grim shadow never to be lifted?

"You understand, therefore, why I have sent for you, Talbot," said Mr. Railton, after another long silence. "In spite of what appears to be certain, in spite of what many would call overwhelming evidence that you must be guilty, I cannot believe that you have done this. And yet—and yet you cannot fail to see that no one else can have done it."

Talbot drew a deep breath.

"I understand, sir."

"It is impossible, of course, that the theft can have been perpetrated by anyone from outside the school. The House has not been entered by any thief from outside. Moreover, there was more than a hundred and fifty pounds in the desk, and only fifty currency notes were taken. A common thief would have taken all."

"I should think so, sir."

"Whoever took the money, Talbot, belonged to this school, and was in need of the sum of fifty pounds."

"It would appear so, sir."

"Now, Talbot, it is some time since I made this discovery, and I have been making some inquiries," said Mr. Railton. "I called Kildare, of the Sixth, and consulted with him. As head prefect of the House, I considered that he might be able to throw some light on the matter. I inquired of him whether he knew, or had heard, of any boy in this House who was in trouble for money."

"Oh!" muttered Talbot.

"He answered: 'None!'" said Mr. Railton. "But he told me, as he was bound to tell me, that for some days there has been talk and tattle in the Lower School in connection with you, Talbot. The story is that you were in need of fifty pounds, and that you asked your uncle, Colonel Lyndon, to give you that sum, when he visited the school a few days ago. This story has been repeated up and down both Houses, I understand, and it reached the ears of the prefects at last, and Kildare tells me that he spoke to you on the subject only to-day."

"That is correct, sir."

"You denied, to Kildare, being in any money trouble, and he was satisfied with your assurance."

"He took my word, sir."

"Quite so. But you will see, Talbot, that it is at least a very extraordinary coincidence that there should be a general rumour that you were in want of the sum of fifty pounds, while that is exactly the sum that has been taken from my desk by an unknown hand—in a manner possible only to you among all the hundreds of boys in this school."

"I see it, sir."

"Talbot, I repeat that I do not suspect you—I cannot!" said the distressed Housemaster. "If it should prove that you have deceived me, I feel that I

could never trust a human being again. I have had the completest faith in you, a faith shared by Dr. Holmes, your headmaster; by Mr. Linton, your Form master; by Kildare, your head prefect; by your friends in the Lower School; by your uncle, Colonel Lyndon; by Lord Eastwood, a governor of the school—by all, or nearly all, who have come into contact with you. If that faith must be shattered, Talbot, the responsibility resting upon you is very heavy."

"I know it, sir!"

"That you threw behind you your old life; that you were scarcely to blame for the evil you learned in childhood, brought up as you were among a gang of cracksmen; that your reform at the first opportunity was sincere and lasting, no one has doubted. But, Talbot, if it is possible that some strange temptation has overcome you, that some longing for your old wild way of life has been too strong for you—"

"I SAY, YOU FELLOWS—"



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Mr. Railton paused.

Talbot smiled faintly.

"My old way of life, sir, has no temptation for me," he said. "I try never to think of it—and when the recollection forces itself into my mind, it sickens me."

"So I have always believed. But—"

"I have no more to say, sir," said Talbot heavily. "In the circumstances, what can you do but suspect me? I can only say that I am absolutely innocent; that I would cut off my right hand rather than touch money that did not belong to me—that I could lose my tongue rather than tell you falsehoods. But it is useless for me to say so—the word of the Toff is worth nothing, when suspicion is abroad."

"You are mistaken, Talbot," said Mr. Railton quietly. "At the present moment, I am absolutely perplexed. But my faith in you and your word is still as great as ever. Give me your word, therefore, that you know nothing of this, and I will take it."

"Oh, sir!"

"I mean what I say!" said the Housemaster. "If
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you are innocent, Talbot, as I hope and believe, you can have known nothing of this theft until I spoke to you. Give me your word of honour that you came to my study knowing nothing of what I was about to tell you, and I will trust you."

Talbot did not speak.

"If I am foolishly confiding, I cannot help it," said Mr. Railton. "I have trusted you too completely to distrust you now. Give me your word, Talbot, and all is said."

He waited.

The pale cheeks of the Shell fellow were suffused with crimson now. His eyes dropped before the Housemaster's.

Mr. Railton waited—and a strange expression came over his face. He waited, but there was no word from the junior. Slowly the Housemaster's look hardened.

"Talbot! I am waiting for your answer!"

The crimson receded again, leaving Talbot's face deadly pale. He made an effort to speak, but the words seemed to die upon his lips.

"Talbot! Answer me!"

"I have nothing to say, sir."

"What?" Mr. Railton's brow was dark now—the kindness was gone from his face. "Are you in your senses, Talbot? I ask you to give me your word that you knew nothing of the theft in my study."

"I have nothing to say."

"Do you understand, boy, what that reply means?"

A look of suffering passed, for an instant, over Talbot's pale face. He knew—he knew only too well. But his tongue was tied.

"For the last time, Talbot?"

"I have nothing to say, sir."

"Very well." The Housemaster's manner was as hard as iron now. "There is only one conclusion to be drawn from your silence, Talbot. You will now come with me to your headmaster."

And Talbot of the Shell, in silence, followed the Housemaster to the study of Dr. Holmes.

CHAPTER 4. Treasure Trove I

"**B**LOW it!"

Baggy Trimble was annoyed.

He was on his knees beside the orifice in the box-room floor, groping under the boards for the tin of pineapple.

He puffed and panted for breath, and his fat face grew crimson as he groped and fumbled.

But his fat fingers did not close on the pineapple-tin.

He had shoved it hastily under the loose board, expecting to retrieve it without difficulty. But it had rolled away—rolled beyond the reach of his fingers. Baggy had intended to conceal the tin from the eyes of its owners; and he had done so—rather too successfully.

"Oh dear! Blow it!" groaned Baggy.

He groped and groped again. It was dark under the floor-boards; he could see little in the dusty, cobwebby shadows. He fumbled in his pocket for a box of matches, and struck a match, and blinked down into the opening again. The tin of pineapple was not to be seen; but there was something else to be seen. Lying there within easy reach of Trimble's fat paw, was a little bundle of papers.

Trimble blinked at that little bundle in amazement. He knew currency notes when he saw them. It was a bundle of currency notes that lay there, under his startled eyes.

He was so amazed that he remained blinking at the unexpected treasure, till the match burnt his fingers. Then he gave a yelp.

"Ow!"

Hastily Baggy struck another match. Then he clutched out the bundle of currency notes, with fingers that trembled with eagerness.

Quite forgetful of the elusive tin of pineapple now, Trimble carried his unexpected prize across to the box-room window, to examine it in the failing light.

His little round eyes were distended with amazement as he turned over the wad of notes in his hands.

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Thirty—forty—fifty of them! Baggy Trimble, the most impecunious fellow at St. Jim's, the borrower of twopences and sixpences, had the sum of fifty pounds in his hands.

It was so amazing, so utterly staggering, that Baggy could scarcely believe his eyes.

He counted the notes, one by one, breathlessly.

Fifty! Fifty pound notes! Fifty pounds hidden away under the floor of the box-room. And Baggy Trimble had found them!

How the notes had come there was an insoluble mystery to Baggy. Had there been any news of a theft in the House, he could have understood—the thief had hidden his plunder under the loose board in the box-room. But Baggy had heard nothing of missing money. He could see that the bundle had been there some little time—probably days, for dust had gathered on it, and a spider-web trailed on it. Days at least—weeks, or months, or years, for all Baggy knew to the contrary.

He was glad that he had locked the door of the box-room. He had his discovery all to himself now.

To do Baggy justice, the first clear thought in his astonished mind was to do what he knew ought to be done—to take the strangely-discovered treasure to his Housemaster.

But that thought did not linger in Baggy's fat mind. Another much more furtive thought followed it.

"Findings keepings!" he murmured.

Along with that thought came an uncomfortable thrill of guilt. Baggy was undoubtedly a fool; but he was not fool enough to believe that findings were keepings where valuables were concerned. If he kept the money he had found, other fellows would find a much more unpleasant description for his conduct.

But Baggy's fat fingers were tight on the bundle of notes. It was the first time his greedy clutches had ever closed on such a sum of money.

According to the airy talk of Baggy Trimble, such sums were very small beer to him—Trimble Hall, that very desirable residence, was a place that reeked of tenners and fivers. But none of the wealth of Trimble Hall ever found its way as far as Trimble's study in the Fourth Form passage in the School House of St. Jim's. In holiday-time, according to Trimble, he fairly rolled in fivers. In term-time he had not enough twopences to roll in. But all the Doubting Thomases who chortled at Trimble Hall, would chortle in quite a different manner now—now that Trimble of the Fourth could make good his airy swank. Certainly there was no fellow at St. Jim's who walked about with fifty pounds in his pockets. Even D'Arcy of the Fourth considered it rather a good thing to get a fiver from home—even Racke of the Shell, the heir of the profiteer Sir Jonas Racke, whose pocket-money was abundant and conspicuous, never had fifty pounds at once in his hands. Baggy had heard that Crooke of the Shell had so much pocket-money that his Housemaster had written to Mr. Crooke on the subject, and caused the too-ample supply to be stopped. But even Gerald Crooke would never have sported a wad of notes like this.

Baggy grinned as he thought of it.

Fifty pounds!

Unlimited swank, and unlimited tuck, for the rest of the term. He would stand a feed in the study—hitherto, he had been an unwelcome hanger-on at other fellows' feeds. Generally he sponged for tea on his study-mate, Wildrake—his other study-mate, Mellish, being always ready with a cuff or a kick if Baggy's fat fingers strayed towards his property. Baggy would show them now.

And then, with a sinking of the heart, Baggy realised what was likely to happen to a fellow who spent money not his own.

At that unpleasant thought, the lure of the tuckshop rather lost its attraction.

Better not be in a hurry to spend the money, Trimble reflected. Better make sure first.

The temptation was strong; but Baggy realised that he had better resist it. Still, even if he did not spend it, the money was there. He was a rich fellow now—in his fat hands he had tangible proof of the splendours of Trimble Hall, and the vast wealth of Trimble senior.

That was something! Tuck came first in Baggy's estimation; but swank came a good second.



"Stop thief!" cried Lowther, brandishing the poker, and following hard on the track of the fleeing Trimble. "Stop him!" "Bai Jove! What—" ejaculated D'Arcy. Blake & Co. lined up across the passage, to stop the fugitive. (See Chapter 1.)

Baggy slipped the bundle of notes into an inside pocket. He closed the loose board in the floor, and replaced the box over it. Then he unlocked the door of the box-room and rolled away. He had forgotten the purloined pineapple now. What did a pineapple matter to a fellow with fifty pounds in his pocket?

Baggy rolled away to his study—No. 2 in the Fourth. Mellish and Wildrake were at tea there.

Baggy Trimble's manner was much more important than usual as he rolled into the study. He held his fat little nose high, as became a fellow in possession of more wealth than any other St. Jim's fellow had ever possessed.

He gave the tea-table a disparaging look.

"Nothing decent for tea?" he asked. "Sardines—and a bob cake! Oh, my hat!"

His study-mates stared at him.

"The cake's mine," said Mellish acidly. "I'm whacking it out with Wildrake—he whacks out with me. If you touch it, you know what you'll get."

Wildrake smiled.

"The sardines are mine," he said. "I guess you can wire in if you like, fatty."

"More duffer you!" said Mellish, shrugging his shoulders.

But Baggy did not wire in.

He sniffed contemptuously.

"Thanks—I'm not keen on sardines," he said. "As for your rotten cake, Mellish, you can keep it!"

"Did you bag a good feed in Tom Merry's study?" chuckled Mellish. "I heard that those chaps were after your scalp."

"I hope I can afford something decent for tea," said Baggy.

"Well, nobody's stopping you," said Mellish, with a sneer. "Have you touched that ass Gussy for a loan?"

"I've had a rather decent remittance from home."

"Gammon!"

"I guess you'd better stop chewing the rag and pile in, if you want any of these sardines, Trimble," said Wildrake good-humouredly.

"I don't!" sniffed Baggy.

"Good! All the more for me, then!" said Wildrake imperturbably. "This is a bit of a change, I guess."

"I've mentioned that I've had a good remittance from Trimble Hall."

"You've mentioned that lots of times, but I guess no galoot has ever seen the remittance."

Baggy slid a fat hand into his pocket and paused. He was powerfully tempted to display his new wealth, but a remnant of common-sense restrained him. He had resolved to discover, if he could, how the mysterious treasure had come into its hiding-place under the box-room floor before he openly appropriated it as his own. How it had come there was an utter mystery to Baggy; but it was obvious, of course, that somebody must have placed it there. The only explanation Baggy could think of was that it had been hidden there long ago by somebody who had since left St. Jim's and forgotten it, or had been prevented somehow from recovering it. If there was no claimant for the fifty pounds, it was Baggy's. That it was stolen money, hidden recently by the thief, did not occur to Baggy; and that, perhaps, was natural enough, as there had been no talk of a theft in the school—and the theft of such a sum as fifty pounds would have caused endless talk and sensation.

Baggy intended to make some cautious inquiries—to ascertain, at least, that nobody at present in the school knew anything about the hidden money. That was only cautious.

But it was one matter to make plans and another to carry them out. The currency notes were already burning a hole in Trimble's pocket.

His fat fingers closed on the wad of notes, and his resolution faded away under the temptation to astonish his studymates with a display of his wealth. And Baggy was hungry, too!

Mellish was regarding him very curiously. There was something new about Trimble, and Mellish saw that clearly. If he was by some miraculous chance in possession of funds for once, Mellish was quite prepared to be friendly.

Baggy hesitated—and it is well said that he who hesitates is lost!

"If you don't believe I've got a remittance, Wildrake—" he began.

"I guess I don't care a continental red cent whether you have or not," answered the Canadian junior. "No business of mine."

"Some fellows' paters have plenty of money," said Trimble scornfully.

"Some!" agreed Mellish. "Not yours!"

"I want something decent for tea," said Baggy. "A grubby cake and sardines won't do for me. Look here, if I stand something decent, you fellows can cut down to the shop and get it for me, what?"

"Rats!" said Wildrake.

"Oh, I don't mind," said Mellish, with a grin. "If you've touched some stranger for a loan, all right."

"How could I touch a stranger for a loan, you ass?"

"Well, you couldn't touch anybody that knew you."

"I've said I've had a big remittance from home!" snorted Trimble.

"And I've said 'gammon'!"

"Don't give me any cheek, Mellish," said Baggy loftily. "You cut down to the shop and get a pound's worth of tuck for tea. I'm paying."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Mellish.

But the laugh suddenly died on Percy Mellish's lips, as Baggy drew a wad of currency notes from his pocket, detached a single pound note from the elastic band, and threw it on the table.

"There you are!" said Baggy.

"My only hat!"

Wildrake jumped up, his face very grave.

"Trimble, you born idiot, where did you get all that money?"

"Trimble Hall!"

"Oh, don't give me that guff!" exclaimed Wildrake impatiently. "You've got a wad of greenbacks there."

"Fifty pounds," said Trimble coolly.

"It can't be your own money!"

"Look here, Wildrake—"

"Been robbing a bank?" asked Mellish.

"You silly ass—"

"I guess this is jolly serious," said Wildrake. "You're fool enough to get yourself into any kind of trouble, Trimble. For goodness' sake, tell me where you got that money—for your own sake, you pesky duffer!"

Trimble gave him a glare of contempt.

"My pater's shelled out," he answered. "I've told you so. It's a—a—a birthday present. I—I'm to buy it myself with the money. But I can spare a quid or two from a whacking remittance like this."

Wildrake eyed him very doubtfully.

"Well, if you keep to that, I guess it's no business of mine," he said. "If your father's sent you such a sum of money, he ought to have more sense."

"You go and eat coke!" said Trimble. "Fifty pounds is nothing to my pater. He spends ten times as much on a single evening when he's entertaining Royalty at Trimble Hall."

"Oh, can it!" said Wildrake. And the Canadian junior, having finished his tea, left the study.

Mellish eyed Trimble dubiously. But he was not so particular upon such matters as Wildrake. One fact was clear—Baggy Trimble was rolling in money. Any fellow rolling in money was a fellow that Percy Mellish delighted to honour. It was unlikely enough that he

had received such a remittance from his father. But it was still more unlikely, so far as Mellish could see, that he had obtained the money from any other source. Mellish was all smiles now. The responsibility was not his, anyhow.

"Are you going down to the shop?" demanded Trimble.

"Yes, rather, old chap!"

And Mellish picked up the pound note and went.

There was a spread of unusual proportions in Study No. 2 when Mellish came back. Still more unusual, it was Baggy Trimble who was standing it. That evening Mellish helped Baggy with his prep in the most friendly and affectionate manner. "Sunday prep" was a great bore to Trimble—he did not admire that great poet John Milton, a section of whose work had to be prepared. Mellish had never helped him with it before. Now he helped him in the most painstaking way. A prophet is said to be without honour in his own country; but Baggy Trimble was honoured in his own study—at least, by Mellish. And there were still forty-nine pounds in Baggy Trimble's pocket.

CHAPTER 5.

Where is Talbot?

"WHERE'S Talbot?"

Crooke of the Shell asked that question.

Gerald Crooke had come in just in time for calling-over. Crooke looked ruddy and well—much more fit than usual. The slacker of the Shell had been for a long spin on his bicycle that afternoon, and certainly it had done him more good than hanging about the studies, or sneaking in at the back door of the Green Man with Racke and Clampe and Mellish. He looked tired, but he looked well, and for once there was colour in his cheeks and brightness in his eyes.

Crooke had been just in time to answer "adsum" when his name was called by Mr. Railton in Hall. He had looked round the ranks of the Shell—looking for his cousin Talbot. But Talbot was not to be seen there.

Apparently Talbot of the Shell had cut call-over, a very uncommon proceeding on his part. Talbot was generally very careful indeed in keeping to the regulations of his House.

Crooke felt a vague sense of uneasiness in noting that Talbot was absent. He noticed, too, as all the Shell fellows did, that Mr. Railton did not call Talbot's name. Apparently the Housemaster did not expect Talbot to be there. It was odd enough, and Crooke could see that Tom Merry & Co. were puzzled; indeed, he thought he could read uneasiness in the face of Tom Merry. And Crooke leaned towards the Terrible Three and asked in a whisper where Talbot was.

Tom looked round at him and shook his head.

"You don't know?" asked Crooke.

"No."

"He played in the football match?"

"Yes."

"Well, why—"

"Silence!" called out Darrell of the Sixth, with a frowning glance at the Shell.

And Gerald Crooke had to control his impatience till Hall was cleared. He stood biting his lip while the School House master went through the rest of the roll.

He was uneasy, unquiet. A feeling of fear was rising within him. That afternoon, he knew, it was practically certain that Mr. Railton would miss the money that had been taken from his desk. He would require it for the House accounts that Saturday. That bundle of notes which Gerald Crooke in a mad moment had taken, and which he had not been able to return to the Housemaster's desk, in spite of his effort to do so—that bundle of notes must be missed by this time. It was for that reason that Crooke had gone out of gates all the afternoon and stayed out till calling-over. He wanted to be off the scene when the startling news spread through St. Jim's and both Houses buzzed with the excitement of it. He had expected to see the signs of excitement when he came back. But there was nothing out of the

normal to be noticed, excepting that Talbot was not in his usual place in the Shell at roll-call.

Had not Mr. Railton discovered his loss yet? If he had he had not made it known to the school. No one knew yet that fifty pounds in currency notes had mysteriously disappeared from the Housemaster's desk. The thought came into Crooke's mind that if only he could get his hands on the Housemaster's key once more he might yet have a chance of replacing what he had taken. But where was Talbot? Of all the St. Jim's fellows only Talbot knew his guilt, that act of frantic folly, rather than guilt, which he had striven in vain to retrieve. But nobody could know that Talbot knew. Talbot's absence could have nothing to do with that. And yet Crooke felt terror rising within him.

Hall was cleared at last, and Crooke hurried up to the Terrible Three at once in the corridor. Tom Merry's face was clouded with thought. Manners and Lowther looked a little perturbed. Other fellows were remarking on the absence of Talbot of the Shell in wonder.

"Tom Merry, is—is there anything wrong?" asked Crooke, touching the captain of the Shell on the arm.

Tom looked at him steadily.

"If there is, Crooke, you should know it," he answered.

Crooke started back, paleness creeping over his face.

"What—what do you mean? What should I know?"

"I can't understand it," said Tom. "Kildare of the Sixth came down to the football ground and watched the game all through the second half. He came with us to the changing-room and waited at the door. He took Talbot away to the Housemaster's study. It seems to me that he was watching Talbot all the time."

"That's fairly clear," said Manners.

"It looked like it," said Lowther. "But what rot! Talbot can't be suspected of anything, I suppose?"

"Of course not!" said Tom, knitting his brows. "That's rot! But it's no good blinking the fact that Kildare was keeping an eye on him. Goodness knows why. Nobody's seen him since he went to the Housemaster. Again, nobody knows why. Talbot had a look on his face when Kildare walked him off." The captain of the Shell paused. "I'm feeling uneasy. I hardly know why. I wish Talbot would come along."

"Why was he taken to the Housemaster's study?" asked Crooke.

"Nobody knows."

"Didn't Kildare say?"

"Not a syllable."

"Has—has anything happened?" Then, as he caught the surprised looks of the Shell fellows, Crooke realised that he was betraying himself. At all costs he must keep his knowledge of the theft a secret, if it was not already generally known. "I—I mean, anything—anything that would account for Talbot being called up before the Housemaster?"

"Nothing," said Tom. "Nothing that we know of. But you—"

"I?" ejaculated Crooke.

"You!" said Tom, eyeing him steadily. "If some trouble's dropped on old Talbot, I can't help thinking it's in connection with you, Crooke."

Gerald Crooke scarcely breathed.

"Why? What do you mean?" he faltered.

"Talbot's been very thick with you for a week or more, and as a rule you never speak, though you're cousins. In fact, you've always been Talbot's enemy. Everybody knows that you've been in trouble lately. You showed it in your face all over the House. You scrapped with Racke because he refused to lend you money—quarrelled with all your friends. I knew jolly well that you were playing on Talbot's good-nature and landing your troubles on him. I wasn't the only fellow that knew that. It was like him to stand by a chap who'd never been his friend. Now something's happened—goodness knows what. But I can't help thinking you're in it somehow."

"Looks like it," said Manners, with a very curious look at Crooke's tormented face.

"I'm not Talbot's enemy," said the black sheep of the Shell in a low voice. "I'm his friend. He's been awfully decent to me, and I hope I know how to feel it a little. He's helped me a lot."

"I know he has," said Tom.

"He—he told you—" panted Crooke.

Tom Merry's lips curled.

"Is Talbot the fellow to tell anybody? Of course he hasn't told me a word. But you've chucked up going about looking like a fellow who's going to be hanged, which means that you've got out of your trouble, whatever it was. What I'm afraid of is that you've landed it somehow on Talbot."

"Tom Mewwy, deah boy!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy joined the group, and his eyeglass gleamed disfavoured at Gerald Crooke. "Do you know where old Talbot is?"

Tom shook his head.

"Fellows are sayin' that there's somethin' up," said Arthur Augustus. "Is old Talbot booked for a wow?"

"I hope not."

"He hasn't been kickin' ovah the twaces, what!" inquired the swell of the Fourth. "You Shell fellows are wathah weckless youngstahs."

Crooke drew a deep breath.

"Talbot can't be in trouble," he said. "Why should he be? But I'm going to ask the Housemaster what's the matter. If my cousin's in trouble, I've a right to know."

"Bai Jove! I should nevah have expected you to

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utah a very pwopah sentiment like that, Cwooke!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, in surprise. "I quite approve!"

"After which there remains nothing to be said," remarked Monty Lowther.

"You haven't asked Mr. Railton?" inquired Crooke, looking at the captain of the Shell.

"No. I was thinking of it, but—"

"Well, I'm not going to think of it, I'm going to do it!" snapped Crooke. And he walked away towards Mr. Railton's study, leaving the juniors staring after him in surprise.

"Crooke seems mighty concerned about Talbot all of a sudden," said Manners. "He's never been before."

"It's plain enough that Talbot's lately got him out of some awful scrape," said Tom. "I suppose even Crooke might feel grateful."

"Hem! He might!"

"Weally, Mannahs, I think that Cwooke is showin' up wathah well," said Arthur Augustus. "I am vewy glad to see him concerned about old Talbot. I am suah that somethin' has happened. Bai Jove, heah's Twimble! Twimble always knows ewerythin'. Let's ask him."

"He always will so long as they make keyholes to doors," agreed Monty Lowther. "Here, Trimble!"

Baggy Trimble eyed the Terrible Three warily.

"If you're going to make a fuss about that pine apple—" he began.

"Wats! Do you know where Talbot is?" asked D'Arcy.

"Eh? No. Now I think of it, he cut call-over," said Baggy. "Stayed late out of gates, I suppose."
 "He hasn't been out of gates," grunted Tom Merry.
 "And he doesn't seem to be in the House," said Manners. "Blessed if a fellow can guess what's become of him."

Trimble considered.

"I've heard that he used to be mixed up with a gang of fearful characters before he came to St. Jim's," he said. "Perhaps he's gone back to them."

"What?" roared Tom Merry.

"Bai Jove!"

"Likely enough, don't you think?" asked Baggy Trimble brightly. "You see—Here! Wharrer you at? Yaroooh! Whoooooop!"

Bump!

Baggy Trimble sat down on the floor, hard, and roared. Tom Merry & Co. walked away and left him roaring.

CHAPTER 6.

Crooke Does His Best!

GERALD CROOKE tapped at Mr. Railton's door with a shaking hand.

He was well aware that it was imprudent to speak to the Housemaster; to betray that he had any concern in what might have happened. Crooke's game was to lie low; to say nothing; to assume no more knowledge than the other fellows, when the news of the theft was made public. If Talbot had somehow become mixed up in the matter, as Crooke could not help fearing, it was Gerald Crooke's cue to keep quite clear, and not to run the slightest risk of self-betrayal. He knew it, and yet he went at once to the Housemaster's study. He felt that he had to know—that he must know! And he was feeling, too, a trace of concern for Talbot—the fellow who had generously helped him out of his terrible scrape, and who, it seemed, was now in trouble. How his trouble could be connected with the missing money, Crooke could not imagine. But some sure instinct warned him that such was the case.

Mr. Railton's voice bade him enter, and Crooke stepped into the study. The Housemaster's face was very grave.

"What is it, Crooke?"

Crooke breathed hard.

"I—I want to—to ask you, sir—"

He faltered.

"Well?"

"My cousin, sir—Talbot of the Shell," said Crooke. "He cut call-over, and the fellows don't seem to know where he is. His friends seem to think something has happened to him."

"No doubt," assented the Housemaster.

"I'm rather anxious about him, sir," said Crooke more boldly. "He's my cousin, sir."

"Quite so," assented Mr. Railton. "But more than once, Crooke, it has been brought to my notice that you were on bad terms with your cousin. Indeed, your uncle, Colonel Lyndon, has referred to it."

"That's all over, sir," muttered Crooke.

"I am glad to hear it," Mr. Railton glanced very curiously at Gerald Crooke's face, which plainly betrayed his distress of mind. "If you are sincerely concerned about your cousin, Crooke—"

"I am, indeed, sir!"

"Am I to understand that you are now on friendly terms with Talbot?" asked Mr. Railton thoughtfully.

"Certainly, sir."

"It is possible, then, that you know something of Talbot's affairs, and may be able to enlighten me a little," said the Housemaster. "No, doubt you have heard what appears to have been the talk of the Lower School for some days past—that Talbot was in want of money—of a large sum of money."

Crooke shivered.

"I—I've heard the fellows speak of it, sir. I—I think it was a silly yarn started by Trimble of the Fourth. He's always telling some tale or other."

"You think there was nothing in the story, Crooke?"

"I'm sure that Talbot was never in want of a large sum of money, sir," said Crooke. "I know he's very

careful with his money, and always has some in hand—he always has something in the bank, too."

"Yet, according to the story that has been going about the school, he asked Colonel Lyndon for fifty pounds the day his uncle was here."

Crooke repressed his rising terror. He had feared that Trimble's tattle would, sooner or later, reach the ears of the masters. But neither Mr. Railton nor the Head was likely to guess that Talbot had asked Colonel Lyndon for fifty pounds, to help Crooke to settle a gambling debt with Mr. Lodgey at the Green Man; to get back the paper he had recklessly left in the hands of the sharper. Neither was anyone likely to guess that the colonel had so great a faith and trust in Talbot of the Shell, that he had handed him that large sum of money. Was it simply on account of that rumour that Talbot of the Shell had been taken before the Housemaster? But if so, where was he now? What had happened? Talbot, at least, had not betrayed Crooke—the wretched black sheep was sure of that. Whatever had happened to the "Toff," he had not mentioned Crooke's name. Indeed, the Housemaster's manner was an assurance of that.

Mr. Railton was watching Crooke's face keenly.

"Do you know anything of this, Crooke?"

"I—I know what the fellows have been saying, sir," faltered Crooke. "I—I think it's all rot. Trimble was eavesdropping while my uncle was talking to Talbot, and he heard something, and—and misunderstood, I think, sir."

"That is quite probable," assented Mr. Railton. "You do not believe, then, that your cousin was in some desperate need of money?"

"I am sure not, sir."

"Do you know enough of his private affairs to be so sure?"

"I think so, sir. Talbot isn't a fellow to have secrets," said Crooke. "Tom Merry would know—he's Talbot's best pal; and I'm certain he would say the same if you asked him."

"You are aware, Crooke, of the peculiar circumstances of Talbot's life before he came to this school. You are aware that on certain occasions he has been approached by persons who knew him in his former life. Are you aware whether anything of the kind has occurred recently?"

"I—I think not, sir."

"On that supposition, it would be possible to account for Talbot suddenly requiring a large sum of money," said Mr. Railton. "He may have been threatened by some associate of former years."

Crooke smiled involuntarily.

"It wouldn't pay anybody to threaten Talbot, sir. He's about the last fellow at St. Jim's to take any notice of a threat."

"Certainly that was my impression of him," said Mr. Railton musingly. "Yet, otherwise, how to account—"

He broke off.

"But, sir," Crooke went on as the Housemaster stood silent—"but, sir, surely Talbot isn't in trouble because of this talk about him—a silly yarn, sir. Even—even if he asked Uncle Lyndon for money, that's nothing against him, is it, sir?"

"Something has occurred, Crooke, which makes it very important," said Mr. Railton.

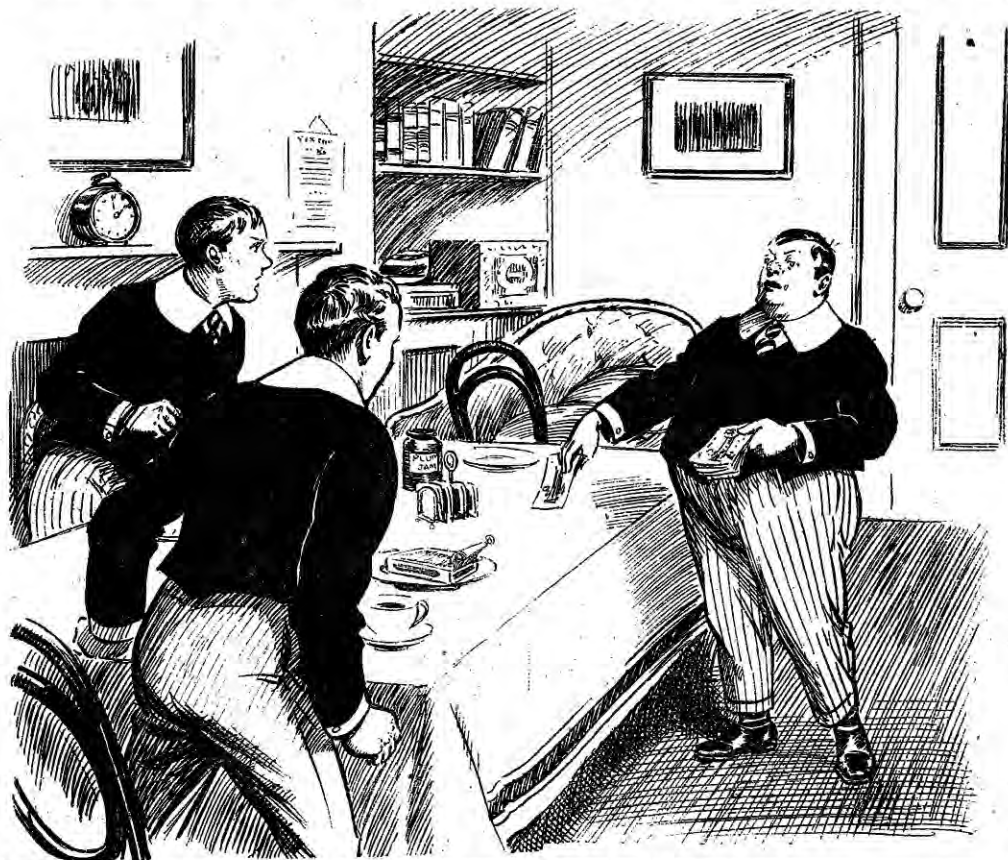
Crooke's heart almost died within him. What had occurred?

"May I—may I ask what it is, sir?"

The Housemaster did not reply.

"I'm his cousin, sir—his friend," said Crooke. "I can answer for it that Talbot of the Shell is straight as a die. Any fellow in the House will say the same—even fellows who don't like him. Why, sir, if he wanted money, he would only have to ask. Even such a whacking sum as fifty pounds, sir. Why, when that yarn got round that he was hard up, the whole House rose to it, sir—fellows he hardly knew came and offered to help. Fellows he never speaks to—even fellows he's on ill terms with—there wasn't a man in the House who wasn't ready to help him through. New House men, too, sir—all the school."

"I am aware that Talbot is very popular," said Mr. Railton. "But such a sum as fifty pounds is very large.



"Just you cut down to the shop, Mellish, and get me a pound's worth of tuck for tea," said Baggy Trimble loftily. "I'm paying!" The fat Fourth-Former drew a wad of currency notes from his pocket, detached a single pound note from it, and threw it on the table. Wildrake jumped up, his face very grave. "Trimble, you born idiot!" he cried. "Where did you get all that money?" (See Chapter 4.)

And Talbot declines to make the least explanation as to why he wanted it."

Crooke was already sure of that.

"I shall tell you what has occurred, Crooke, as you are Talbot's cousin, and apparently deeply concerned in his fate," said Mr. Railton. "The news has not yet been made generally known—and you will not speak of it outside this study, until the Head has decided. But it is possible that you may be able to help, as you are related to the unfortunate boy. Fifty pounds in currency notes has been taken from my desk."

Crooke's face whitened.

"Oh, sir!"

"The desk was locked, and it was opened without a trace being left," said Mr. Railton. "The currency notes are gone, and may have been gone for many days. There is only one person in this House who could thus open my desk without a key. My faith in Talbot has received a very severe shock. Even to Dr. Holmes, he refuses to make any explanation. He will not even give his word that he knew nothing of the theft before I spoke of it to him. That is practically a confession of guilt; and yet—"

Gerald Crooke trembled.

"You—you suspect Talbot?" he gasped.

The truth came like a flood of illumination to Crooke's mind.

He had not thought of it before—but he realised it now. Money taken from a locked desk, with no sign left of a forced lock! Whom was the Housemaster to suspect, excepting Talbot—once known as the Toff, the prince of cracksmen?

Crooke's heart was sick within him.

He had not thought of it—he had never dreamed of it. Yet now that he did think of it, he realised that it had been inevitable. Mr. Railton was not aware that the key had ever been out of his possession. What was he to think?

"If Talbot is guilty, I shall feel it impossible ever to trust a boy again," said Mr. Railton, with a sombre look. "But what am I to think? What is the Head to think? Talbot clearly knew of the theft before it was mentioned to him. Crooke, if you can say anything to throw light on this matter, you see that it is your duty to do so."

"Talbot is innocent, sir!" panted Crooke. "Oh, it's a shame—a shame!"

"Crooke!"

"The best fellow in the school—the fellow who would stand by any chap who was down on his luck, and never say a word about it. Oh, it's a shame—a rotten shame!"

"I quite understand your feelings, Crooke," said the Housemaster quietly, "but you can see for yourself—"

"I know that Talbot would cut his hand off before he would touch your money, or anyone else's, sir," said Crooke. "I don't care what he was before he came to St. Jim's—I know what he is now. All the fellows know. Ask any chap in the House. He was a little kid when those rotters got hold of him and turned him into a cracksmen. He chucked it all up as soon as he understood. I've never been his friend, until lately, but I'd have trusted him with anything. Anybody would."

"You speak very positively, Crooke. I am glad to see your faith in Talbot. But, after all, you are only expressing an opinion, which I shared until this miserable occurrence. Can you tell me anything that will help to clear Talbot, if he is innocent?"

Crooke suppressed a groan.

Certainly, he could have done so—at the cost of confessing his own guilt. But Crooke was not equal to that.

"Can you explain why he refuses to speak—why he refuses to give his word that he knew nothing of the theft?"

"I—I think—"

"What do you think, Crooke?" asked the Housemaster quietly. "Believe me, I am only too anxious to hear even the slightest suggestion that may tell in Talbot's favour."

"Suppose, sir, suppose—" Crooke's voice trailed off, but he went on with an effort: "Suppose somebody got hold of your key, sir?"

"Impossible!"

"You—you might have dropped it somewhere, sir."

"The key has not been out of my keeping, Crooke. It is in my pocket at the present moment."

"Suppose, sir—" Crooke knew that he was nearing danger, but all that was good in him was to the fore now. Talbot was to suffer for his crime—for his act of madness—Talbot, who had saved him from becoming a thief! At any cost, Talbot must be saved—except at the cost of Crooke taking his place as the accused. Crooke could not face that. "Suppose, sir, suppose," he went on, with dry lips—"suppose you dropped the key somewhere, and—a—a fellow picked it up?"

"I repeat that it is now in my pocket."

"Yes, sir, but the fellow—the thief, after using it, may have put it back, somehow!" stammered Crooke.

"You suggest that some boy, not Talbot, may have found my key—which I am certainly not aware of having dropped—may have robbed my desk, and then returned the key to me without my knowledge! Come, come!"

It was exactly what had happened; and yet it sounded utterly improbable in the Housemaster's words.

"I—I don't mean the key could have been put into your pocket without you knowing it, sir!" stammered Crooke. "It might have been left in your study, sir, for you to find—"

"I have never found my key lying about my study, Crooke."

"It might have been slipped into the pocket of your gown, when you weren't wearing it, sir, or—or some old jacket—"

Crooke's eyes rested for a moment on the Housemaster's old Norfolk jacket, hanging on a peg in the study. Mr. Railton sometimes slipped on that comfortable, shabby old jacket to work in the evening.

The Housemaster started.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed.

"You—you think it's possible, sir—" stammered Crooke.

"It is possible," said the Housemaster very slowly. "I recall, Crooke, that although I never keep that key in the pocket of that old Norfolk jacket, I found it there one evening this week. I supposed that I had slipped it into the pocket while wearing the jacket without observing it. I gave no heed to the incident. But now you suggest—"

The Housemaster broke off, his face dark with thought.

"It is possible—possible—that the desk was opened with the key, and not by an accomplished cracksmen without a key," he said slowly. "The bare possibility exists, at all events."

Crooke breathed hard and deep.

The "bare possibility" was the truth, for it was Crooke who had found the key, and, after using it, had slipped it into the pocket of the old Norfolk jacket.

"This opens a new line of investigation," said Mr. Railton, knitting his brows. "I am glad—very glad—that I spoke to you on the subject, Crooke. I considered it possible that you might be able to shed some light on this mysterious matter—and undoubtedly

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you have done so. I shall certainly follow up this new line."

Crooke's teeth almost chattered. What had he done? That new line of investigation was to be followed up—and if it led to anything at all it could only lead to Gerald Crooke!

Yet he was not sorry that he had spoken. Crooke was not a particular fellow, but to let the fellow who had saved him suffer for his crime was beyond Crooke's limit.

"Yet this does not explain, Talbot's silence," said Mr. Railton musingly. "Even if he is not guilty, his silence would indicate that he knows the thief and refuses to betray him. That, however, is a very light matter in comparison with a theft. He may be under some promise to respect a confidence; he may have learned the facts by accident, and may have a natural shrinking from uttering words that might



CAMEOS OF LIFE!

THE TRIALS OF

The life a page-boy must endure
Is not a bed of roses;
Nor is his job a sinecure
As many a chap supposes.
He rises earlier than the lark
Or other feathered beauties;
And still he's slogging, after dark,
At many menial duties!

He has a hundred pairs of boots
To blacken and to polish;
Ere to the servants' room he scoots,
His breakfast to demolish.
The bread of idleness is not
A meal that he may swallow;
A host of duties he has got,
And further hosts to follow!

On divers errands, to and fro
He dashes helter-skelter;
Whether the roads be deep in snow,
Or old King Sol doth swelter.
He dare not shrink his daily work
To snatch an hour of pleasure;
Nor in odd corners dare he lurk
Reading THE GEM at leisure!



ruin a school-fellow—even a thief. It may be the memory of his own unhappy past which makes him resolved not to give assistance in detecting the guilty party. So long as he is innocent of the theft all else may be forgiven."

"He is innocent, sir," muttered Crooke.

"I hope so—I trust so. For the present, however, it is the Head's desire that he should not mingle with the other boys until this matter is cleared up," said Mr. Railton. "He will not be seen again in the House at present."

"But—but where is he, sir?"

"In the Head's house, Crooke; and he will remain there for the present. You will say nothing of this until Dr. Holmes makes some public announcement, of

course. You may go, Crooke; I shall speak to Dr. Holmes at once, and if Talbot's innocence should be proved you may have the pleasure, my boy, of knowing that you have helped."

Crooke dragged himself from the study.

What had he done?

Could the proof of Talbot's innocence consist in anything but the proof of his own guilt? What had he done?

CHAPTER 7. Gone!

TOM MERRY & CO. had troubled looks the next day.

It was Sunday, and as a rule Talbot of the Shell joined the Terrible Three on their usual "Sunday walk." On this especial Sunday they did not see Talbot.

S OF SCHOOL LIFE!

RIALS OF TOBY!

"I press a button," says the Head,
"And Toby comes like magic!"
Well, if he came with crawling tread
The outcome would be tragic!
"I give a shout," says Gerald Knox,
"And Toby stands before me!
Or he would suffer painful shocks
And find the outlook stormy!"

At everybody's beck and call
Poor Toby dashes dizzily;
There's Ratty, Railton, Knox and all
To keep him toiling busily.
He's running errands all the day
With swiftness and celerity;
For if he lingers by the way
They'd cuff him with severity!

So let us thank our lucky star
That we're not humble pages;
Dispatched on errands, near and far,
And drawing modest wages.
We sometimes grumble at our lot,
But let us smile like Robey,
And thank the gods that we are not
In the same shoes as Toby!



But it was known now where the missing Shell fellow was. It had leaked out that he was in the Head's house—some fellows had seen him taking a walk in the Head's private garden.

Talbot was in trouble—that was clear. He was under a kind of detention; he was being kept away from the rest of the school.

Why, his friends could not guess.

They considered that the matter could not be serious, or Talbot would have been locked up in the punishment-room. He was either suspected or accused of something—they could not imagine what. Yet the suspicion or accusation must be very doubtful, or certainly Talbot would have been locked up in "Nobody's Study."

That was the place where undoubted delinquents were placed in confinement.

But what could it all mean?

Tom Merry coddled his brains in vain over that problem. He had even gone to the length of inquiring of Mr. Railton: But the Housemaster had told him that, for the present, there was nothing to be said.

With that very unsatisfactory reply the captain of the Shell had to be satisfied.

It was a dismal Sunday to Tom. His thoughts were with his chum, now known by all the school to be under some vague suspicion. What was it that they had got against old Talbot? Tom asked himself and his friends passionately. But there was no reply to be had. Nobody knew—nobody could even guess. Tom had a well-grounded suspicion that Gerald Crooke was somehow mixed up in the trouble. Yet Crooke seemed to be as concerned about Talbot as his nearest and dearest chums. Crooke was certainly not a very sincere fellow, but in this case his sincerity was not to be doubted. If it was Crooke who had, in some mysterious way, landed this strange trouble on Talbot, it was clear at least that he was sorry for it.

Nothing had been said, so far, of a theft in the House. But many of the fellows were aware that some sort of an inquiry was going on.

The Sixth-Form prefects were often seen talking together in low voices, and they were asking all sorts of questions up and down the House. No doubt they supposed that they were proceeding very tactfully and warily, but, as a matter of fact, all the House knew that the prefects had been instructed by the headmaster to make some sort of an inquiry. Fellows wondered whether it had anything to do with Talbot's detention in the Head's house.

But there seemed no connection, as far as the fellows could see. The inquiry, such as it was, seemed chiefly concerned with a desire on the part of the Head to know whether any School House fellow had lately been in possession of unusual funds; whether any fellow had been spending money in unusually large amounts. That, so far as the juniors could see, could have no connection with Talbot of the Shell. It was simply a coincidence that it came along at the same time.

Crooke of the Shell knew that it was not a coincidence, but he kept his own counsel.

Mr. Railton was following up the new line of investigation opened by Crooke's own suggestion. Fifty pounds had been taken, and it was natural to suppose that the money had been taken for spending. So far as Crooke knew, the fifty currency notes were still hidden under the loose board in the box-room—he had not dared go near the place since hiding his loot there. Obviously, therefore, the cautious inquiries of the prefects could not elicit the information that any School House man had been squandering the stolen currency notes. But Crooke wondered, with deep disquietude, whether the inquiry might proceed further afield—whether Kildare, or Darrell, or Langton might pick up the information that a certain Shell fellow had had dealings with Mr. Lodgey at the Green Man, and had lately paid him a large sum of money.

Certainly the sum that Crooke had paid to Mr. Lodgey was the sum that Talbot had obtained from Colonel Lyndon for the purpose. Talbot had handed it to him in time to save the desperate fellow from using the money he had taken from Mr. Railton's desk. But any discovery of that sort would mean ruin for Gerald Crooke; his dealings with the sharper were enough to cause his expulsion from the school, even if he was held guiltless of theft.

Crooke tried to think that there was no danger in that direction; but he knew that there was danger. Once inquiry was started there was no telling what might come to light. And it was by his own act that investigation had been started. He had brought this danger upon himself, and at times he reproached himself for an act of folly. And yet, somehow, he did not regret what he had done.

That Sunday there were many fellows at St. Jim's whose faces were much more serious than usual. In both Houses Talbot of the Shell had many friends.

(Continued on page 17.)

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IS YOUR NAME HERE?**RESULT OF SPECIAL "BICYCLE" JOKE COMPETITION
NO. 3.****ISLINGTON READER WINS THIS
WEEK'S SPECIAL PRIZE OF A
FAMOUS "MEAD" BICYCLE!****SEVEN OTHER READERS WIN CONSOLATION PRIZES!****THIS WINS A BICYCLE!
TERRIBLE!**

Englishman (at Scottish football match): "Why don't they start? They ought to have kicked off half an hour ago."
 Scotsman: "Ay, something serious has happened."
 Englishman: "Not a player taken off ill?" Scotsman: "No, worse than that! They canna find the penny they tossed up with!"
 —The Special Prize of a "Mead" Bicycle has been awarded to Sydney Hancock, 22, Charlotte Terrace, Islington, N. 1.

ECONOMY!

Jimmy: "Father, I have saved you a pound to-day."
 Father: "Oh, Jimmy, and how have you managed that?"
 Jimmy: "Well, father, I bought a guinea-pig for a shilling!" —A topping Table Football game has been awarded to Milton Eatough, 23, Wellgate, Clitheroe, Yorks.

VERY STIRRING!

"I say, Percy, do you know that the Swiss Cafe does not provide teaspoons?" "Oh," said Percy, "and why not?" "Because they have recently engaged an orchestra," said Harold. "Pshaw! What has an orchestra to do with teaspoons?" "Well," answered Harold meekly, "they consider the music so stirring that spoons are unnecessary!" —A topping Table Football game has been awarded to John Windle, 22, Elmswood Avenue, Moss Side, Manchester.

A POSER FOR PAT!

Pat was hard at work digging a post-hole when the "boss" strolled up. "Well, Pat," he said, "do you think you will be able to get all that dirt back into the hole again?" Pat looked doubtfully at the heap of earth, then at the hole, and scratched his head thoughtfully. "No, sir," he replied. "Sure, I don't think I've dug the hole deep enough yet!" —A topping Table Football game has been awarded to J. Sheridan, Carlisleford, Dundalk, I. F. S.

EQUAL TO THE OCCASION!

Teacher: "Billy Brown, name me something important that was not known a hundred years ago." Billy (confidently): "Me, sir!" Teacher: "M'm! Now tell me the difference between a weasel and a stoat?" Billy: "Well, one you can 'weasel-ly' recognise, and the other's 'stoat-ally' different!" —A topping Table Football game has been awarded to F. L. Harris, 35, Osborne Road, Hounslow, Middlesex.

EASILY OVERCOME!

Patient: "My chief trouble, doctor, is with my breathing." Doctor (abruptly): "We'll soon put a stop to that!" —A topping Table Football game has been awarded to Miss Edith Pinkney, 55, Wellington Road, Bridlington, East Yorks.

**ANOTHER
VALUABLE
"GO-ANY-
WHERE"
MOUNT
AWARDED
NEXT WEEK,
CHUMS!**

**THE YOUNG IDEA AGAIN!**

Reading lesson was in progress when an inspector entered the Fourth Standard class-room of an elementary school. "What are the children reading about?" he inquired of the teacher. "American Indians," came the answer. "Oh," said the inspector. "I'll just try them with a few questions, then." He turned to the class. "What is an Indian's wife called?" he asked. There was an immediate show of hands. "Well," said the inspector, addressing a youngster in the front row, "can you tell me?" "Yes, sir," answered the little one, with a beaming smile. "A squaw, sir." The inspector looked pleased, and ventured another question. "And what is an Indian's baby called?" he asked. There was a silence for a while, then a little hand suddenly shot up. "Well, my boy," said the inspector, "and what is an Indian's baby called?" "Please, sir," said the youngster eagerly, "a squawker!" —A topping Table Football game has been awarded to Mas. R. Keen, 245, Manor Lane, Lee, S.E. 12.

PROOF POSITIVE!

Angry Customer: "I thought you said the coat you sold me yesterday was rainproof?" Shopkeeper: "So I did, sir." Angry Customer: "Then look at my suit—it is drenched!" Shopkeeper: "Well, is that not proof we have had rain?" —A topping Table Football game has been awarded to George Paterson, Cunningham Street, Tarbolton, Ayrshire.

RESULT OF**"BICYCLE" JOKE COMPETITION NO. 4****NEXT WEEK!**



THE TOFF'S SACRIFICE!

(Continued from
page 15.)

Figgins & Co. of the New House were deeply concerned, almost as much as the Terrible Three and Study No. 6 in the School House.

But there was, at least, one bright face—the fat and podgy countenance of Baggy Trimble of the Fourth. Baggy relied on his fatuous way with his nose in the air and a manner of great importance. His new wealth had been in his possession for twenty-four hours, and not a word—not a syllable—had Baggy heard of the subject. He was quite satisfied now that whoever had hidden those currency notes under the box-room floor was no longer at St. Jim's; that it was some hidden hoard belonging to a fellow who had left the school. That was, to Baggy's mind, the only way of accounting for the notes having been there at all, and for no inquiry being made after them now that they had been taken from their hiding-place. Baggy was satisfied now that findings were keepings, and a second pound note had been detached from the bundle and expended on refreshments, liquid and solid. And Baggy, with forty-eight pound notes still in his possession, was feeling like a millionaire. That evening, when Baggy passed Crooke in the passage, his bright and cheery countenance was a striking contrast to the gloomy, troubled visage of the Shell fellow. Gerald Crooke did not even glance at Baggy, however—he was too occupied with his own black thoughts to pay any heed to so unimportant a person as Trimble of the Fourth.

A thought had come into Crooke's mind during the day. He had pondered over it, and that evening he reached a decision.

Talbot was practically a prisoner in the Head's house. What if the stolen notes were replaced in Mr. Raitton's study—placed on his study table for him to find?

That would clear Talbot.

It would be known, beyond doubt, that Talbot could not have handled the notes. He was in the Head's house under observation.

He would be cleared, and the recovery of the stolen money, too, would take the keen edge off the inquiry for the thief.

Crooke thought and thought till his brain was almost in a whirl. He could clear Talbot by this device, but what if he brought suspicion on himself? He might be noticed groping about the box-room; he might be seen stealing into the Housemaster's study; there was risk—terrible risk. But Crooke was prepared to take risk to save Talbot from utter ruin—the ruin the Shell fellow had brought upon himself by helping Crooke.

It was with fear and trembling that Crooke made up his mind, but he made it up at last.

He left it till a late hour in the evening, and then quietly, stealthily, he sneaked away to the box-room. He locked the door and turned on the light of a pocket torch.

There was a box standing on the loose board in the corner—someone had shifted it there since Crooke had last been in the room. He pulled it aside and raised the loose board.

Kneeling by the opening, he groped for the bundle of notes.

His heart almost failed him, as his grasp failed to come into contact with the bundle.

He turned the light into the opening, he scanned the shadowy recess, he groped the full length of his arm in all directions. But the bundle of currency notes was not there.

Crooke rose to his feet, sick at heart.

The plunder was gone—it had been taken. Somehow—he could not imagine how—someone had found it there. Someone had taken it. His brain was almost reeling as he tried to think it out. Who had done this? Into whose hands had the bundle of notes fallen?

With shaking hands he replaced the loose board and the box. He unlocked the door and crept from the box-room, white as a sheet.

There was no hope now of replacing the currency notes where they might be found. That had to be given up. He could do nothing to help Talbot—he could only let matters take their course. Who had taken that bundle of notes? He could not even guess. Crooke went to his study in the Shell passage with a face so white that Tom Merry, who was in the passage, stared at him as he passed and made a movement towards him.

"Anything the matter, Crooke?"

"Eh?" stammered Crooke. "No!"

He went into his study and closed the door.

Where were the currency notes? Who had taken them? What was he to do now?

Nothing!

There was nothing that he could do—only await the course of events and leave Talbot to take his chance!

CHAPTER 8.

Findings Not Keepings!

"A ND half a dozen jam-tarts!"

"Yes, Master Trimble."

"And six doughnuts."

"Yes."

Dame Taggles was unusually respectful in her manner to Trimble of the Fourth.

It was Monday morning, and Baggy was doing a little shopping after class.

Apparently Baggy felt the need of a snack before dinner, and he was ordering quite a substantial snack.

Baggy would have been the very best customer at Dame Taggles' little shop at St. Jim's, every day and all days, had the good dame been prepared to run her business on a system of extended credit. Mrs. Taggles was not prepared to do so, however—and, as a rule, Baggy feasted only his eyes on the good things displayed behind the little diamond panes of the tuckshop window. But for once in a way Baggy was giving extensive orders without requesting Mrs. Taggles to leave the account over till he received a remittance from Trimble Hall. Mrs. Taggles' very worst customer had suddenly turned into her very best, and the dame's manner had changed accordingly. Pound notes seemed, just at present, as common as blackberries with Baggy Trimble. Dame Taggles had seen him take a whole wad of them out of his pocket. And so long as Baggy had pound notes to splash about, so long was he assured of the very best attention of Dame Taggles—so long, and no longer.

Several fellows in the tuckshop were interested in Baggy. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther were disposing of ginger-beer, and they could not help regarding Trimble with some surprise. Baggy in funds—ample funds—was quite a new Baggy. Percy Mellish was there, hanging on to Baggy Trimble with all the affection of a life-long pal. Racks of the Shell was there, and he had condescended to give Baggy a nod. Baggy seemed worth taking notice of for once. Baggy felt that all eyes were upon him, and he swelled with importance as he rapped out his orders.

"And a box of chocolates, Mrs. Taggles."

"Yes, Master Trimble."

"One of those ten-bob boxes," said Baggy recklessly.

"Oh! Yes, Master Trimble."

Kildare of the Sixth had stepped into the school shop, and he stood regarding Baggy Trimble with a very curious expression on his face. Trimble noticed him and grinned complacently. He was not unwilling to allow the captain of the school to observe what a very wealthy fellow he was and how he could afford to splash his money about. But as Dame Taggles was stacking up the good things before Trimble, Kildare came forward and tapped Baggy on the shoulder.

"You're wanted, Trimble," he said laconically.

"Eh?"

"Mr. Railton's study."

"Oh, I say!" ejaculated Trimble. "I—I was just going to have a little snack before dinner, Kildare."

Kildare smiled.

"Is that the snack? You wouldn't want much dinner after it, I should think. Anyhow, come along—I'm to take you to Mr. Railton."

"Just a minute, Kildare——"

"Not a second."

"Oh dear!"

Baggy Trimble was marched out of the school shop. Kildare glanced at him several times as they crossed the quad together. Baggy's fat face was annoyed and dismayed; but it was obviously the interruption of his intended feast that annoyed and dismayed him. He did not seem alarmed by the summons to the Housemaster's study.

"I hear that you are in great funds lately, Trimble," Kildare remarked.

Trimble nodded, and grinned.

"Oh, quite!" he answered.

"That's rather unusual with you, isn't it?"

"Not at all. I get whacking remittances from home, you know," said Trimble airily. "The pater has shelled out rather handsomely this time."

"Oh!" said Kildare.

He said no more, and they entered the School House, and stopped at the door of Mr. Railton's study. Kildare tapped, and opened the door, and Trimble followed him in.

"Here is Trimble, sir!" said the captain of St. Jim's.

"Thank you, Kildare!"

The Sixth-Former, with another curious look at Baggy, left the study. Mr. Railton fixed his eyes on Trimble.

Baggy faced him, without feeling any great uneasiness. He could not imagine why he had been sent for; and so far as he knew, there was no trouble impending. Sometimes Baggy had found trouble as a result of grub-raiding; but his last performance in that line had been on Saturday, in Tom Merry's study, and he was sure that Tom had not made any complaint about it. So he was feeling easy in his fat mind.

"Trimble!"

"Yes, sir!" said Baggy cheerily.

"For certain reasons," said Mr. Railton, "I have caused inquiry to be made in my House, with a view to ascertaining whether any member of the House was in possession of unusually large supplies of money."

"Oh!" ejaculated Trimble.

The fat satisfaction faded from his face, and he blinked uneasily at the Housemaster. But he reflected that it was absolutely impossible that Mr. Railton had hidden a roll of currency notes under a loose board in the box-room. The Housemaster could not be referring to his "and."

"I learn that you seem to be in possession of a considerable amount of money, Trimble."

"D-d-do you, sir?"

"You need not be alarmed, my boy," said the Housemaster kindly. "No doubt you have had a remittance from your people—you have only to explain. I require to be satisfied on the subject, for certain reasons."

"That's it exactly, sir," said Baggy eagerly.

"You have been spending a considerable amount at the school shop, I understand."

"I—I generally do, sir."

"More than usual, I think?"

"Perhaps a little more than usual, sir," admitted Baggy cautiously. "You see, sir, I—I've had rather a good remittance."

"For what amount?"

Baggy hesitated. It was all very well to brag to Mellish, and other fellows, that his father had sent him fifty pounds. But a remnant of common sense warned Baggy that this would not do for the Housemaster.

"Kindly answer me at once, Trimble!" said Mr. Railton sharply.

"A—a few pounds, sir!" stammered Trimble.

"How many pounds?"

"Fuf-fuf—five, sir."

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"Very well," said Mr. Railton. "There are certain reasons, Trimble, why the matter should be cleared up beyond doubt. You have no objection to my communicating with your father?"

"Eh?"

"No doubt he will confirm your statement."

"Oh, lor!" gasped Trimble.

Mr. Railton's face hardened.

"What do you mean, Trimble?" he asked. "Am I to understand that Mr. Trimble will not confirm your statement that he has sent you an unusually large sum of money recently?"

"The—the fact is, sir——"

"Well?" rapped the Housemaster.

"It—it wasn't my—my pater, sir."

"According to what the prefects have learned, you have told several boys that your father had sent you a large remittance. If, however, the money did not come from Mr. Trimble, from whom did it come?"

"I—I—I——"

"Answer me immediately."

"From—from my uncle, sir!" stammered Baggy.

"His name?"

"His—his—his name, sir!" groaned the unhappy Baggy.

"Yes—and his address! I must communicate with him."

"He—he's gone abroad, sir."

"What?"

"He—he sent me the fifty—I mean the five—just—just before leaving England, sir!" stammered Baggy. "He—he went on—on Saturday."

"Where has he gone, Trimble?"

"I—I don't know, sir."

"Then he cannot be communicated with?"

"No, sir!" gasped Baggy. "Quite impossible, sir! He's—he's gone abroad without leaving an address, sir."

"Do you expect me to believe that statement, Trimble?"

"Oh, yes, sir!"

"It is perfectly evident to me, Trimble, that you are uttering falsehoods!" said the School House master sternly.

"Oh, lor!"

"If, however, your statement is correct, doubtless Mr. Trimble is acquainted with your uncle's movements."

Baggy hardly breathed.

"Oh, no, sir! They—they don't speak, sir! Not on speaking terms."

Mr. Railton's grim face grew grimmer.

"When did this remittance reach you, Trimble?"

"On—on Saturday, sir."

"In what form? Currency notes, I presume?"

"Exactly, sir."

"Was the letter registered?"

Trimble was about to reply in the affirmative, when he remembered, in time, that receipts had to be signed for registered letters.

"No, sir!" he gasped.

"You state that you received a sum of money in an unregistered letter?"

"Yes, sir!" mumbled Trimble. "My—my uncle's rather careless with money, sir. Being awfully rich——"

"Have you your uncle's letter now?"

"I—I burnt it, sir."

"Have you the envelope?"

"I—I threw it away, sir."

"On Saturday, all the letters for the boys of this House passed under my inspection, as usual, Trimble, before being placed in the rack. I do not recall that there was a letter for you. You must have taken the letter you speak of direct from the postman?"

"Yes, sir; just so."

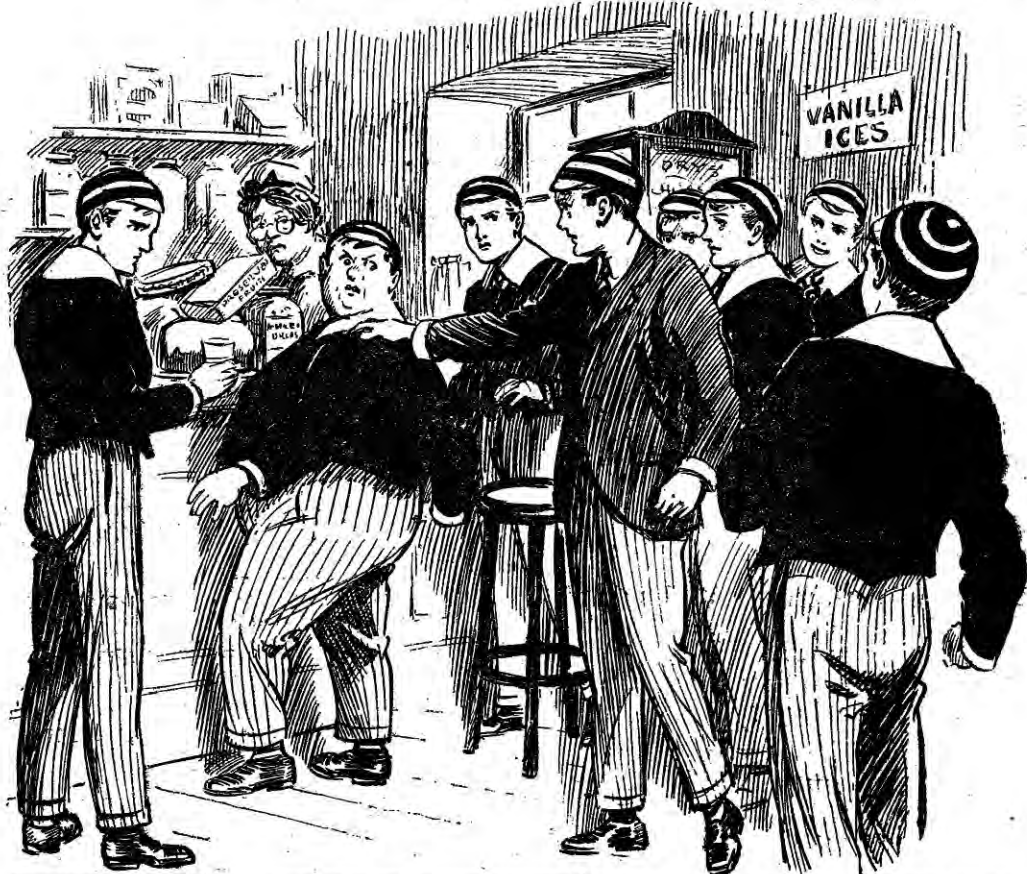
"That is against the rules of the House, Trimble."

"I—I happened to—to see the postman, sir, and—and asked him if there was a letter for me, so—so——"

"The postman, Mr. Blagg, will doubtless remember the circumstance. He shall be questioned."

Baggy Trimble almost fell down. His system was to back up one untruth with another, like Pelion piled on Ossa. It did not really seem a very good system, judging by results.

He stood stuttering with dismay, at the end of his tether. One question to Blagg, the postman, was sufficient to cause his edifice of falsehoods to topple over.



Baggy Trimble was splashing his money about when Kildare stepped into the tuck shop and tapped the fat Fourth-Former on the shoulder. "You're wanted, Trimble," he said. "Mr. Railton's study." "But I—I was just going to have a little snack, Kildare." "Well, I'm going to take you to your Housemaster instead!" said the school captain. (See Chapter 8.)

Mr. Railton eyed him grimly.

"I have given you every chance, Trimble, and you have involved yourself in a tissue of false statements," he said. "Take from your pockets all the money in your possession and lay it on my table."

"It—it's mine, sir."

"Do as I tell you."

With shaking fat fingers Baggy fumbled in his pocket and produced the wad of currency notes. Mr. Railton picked up the wad and counted the notes quietly.

"There are forty-eight pound notes here, Trimble," he said. "You have disposed of the other two."

Trimble blinked at him blankly. How on earth did the Housemaster know that there had been fifty?

"Oh, sir! I—I—I—"

"Where are the other two notes, Trimble?"

"I—I spent them at the school shop, sir," groaned Baggy.

"The numbers could be ascertained at the bank from which I received these notes, Trimble. It will be scarcely necessary, however. I presume that you confess to the theft?"

Baggy jumped.

"Theft!" he stuttered.

"These currency notes were taken from my desk one day last week," said Mr. Railton sternly. "Suspicion has fallen upon a boy who is obviously innocent, as the stolen money is found in your possession. Obviously, you obtained possession of the key of my desk without my knowledge. You will now come with me to the Head, Trimble, and he will deal with you."

Trimble's knees knocked together.

"Is—is—is that money yours, sir?" he stuttered.

"What!"

"I—I thought I—I could keep it, sir," groaned Baggy. "Findings keepings, you know, sir. I—I hope you don't think I'm a thief, sir!"

"Are you in your right senses, Trimble? You abstracted these currency notes from my desk in this room one day last week—"

"I didn't!" yelled Trimble.

"How dare you deny what is perfectly plain?" exclaimed the Housemaster angrily.

"I—I—I didn't—I—I wasn't—I—I never did!" babbled Trimble. "I—I found them! Oh, dear! I thought findings were keepings! Oh lor! I—I never knew they were stolen! Oh dear!"

Mr. Railton paused.

"You deny having robbed my desk, Trimble?"

"Ow! Yes!"

"Then what is your explanation of the stolen notes being in your possession?"

"I—I found them!"

"Nonsense!"

"I—I did, sir!" stuttered the wretched Trimble.

"They—they were hidden under the loose board in the box-room, sir! I—I can show you the place. I—I found them by accident! I—I thought they must have been left there long ago by somebody who'd left. I—I never knew they'd been stolen! Oh dear!"

"You can scarcely expect me to believe such an incredible statement, Trimble."

"Oh dear! It's true!"

"If you found such a sum as fifty pounds, as you state, do you expect me to believe that you considered yourself entitled to keep it?"

"Findings keepings, sir!" groaned Trimble.

Mr. Railton rose to his feet.

"You have stood in my presence, Trimble, and told me falsehood after falsehood," he said. "Now the stolen money is found in your hands, and it is quite clear that you are uttering more falsehoods. You will now come with me to Dr. Holmes, and the least you have to expect for your dishonesty is expulsion from the school."

"I—I—I—" babbled the hapless Trimble.

"Follow me!" rapped out the Housemaster.

And Mr. Railton strode from the study, and the wretched Baggy trailed dismally in his wake.

CHAPTER 9.

Mysterious!

"TALBOT!"

It was a general exclamation at the Shell table.

The School House fellows had sat down to dinner when Talbot of the Shell walked quietly into the dining-room.

He dropped into his seat beside Tom Merry with a smile. Mr. Linton, at the head of the table, gave him a kind nod.

Tom's face was very bright.

The trouble that had fallen on his chum had apparently lifted, for here was Talbot of the Shell back in his place in the Form. His handsome face was very grave, but he did not look like a fellow in trouble or disgrace.

From the Fourth Form table Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave Talbot a cheery grin. Blake waved his fork in greeting, and blushed as he caught Mr. Lathom's eye. St. Leger of the Fifth gave the returned junior a smile; several of the prefects at the Sixth Form table glanced

at him in greeting. Talbot's detention in the Head's house clearly was over and done with—whatever the "beaks" had had against him seemed to be dropped. And there was no doubt that that state of affairs gave general satisfaction.

Gerald Crooke looked across the table at his cousin with a friendly grin. He was more surprised than anyone else to see Talbot there, but he was greatly pleased and relieved to see him. What had happened to clear Talbot was a mystery to Crooke, but it was evident that somehow he was cleared.

"Talbot, old chap!" murmured Tom Merry. "Back again?"

"Yes, old scout!"

"We've been no end worried, old man."

"It's all right," said Talbot.

"But what was the trouble?" asked Monty Lowthier.

Mr. Linton glanced along the table.

"Silence, if you please," he said.

And the Shell fellows had to bottle up their curiosity till after dinner.

In the general interest excited by Talbot's return to the Shell, hardly anyone noticed that a place was vacant at the Fourth Form table. Baggy Trimble's absence excited no remark whatever. The fat and fatuous Baggy was not a person of any importance, excepting in his own eyes. He was not there—and scarcely an eye noted the circumstance!

Talbot went out with the Shell after dinner, and the Terrible Three went with him, and a score of fellows gathered round him in the quad. Everybody wanted to know.

"And now——" said Tom Merry.

"Now we want to know the history of the giddy mystery," grinned Manners.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"What was the trouble, Talbot?" asked Kangaroo.

Talbot of the Shell coloured.

"Nothing much," he answered. "The—the fact is, I'd rather not go into details, if you fellows don't mind."

"Keeping secrets from your old pals?" asked Monty Lowthier, more in sorrow than in anger.

Talbot's colour deepened.

"But what on earth's happened?" asked Blake.

"You've practically been in chokery since the football match on Saturday——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Not exactly that," said Talbot, with a smile, though his cheeks were crimson.

"You haven't been staying in the Head's house simply as a distinguished guest, what?" asked Cardew of the Fourth.

"Not quite."

"The beaks had something up against you?" said Levison.

"Well, there was something," said Talbot, "but Mr. Railton came over and told me that all was clear, and told me to come back to the House to dinner. I'd rather not say more—least said soonest mended, you know. I've nothing to complain of—but I'm jolly glad it's all over."

"It's all over, then?" asked Crooke.

"Quite."

"That's good!"

"Jolly good," said Tom Merry. "Never mind telling us anything, old chap, if you'd rather not. So long as the trouble's over, all serene. Blessed if I can make it out, all the same."

Nobody was able to "make it out," and everybody was surprised at Talbot's reticence. But the satisfaction was general that Talbot's trouble, whatever it had been, was over. Fellows congratulated him on all sides, and Crooke, who was very anxious to speak to his cousin in private, found it difficult to do so. Tom Merry & Co. naturally did not want to part with the chum who had been taken away from them so strangely, and as strangely restored, and Talbot of the Shell was given hardly a minute to himself before the bell rang for classes.

Crooke chafed with impatience as he went into the Form-room that afternoon with the rest of the Shell. He was glad and relieved, but he was intensely perplexed by Talbot's release from detention, which seemed

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to indicate that the Toff was no longer under suspicion. So far as Gerald Crooke knew, no discovery had been made—indeed, how could any discovery have been made, without Crooke being the first to hear of it?

Crooke sat on thorns during afternoon class, and was more than once reprimanded by Mr. Linton for inattention. It was not easy for the black sheep of the Shell to give attention to Form work just then. He was glad when the hour of dismissal came and the Shell crowded out. He joined Talbot at once in the corridor, and gave the Terrible Three a rather black look as they came up.

"Look here, you fellows. I want to speak to my cousin," he said bluntly.

"And we mustn't hear?" asked Monty Lowther. "Are you going to give him a sure snip for the Swindlem Handicap?"

"Oh, cheese it!" growled Crooke.

"Give him a miss, Talbot, my boy," said Monty solemnly. "Evil communications corrupt good manners, you know. That's a proverb."

Talbot smiled and walked away with his cousin. He also was anxious to compare notes with Crooke.

"What does it mean, Talbot?" asked Crooke, when they were out of hearing of the other fellows. "Railton told me why you were detained in the Head's house. They—they suspected—" He broke off. "But why have they stopped suspecting you?"

Talbot shook his head.

"Mr. Railton told me nothing except that all was clear, and that he was sorry that he had doubted me. 'I can't understand it!' muttered Crooke.

"You have heard nothing—" Talbot paused.

"Nothing. They don't suspect me," said Crooke bitterly. "That's what beats me."

Talbot knitted his brows.

"I don't catch on to it," he said. "Surely they can't be suspecting somebody else—some innocent party? Anyhow, Crooke, it seems that there is not to be any public announcement of the theft, so the money cannot be left where it is to be found in a search. Somehow it must be got back to Mr. Railton's study."

"I thought of that, but—it's gone!"

"What?"

"Somebody's taken it from where I hid it," muttered Crooke. "I—I've looked. It's gone!"

"Crooke!"

The black sheep of St. Jim's flushed crimson under Talbot's quick, searching look.

"You—you think I—I—" he panted.

"No," said Talbot, with a deep breath. "I can't think that, Crooke. I can't make it out. Who could have found it? Who could have taken it? I—I'm getting rather out of my depth in this business."

"Still, it's all right," muttered Crooke. "You're cleared, though goodness knows how, and I'm not suspected. We've only got to keep mum and try to forget about the whole thing. I helped to get you off, I know that. I jolly nearly gave myself away to Railton on Saturday. They've got on to something new, not connected with either of us. Let it rest."

Talbot did not answer. He stood silent, plunged into deep thought. What could have happened to clear him without involving Crooke? Had someone else fallen under suspicion? That seemed to be the only explanation, so far as Talbot of the Shell could see. If so, it was someone who was innocent, and the matter could not, as Crooke suggested, rest where it was.

Crooke left him, and Talbot paced in the dusky quad for some time, trying to think out this strange new development. He went into the House at last, and was collared at once by Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther.

"Tea in Study No. 6," said Tom cheerily. "Gussy is standing a terrific spread in honour of the occasion, and you're the giddy guest of honour. Come on!"

Talbot smiled, and allowed the Terrible Three to march him off to Study No. 6 in the Fourth. Blake & Co. greeted the Shell fellows with hospitable grins. A feast was toward in Study No. 6. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was in funds, and he had explained to his chums that this was the time for a rather special celebration, and Blake and Herries and Dig fully agreed with him.

"Twot in, deah boys!" said the swell of St. Jim's. "All weady!"

And the chums of the Shell trotted in.

"Heard the news?" asked Blake, as the juniors sat down to tea.

Talbot gave him a quick look.

"News? No. What's the news?" He expected to hear at last that the theft in the Housemaster's study had been made public.

"Trimble," said Blake.

"Oh! What about Trimble?" asked Talbot carelessly, his interest in the "news" fading away at once.

"Sacked!" said Blake.

"Trimble of the Fourth sacked?" exclaimed Talbot.

"Just that!"

"I am wathah sowwy, you know," said Arthur Augustus. "It appears that Twimble is locked up in the punishment-woom. I wemembah that he was missin' at dinnah, you know. Twimble is a feahful wottah, but I am wathah sowwy to see him come a muckah like this."

"Bound to get the chopper sooner or later," said Lowther. "Trimble's too thick altogether, you know. Still, it's a surprise."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"But what has he done?" asked Talbot, vaguely uneasy.

"That's not known," said Blake. "May have made a mistake and raided the Head's study instead of one of the fellows'."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove, it's not a laughin' mattah for Twimble!" said Arthur Augustus. "It is wathah odd for a fellow to be sacked without the weason bein' stated. It must be somethin' fwightfully disgraceful to the school, I suppose, and the Head has decided to keep it dark."

"Well, we know that Trimble's been jolly near the limit a good many times," said Herries. "You remember once he found Mr. Lathom's gold tiepin and fancied that findings were keepings. He would have been sacked then, I believe, only he was let off as a silly ass who didn't know enough to go in when it rained. Something of that kind again, I expect."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Talbot rose from the table. His face was white. It was not—he knew that it could not be—a coincidence. He was cleared, and Crooke was not suspected, and on the same day Trimble of the Fourth was expelled, without any reason being stated to the school. The reason would have to be given to Trimble's people, and Talbot knew what it would be—what it must be. Somehow or other the fatuous Baggy had placed himself under suspicion of the theft in Mr. Railton's study.

"Sit down, old chap!" said D'Arcy, turning his eyeglass on Talbot of the Shell in surprise.

"Where is Trimble now?"

"In the punishment-room," said Digby.

"Is it certain that he's sacked?"

"It's certain that he's going. Darrell of the Sixth is to take him home," said Blake. "All the House knows it."

"You needn't worry, Talbot," said Tom Merry. "It's jolly certain that Trimble has asked for it. He's gone over the limit this time."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Talbot did not answer. He crossed to the door and left Study No. 6 without a word. Tom Merry & Co. stared at one another in blank astonishment.

"What the thump—" ejaculated Tom.

"Bai Jove! What's the mattah with Talbot? Weally, you fellows, I am wathah surprised at such mannahs in old Talbot!"

"Just like Talbot to bother his head over that fat frog," grunted Monty Lowther. "There will be lots of dry eyes in the House, I fancy, when Trimble goes. Is this gorgeous spread off, Gussy, now that the guest of honour has mizzled?"

"Certainly not, Lowthah! Pway pile in!"

"Good!"

And the tea-party in Study No. 6 "piled in." They were perplexed by Talbot's peculiar proceedings, but their perplexity, fortunately, did not affect their healthy appetites, and full justice was done to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's generous spread.

CHAPTER 10. To Save Another!

"TRIMBLE!"

"I—I didn't, sir—"

"What?"

"I—I wasn't—I mean, I never did!" gasped Baggy Trimble, his little round eyes almost bulging from his head with terror, as he blinked at Dr. Holmes. "I wouldn't, sir. Oh, dear!"

Dr. Holmes raised his hand.

Baggy Trimble, of the Fourth, stood before the Head of St. Jim's, in the headmaster's study. Mr. Railton was there, and his glance was stern as it was fixed on the wretched Baggy.

Not the slightest doubt of Trimble's guilt was entertained by either of the masters.

The facts were clear—at all events, they seemed to be clear. Crooke's suggestion to the Housemaster had been followed up—with this outcome. The stolen notes had been found in Baggy's possession, and Mr. Railton was satisfied now that his key had been purloined by the thief—that the theft was not the work of a light-fingered crackman, after all, as he had been driven at first to believe.

Baggy Trimble, certainly, could not have opened the locked desk without a key. But Crooke's suggestion had let in light on that point.

And Trimble had the stolen notes. As for his statement that he had "found" them—that was regarded with contemptuous disbelief. Even if he had "found" them, it was theft to keep them. But neither of the masters had the slightest disposition to believe that the thief, after taking the notes, had hidden them under the box-room floor and left them there. The money had been taken to spend—and Baggy had been discovered spending it. That was more than enough to convict the wretched Baggy.

The fat junior realised that himself, and from the bottom of his podgy heart he wished that he had never heard of that bad old saying, that findings are keepings.

He had told so many falsehoods to account for the possession of the money that he could scarcely expect to be believed when he told what was actually the truth, but sounded as improbable as the rest. That, too, Baggy realised, and it was borne in upon his mind, too late, that telling the truth was a rather better "system" than unlimited prevarication. Had Trimble been a fellow whose word could have been taken on any subject, the headmaster might have felt a doubt. But the wretched Baggy's reputation was too well known. He was so untruthful that he really seemed to have a preference for lying, when the truth would have served his purpose equally well. He was paying the penalty now.

He stood before the Head, his fat face white as chalk, his fat knees knocking together. He had spent hours and hours in the punishment-room, in a state of palpitating terror, till he was called again before the headmaster to receive his final sentence. He could scarcely believe that the "chopper" really had come down. But there was no doubt of it—he read his fate in the cold, clear glance of Dr. Holmes.

The headmaster lifted his hand, and Baggy stuttered into dismal silence.

"You are guilty, Trimble! The evidence is absolutely clear. Someone obtained possession of Mr. Railton's key and abstracted money from his desk. You are found in possession of the money. You have spent some of the notes; the remainder have been identified as Mr. Railton's property. This afternoon a list of the numbers was obtained from the bank for the purpose. For the sake of the good name of the school,

and for the sake of your family, I shall not make this public. I have written a letter to your father, explaining the matter to him. A Sixth Form prefect will take you home and hand the letter to Mr. Trimble. That is all!"

"But, sir—"

"You need say no more, Trimble, unless you desire to express regret for your wicked conduct."

"But I didn't—"

"Are you persisting in denial of your guilt, Trimble?" rapped out the Head.

"Yes, sir. You see—"

"Silence!"

"Oh, dear!" groaned Trimble.

Dr. Holmes turned to the Housemaster.

"You have spoken to a prefect, Mr. Railton?"

"Certainly, sir. Darrell, of the Sixth Form, is in readiness to take Trimble to his home."

"Very good. You have packed your box, Trimble?"

"Oh, dear! Yes, sir!" groaned Trimble. "But, sir—"

"That will do. If you will call Darrell in, Mr. Railton, I will give him his instructions."

"Certainly."

Knock!

Dr. Holmes frowned as a knock came at his study door. Mr. Railton was about to open it when the door opened and Talbot of the Shell stepped into the study.

For a second Talbot's glance rested on the white, frightened face of Baggy Trimble. Then he came over towards the Head.

"What is it, Talbot?" exclaimed Dr. Holmes rather sharply.

"Please excuse me, sir," said the Shell fellow quietly, "I had to come. I heard that Trimble was locked up in the punishment-room—"

"I do not see how that concerns you, Talbot."

The Shell fellow coloured.

"I went to the punishment-room, sir, and found that Trimble had been brought here. The fellows are saying that he is sacked—I mean, that he is to be sent away from the school."

"That is correct; the matter is not a secret," said the Head coldly. "Kindly leave my study, Talbot."

Talbot did not stir.

"I have something to say, sir," he went on steadily.

"No one knows of what Trimble is accused—"

"The matter is not intended to become the talk of the school," said Dr. Holmes. "But I presume that you have not come here to question your headmaster, Talbot."

"I am bound to speak, sir. For two days I lay under a suspicion—a terrible suspicion—"

Dr. Holmes' face softened.

"I regret it very much, Talbot. Mr. Railton regrets it deeply. Circumstances certainly pointed to you, and your refusal to speak out made it scarcely possible for you to remain unsuspected. Fortunately, the truth has now been discovered. Even now your silence is not explained, but as your innocence is clear I pass that over. The guilt has now been fastened upon the right person."

"You refer to Trimble, sir?"

"Certainly."

"I feared it," said Talbot, in a low voice. "I feared it, sir, as soon as I heard—"

"You will say nothing of this, Talbot. The school is not to be disgraced by the story of a theft in a master's study," said the Head. "The stolen notes have been recovered; the thief is being sent away from the school. For the rest, silence."

"Trimble is not the thief, sir."

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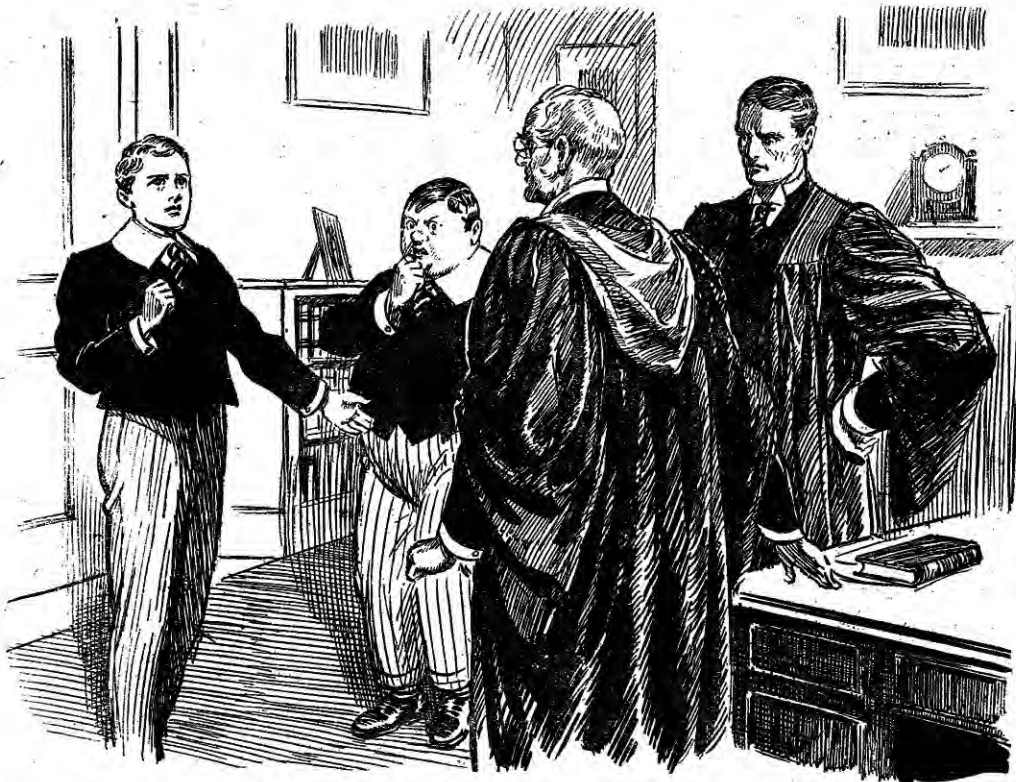
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"Talbot," said the Head sternly, "give me the name of the thief, since you know it." "I cannot, sir," answered the Shell junior. "And why not?" "Because he trusted me, sir," said Talbot calmly. "He confessed to me what he had done, under a promise of secrecy, and then left the notes to be found as soon as a search was made—and they would have been found, had not Trimble butted in!" (See Chapter 10.)

"Nonsense!"

"I can prove it, sir," said Talbot quietly.

Baggy Trimble's round eyes opened wide. He blinked at Talbot of the Shell, with dawning hope in his fat face.

"I've told the Head so, Talbot!" he gasped. "He won't believe me. I never touched—"

"Silence!" exclaimed the Head; and Trimble gasped into silence. Dr. Holmes fixed his eyes on Talbot's steady face.

"You have made an extraordinary statement, Talbot. If you know anything of this matter, speak out at once."

"I know that Trimble is not the thief, sir," said Talbot. "If the stolen notes have been found in his hands—he must have found them, sir. I know that he did not take them from Mr. Railton's study. I know where he must have found them."

"And where?" demanded Dr. Holmes, while Mr. Railton, in silence, watched Talbot's face closely.

"Under a loose board in the floor of the box-room, sir," said Talbot. "They were hidden there, and Trimble can only have found them there."

"Bless my soul!"

Dr. Holmes and Mr. Railton exchanged startled glances. Trimble's statement was known only to the two masters. Yet Talbot of the Shell knew. The obvious inference was that Trimble's statement was the truth and not a wild and unthinking falsehood, as the masters had supposed.

"Did not Trimble tell you so, sir?" asked Talbot.

"He did tell me so, Talbot, and I did not believe him."

"He told you the truth, sir."

"And how," said the Head, in a rising voice—"how, Talbot, if the stolen notes were hidden under the box-

room floor, did you know that they were there? Am I to understand that you placed them there?"

Talbot winced.

"No, sir."

"But you know who placed them there, as you know that they were there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you know the thief?"

"Yes, sir," said Talbot, almost in a whisper.

"His name?"

No answer.

"Talbot, you have said too much, or too little," said Mr. Railton quietly. "If your statement is correct, that you knew the stolen notes were hidden in the box-room, it bears out the explanation given by Trimble, and clears him of the charge of actual theft."

"That is why I came here, sir," said Talbot steadily. "If Trimble kept the notes when he found them, he is a young rascal, certainly; but he did not steal them from your desk. They were hidden under the box-room floor four or five days ago, to my knowledge."

"By whom?"

Talbot did not answer.

"Why did you come to my study, Talbot?" asked the Head, in an ominous voice.

"Because I heard that Trimble was to be sent away, sir, and guessed the reason," said the Shell fellow.

"You came here to clear him?"

"I was bound to do so, sir."

"Quite so. And in doing so, you have admitted your knowledge of the theft, and confessed that you were either the thief yourself, or a party to the theft."

Talbot started.

"Neither, sir," he answered. "I knew the risk I was taking in coming here, but I had to come. Knowing

what I do, I could not let Trimble be expelled from the school on a charge I knew to be unfounded. If you take that as a confession of guilt on my part, I cannot help it. I should have despised myself for ever if I had remained silent."

"Give me the name of the thief, since you know it."

"I cannot, sir."

"And why not?"

"Because he trusted me, sir—he confessed to me what he had done, under promise of secrecy. He acted foolishly, unthinkingly, in taking Mr. Railton's money—he regretted it, repented it afterwards, and tried to put the notes back, but he could not. He never meant to use them—he left them there to be found as soon as a search was made—and they would have been found there, had not Trimble butted in."

"His name?"

"I cannot give it, sir," said Talbot respectfully but firmly. "I should have said nothing, sir, had not Trimble been accused. I was bound to say as much as would clear him. But I am bound not to betray the fellow who trusted me."

Dr. Holmes set his lips.

"Do you understand what you are driving me to believe, Talbot? That you are, as Mr. Railton at first supposed, the thief—that some rag of conscience has compelled you to save this wretched boy from suffering for your crime; but that it was by your hand that the desk was robbed."

Talbot drew a deep breath.

He had known it—he had known what it must look like, when he intervened to save the wretched Trimble. Even now he had only to speak, to save himself. But it did not even cross his loyal mind to betray Gerald Crooke. The wretched black sheep of the Shell had trusted him—his promise had been given. And the word of the "Toff" had always been his bond.

"Talbot," said Mr. Railton, in a deep voice, his face distressed and troubled—"Talbot, every word you utter is a confession of guilt. I repeat that you have said too much or too little. Having said so much, you must tell Dr. Holmes all."

"I can tell him no more, sir."

"Because, I fear, there is nothing more to tell," said the Head, anger and sadness mingled in his look. "I have trusted you, Talbot, and you have betrayed my trust."

Talbot shivered.

"It is not so, sir. I can say no more."

The Head made a gesture.

"Leave my study, Talbot! You have saved this wretched boy—for that, at least, I thank you. I must reflect upon your case—I must decide what to do. I shall give you until to-morrow to consider. If by then you can satisfy me, I shall be glad to know that my faith in you was not misplaced. But unless you can give me the name of the thief, and the matter is established beyond doubt, you are adjudged guilty on your own confession. Now go!"

Talbot of the Shell left the study.

Dr. Holmes turned to Trimble. The fat and fatuous Baggy was quite himself again now. He was safe out

of the wood—Talbot of the Shell had saved him. Baggy's look was almost vaunting as he blinked at the Head.

"I told you so, sir! You wouldn't believe me—"

"Silence, Trimble! I believe now that you found Mr. Railton's notes, as you stated, hidden where the thief had placed them. I shall not expel you from the school. But I shall flog you with the greatest severity for your dishonesty."

Baggy's fat jaw dropped.

"Oh, sir! I—I—"

"You found a large sum of money, and kept it," said the Head. "There is very little distinction between such an action and actual stealing. Such distinction as there is, however, I will remember in your favour. I shall not expel you; but I shall administer a severe flogging, which I trust will be a warning to you. Mr. Railton, will you kindly send Taggles here?"

"Oh, lor'!" gasped Baggy.

A few minutes later, loud sounds of anguish were heard proceeding from the Head's study.

Baggy Trimble was going through it.

He was getting off cheaply, as a matter of fact; but the Head certainly did not spare the rod. It was only to be hoped that that severe application of the Head's birch would help Baggy to distinguish between "meum and tuum" on future occasions. Certainly, as the wriggling, writhing Baggy limped and groaned his way from the Head's study when the flogging was over, he was no longer prepared to maintain that findings were keepings.

"You—you fool!"

Gerald Crooke panted out the words. His eyes fairly blazed at the cool, quiet face of Talbot of the Shell.

"Calm yourself, Crooke," said Talbot quietly. "I shall not say a word—it is for you to decide whether—"

Crooke laughed savagely.

"Whether I confess—whether I ask for the sack—whether I beg the Head to kick me out of the school in disgrace! No jolly fear! What did you want to butt in for?"

"Trimble would have been expelled as a thief—"

"So he was a thief, to keep the currency notes!" snarled Crooke. "You should have let him take his chance. What would he have done for you?"

"That is not the point. You—you will say nothing?"

"Nothing!"

"Very well."

Talbot of the Shell turned away.

Crooke made a stride after him, and caught him by the shoulder. His face was almost livid with apprehension.

"You—your promise, Talbot! You can't give me away! You can't—"

"I shall not give you away."

"What are you going to say, then?"

"Nothing!"

"But—but—" Crooke stammered. "You've got to name the thief, or be taken as the thief yourself."

"I know!"

"Then what—what are you going to do?" breathed Crooke. "Are you going to be sacked as a thief? Are you going to face that? Are you mad? Oh, you're a fool—a fool—a fool—"

Talbot smiled—a rather bitter smile.

"Perhaps I am a fool, Crooke. At all events, you have nothing to fear. Good-bye!"

Crooke stood staring after him as he went. With his brain in a whirl, the black sheep of St. Jim's staggered into his study, and threw himself into a chair. What was Talbot going to do? Not betray Crooke—the only way of saving himself—Crooke was sure of that. But what was he going to do? The Toff was at the end of his resources now—at the very end of his tether! What was he going to do?

THE END.

(The Toff has only to name the thief to save himself, but he has given his word to Crooke that he will remain silent—and the Toff is a fellow of his word. Don't miss the concluding story in this magnificent series, chums, entitled: "TRUE AS STEEL!" Order next week's "Gem" early.)

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WHITE EAGLE!

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War to the Knife!

WHEN the warriors saw this figure a laugh went up from the street which was like no other sound in the world. It was not loud. It was not a shout, nor a yell, nor a howl. It was just a happy, purring whine, as if a zoo full of hungry young tigers had all seen their breakfast approaching at once.

No sooner did Mr. Solomon Slack hear that blood-curdling cry, and, lugged forward by Mush, and pricked behind by White Cat, came near enough to the open door to see what was at the bottom of the steps, than he uttered a shrill scream of terror and cast himself on his knees at Tom's feet, blubbering like a baby. Being half blind with fright, the man had not distinguished Badger Head from the rest, and was under the delusion, carefully instilled into his mind by Jeremiah, that he was entirely in Tom's power.

"Oh, save me, Mr. Holt! I'll give—anything!—just what you ask—s'help my soul I will! I'll give you a thousand dollars in gold—you shall have the store—any kind of thing you want! Only keep their claws off me, Mr. Holt! Oh, dear sir, help!"

"Silence, you!" Tom roared, catching the wretched man firmly by his long black hair and whipping out his knife. "I am White Eagle of the Apache nation. Your life belongs to me!"

He had acted on the spur of the moment. He had seen Badger Head draw his knife, and remembering that Black Hawk had told him once that no Indian will interfere with another in the act of scalping an enemy, caught the wretched agent's hair to save his life. It was also vital that the Apaches should believe him to be in earnest. He was only just in time. Badger Head, infuriated at the frustration of his chief hope—that Tom had allowed the agent to escape—had lost his self-control. He had sprung forward to deal with Solomon Slack himself. Now, finding he was too late, he turned on Tom, his face convulsed with passion.

"Give him to me!" he snarled.

Tom did not move, while the wretched Slack, at this last horror, fell on his face in a dead faint.

"The prisoner is mine! Out, or I kill you, white trash!"

Badger Head spoke in English, and very few of the Apaches understood the words; but their meaning was unmistakable, for as he spoke he pulled a tomahawk from his belt and swung it threateningly over Tom's head.

Tom bit his lip till it bled, trying to keep still. All

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.

BADGER HEAD, supreme chief of the nation.

BLACK HAWK, a tribal chief.

WHITE CAT, his son.

SOLOMON SLACK, a Government official in charge of the Reservations.

JEREMIAH MUSE, a hotel-keeper.

CONEL CHAPIN, a wealthy rancher.

SADIE, his daughter.

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

After staying for a time with Colonel Chapin and his daughter Sadie, Tom learns the horrible news that White Cat is sentenced to the "fire" for disobeying Badger Head, his chief. Tom stands by the

the instinctive hatred he had felt for this man when he had seen him first with Sadie took possession of his very soul. The desire to drive his fingers into that red neck was so great that it became uncontrollable. He knew that it would ruin everything; he saw that Badger Head had put himself in the wrong, and that the warriors would now be on his side; that even if he were knocked on the head it would be worth it. But human nature has its limits, and Tom gave way.

Dropping his knife, and stepping across the body of the fallen man, he caught Badger Head's throat with both hands, and then, changing his original intention of throwing him down the steps, shook him like a rat.

Tom's muscles were hard as iron; he was far more powerful than the chief, and his rage was so great that he had the strength of two. A blow Badger Head aimed with his tomahawk fell harmlessly over Tom's shoulder; the weapon dropped from the Indian's hand, and his followers saw the chief of their nation whirled to and fro like a wisp of straw, and then dropped, without a breath left in his body, on his back.

This was a very terrible spectacle to them. The person of the head of the tribe is absolutely sacred. Nothing can justify or excuse an Apache, in the eyes of his fellows, who lays a finger upon the father of the race.

A yell fierce and threatening came from the street, and a dozen Indians sprang up the steps to deal with Tom. His life was in imminent danger now, and all that his policy had gained was lost to him. Black Hawk and several members of the old hunting party followed the attackers to do what they could, but they saw they must be too late. Badger Head's warriors were picked men, who would overpower Tom in an instant and strike without mercy.

Tom knew his own danger. He stepped back and dropped his hands. He was strangely calm, and could think quite clearly. He would not resist. Why should he kill men for doing what they felt was their duty? It was his own fault. A swift, sharp remembrance of Sadie came to him, and he whispered her name, then waited, erect and quiet, for the end to come.

But someone else had seen it all, and the warriors had still to reckon with Hunks. The dog had gathered himself for a spring when Badger Head had swung his tomahawk, but held back when he saw Tom collar him. Now it was his responsibility alone, and with the swiftness and silence he had learned in his many struggles with wild beasts, he slipped through the open door and threw himself in front of his master.

The Apaches did not come in a compact body. Two were in front, running neck to neck, the rest leaping up the steps in their wake. This Hunks had seen before he moved, and he planned his attack accordingly.

Redskins, and to save his life offers to accompany the tribe to the Reservations for the winter. From Black Hawk, Tom then learns that Badger Head is contemplating a raid on the White Settlements in the coming spring, and this knowledge makes Tom more eager to accompany the tribe.

Promoted to the rank of chief and known as White Eagle, Tom reaches the Reservations. Here, he soon realises that Badger Head and Solomon Slack are secretly encouraging the wild bloods to revolt.

Having made a fruitless attempt to restore peace, Tom learns through Black Hawk that Badger Head is about to march his forces on the storehouse. Anticipating the scoop the chief has planned, Tom reaches the place first, with the result that when Badger Head and his men arrive they find the young Britisher in full command, with the "boss," Solomon Slack, securely trussed up, a prisoner.

(Now read on.)

As the leading Apaches mounted the last step the dog gathered himself together, and, springing into the air, struck with his chest the neck of the Indian to the right, and at the same time caught with sure and deadly grip the shoulder of the other man. The Apaches were running their hardest, and Hunks, with careful art, brought the whole of himself, a dead weight, upon them from above. The impact, therefore, was terrific; both men reeled under the shock, fell against each other, and then rolled backwards with Hunks on the top of them, a struggling, writhing mass, upon those who followed.

This put four men out of action on the instant. Those who escaped the fall only did so by rapid leaps to right and left, and even though they won clear their nerves were severely jarred, for as Hunks sprang he gave the hoarse, bulldog yell from the throat, which is a sound as menacing and ferocious as a tiger's growl. The purpose of the Apaches behind held, however, and they ran on. But they never reached their goal.

Hunks had braced every muscle to preserve his balance, and he was as limber on his feet as any cat. Before the Apaches he overthrew had touched the ground he had freed himself from them, sprang up the steps again in two bounds, and was ready for a second assault. This time his tactics were different. The Apaches approaching were further apart, one a step before the other, and Hunks, avoiding a blow aimed at him by the first with a knife, dived at his legs, disabled him with a terrible bite in the knee, and then threw all his weight against the second Apache, sending him flying backwards down the steps like an india-rubber ball.

There were six men left, and Badger Head had recovered from his shaking. Hunks was fighting against long and heavy odds. But he was not to fight alone. Above were White Cat and Jeremiah Mush. The first struck an Indian who had slipped round and made for Tom, a blow on the head which stunned him; the second rammed the muzzle of a Colt's revolver into Badger Head with a gruff:

"Hold in, confound you, and behave!"

But it was from below that the tide of battle turned. At the sight of a dog thrusting back four fully-armed men, a whistling cry of amazement went up from the warriors, and as many of them recognised Hunks and remembered what they had heard of him, a sudden dread and hesitation seized upon them all. This was a devil, indeed, and no dog. That alone, however, would have been of no avail, for Badger Head was without any superstitions, and Hunks was not bullet proof.

But up the steps now swarmed the hunting party, and, with Black Hawk leading, closed in a compact group between Tom and his enemies; while Hunks, improving the occasion, in full sight of the hundreds massed below, reared joyously upon his hind feet and kicked Long Leg—the Apache with the scar upon his side—on both his cheeks.

This ended all action against Tom by force. But a new struggle was to begin. The voice of Badger Head, heard above all the cries and ejaculations of the excited Indians, commanded silence, and there was a stridency in the call which boded ill for his enemy.

Before Badger Head could speak, another had raised his hand and seized the attention of all—Black Hawk.

He had called himself to Tom a small man; and certainly in physique he could not compare with Badger Head. But he was all Apache, whereas the head chief, from the peculiarity of his features—the big nose and narrow forehead—was thought to have alien blood.

Now, as Black Hawk advanced into the centre of the platform above the crowded street, his flat, wrinkled face, inscrutable and still as that of a Chinese idol, nothing moving but his crafty, restless eyes, he was the embodiment of the Apache nation, from his short bow legs to his square shoulders and bristling black scalp lock.

"Warriors," he said, in a tone so measured and so quiet that a profound silence fell upon the crowd at once, "the honour of a great chief is in danger. A hand has been laid upon Badger Head, the leader of us all, the star and guide and father of the nation. No blow has been struck against him, but he has suffered wrong."

He paused, and a deep, approving hum passed through the listeners. Badger Head alone made no sign of acknowledgment. His face was tense and furious in expression, though his features were hard and immobile.

"Why has this wrong been done?" The speaker's voice rang high and clear through the silence which had settled down again. "Let every warrior search his heart for this. The man who wronged Badger Head was a brother chief, elected in full council three moons back for great service to the nation. This chief has lived with us. I say no word

of him. There is not a warrior here, not one squaw within the tepees, not one child, who will not tell in future days what our brother, White Eagle, has done this cruel winter for us all."

Again Black Hawk paused, and again there was an approving hum; and though it was lower in tone, and came from fewer men than the first, there was a force in it which was not to be denied.

"Why has White Eagle wronged Badger Head?" the speaker went on. "You have all seen this fat steer"—he turned and kicked in the ribs the miserable Slack, who, at an unfortunate moment for himself, had just come to and sat up—"this lump of cow-flesh, is White Eagle's most bitter enemy. Two moons back he set a warrior—after filling him with fire-water till he was mad—to kill White Eagle. That I know. But White Eagle kept quiet till to-day, then seize the Big House and take Fat-face prisoner of war. Badger Head called White Eagle bad name and go to kill him. Badger Head do wrong."

A third time the speaker paused. No answer came, but an uneasy quiver went through the crowd. The point had gone home.

"But White Eagle," the speaker continued, "do worse wrong. No chief in all this nation may touch Badger Head. What shall be done? I make this answer as chief next in rank to Badger Head. The council shall be called. Let the council decide. Badger Head and White Eagle shall accept its ruling, and so peace and honour in the nation be established. I have spoken."

He drew back and stood by Tom, White Cat shouldered to shoulder on the other side, Jeremiah Mush, whose pistol had been quietly returned to sheath, behind them; while in front of all, an expression of perfect amiability on his broad face, sat Hunks leaning easily against his master's knee. Everyone looked at Badger Head. He stepped forward.

"Warriors," he said quietly, "the words of Black Hawk are wise. I call members of the council into this house. I have spoken."

There was a unanimous murmur of satisfaction, and Jeremiah Mush heaved a great sigh of relief and turned to White Cat.

"I don't reckon to know all your father said. But he's put the dead squash on peaky-nose. Our lad is safe."

Black Hawk, who had heard the words, turned quickly.

"Nothing safe," he said in a low voice. "But we make time. Soldiers may come." Then to Tom, who had thanked him: "No, thank Hunks! No!"

The Nation Speaks!

THERE was no delay in the meeting of the council. It was known that within twenty-four hours the troops Solomon Slack had wired for would be there, and although careful preparations had been made for their reception—the railway placed under guard, the telegraph operator already a prisoner, and all matters so arranged by Badger Head that the soldiers would be seized and disarmed as soon as their cars drew up at the depot, the Apaches knew quite well that they were taking serious risks, and that time was of vital importance.

In a few minutes a room in the storehouse was cleared and filled with a silent crowd of Indians. They sat on the floor in a circle, in the centre of which, on three chairs, were Black Hawk, Badger Head, and Tom.

As soon as the assembly was complete Black Hawk rose. He made no address, but called upon Badger Head to speak. The chief began quietly enough.

"White Eagle," he said, "received an honour from the council three moons ago. We gave him title of chief. Why? That he should be our servant. No paleface can be a real chief in the nation. It is against our law. White Eagle has broken this law."

He paused and looked slowly round, his mouth hardening, and his eyes beginning to glare savagely, though he kept his voice and manner quiet.

"I have read White Eagle's heart this long time. He has given service, but for a bad purpose. Money has come from his hands to your families, but it was blood-money. He has given all of us soft words, but they are false. It is his desire to rob the nation of its freedom by pretending that white men love the red. The little God-man of the church is his dog. Your squaws are his slaves. Your children lick his feet. He tells us he would kill the fat-face agent man. Why? Because he would himself become agent here and take the place of the fat one. He is much more clever than Fat-face, but his heart is more evil."

"Warriors! Knowing this many days since, I laid my plans. But we have traitors in our nation. They tell my plans to White Eagle, so he takes Fat-face prisoner and defies me. I tell you all!"

His voice rose to a harsh scream, and he pointed at Tom with a gesture indescribably menacing.

"White Eagle is a serpent. He crawled within our tepee in winter, and we thought him grass-snake. While it was cold he lay quiet; now spring has come, and you see the rattles in his tail. What you would do to rattlesnake do now to White Eagle—kill!"

He stamped his foot, and from the council came an ominous murmur of agreement. It was plain now why Badger Head had consented so quietly to the holding of this meeting, and why Black Hawk had given warning. These Apaches were all disciples of Badger Head; Black Hawk had no following among them. Tom, as he heard the sound and saw several of the younger men draw their tomahawks, wondered for just one moment whether Black Hawk was really his friend, after all. He was very bitter over Badger Head's words, and had lost his faith in Indians.

But the next instant he felt ashamed of himself, for Black Hawk's attitude as he faced the restive crowd and rose slowly to his feet was unmistakable. Never had Tom seen the little man so roused. His face was full of bitterness; his eyes, bright and keen, glanced scornfully about him like those of a schoolmaster upon a class of hopelessly stupid boys. His voice, when he spoke, rang through the room and far beyond it. It was as if he were addressing a concourse of people instead of a group. Tom wondered why.

"So! Badger Head has given his mind, and you have given yours, and White Eagle is to die?"

There was a loud affirmative shout.

"Wait!"

The word came like the crack of a whip. "I have not spoken yet. You shall have your will, but listen first. It was I who brought White Eagle into the nation. I had resolved on war with white men, but I knew not their strength. I said to myself, 'This paleface boy shall be a dog, showing us the blood-trail.' I have hated white men all my life. You know that? Answer!"

There was an assenting hum. "Always white men cheat, oppress, then slay. So I say war! Then my hunting-party reach Servita. I find White Eagle has pledged his life that Apaches are his brothers. Next day evil men take my son prisoner. He is to be hanged. But White Eagle save him, and then he make ranch-men and citizens of Servita friends to Apache nation."

"Because of this"—his voice grew deeper, and he spoke slowly—"Apaches who know White Eagle love him and trust him with their lives. Badger Head speaks in foolish anger—" There was a growl of dissent, but Black Hawk went on, taking no notice. "He is but a child, beating another because a toy has been taken from his hands. You are children, too, and should be whipped until you bleed."

At this insult there was a furious cry, and every man leapt to his feet. Black Hawk gave a rough laugh.

"Now I have spoken. Open the door!"

The order came as a surprise, and Badger Head made a motion to countermand it, but he was too late. Seeing this, he said three words harshly, with a stamp of his foot, which brought a score of warriors up to him, to close in an unbroken ring round Tom.

But Black Hawk stood fast, and placed a hand on Tom's shoulder.

"Stay! Before a chief shall die the nation must confirm the decision of the council. I hold White Eagle my prisoner. Touch him not until you hear the nation's will. Make way!"

He had drawn his knife, and, gripping Tom hard, urged him towards the open door. There was no menace in his attitude; but so firm a dignity and resolution, and his own standing in the council was so high, that the men fell back, and Badger Head's threatening manner changed. Beyond the door he had seen a phalanx of warriors, and in the forefront White Cat, with a rifle held at the ready, his finger on the trigger.

An acute crisis had arisen in the nation; but Badger Head was never to be seen at better advantage than in an emergency.

"Black Hawk must be obeyed," he said. "The sentence of death which has been pronounced against White Eagle shall be carried out before all. It is my order that Black Hawk kill this white dog with his own hand. Forward, warriors!"

The council assented and smiled maliciously. This turning of the tables on Black Hawk was entirely to their taste. Would he dare to resist a demand from the head of the nation?

Black Hawk did not resist. Holding Tom as before, he moved down the room without a word, the council following. The men at the door fell back to let them pass, and in complete silence all went to the platform outside the

(Continued on next page.)

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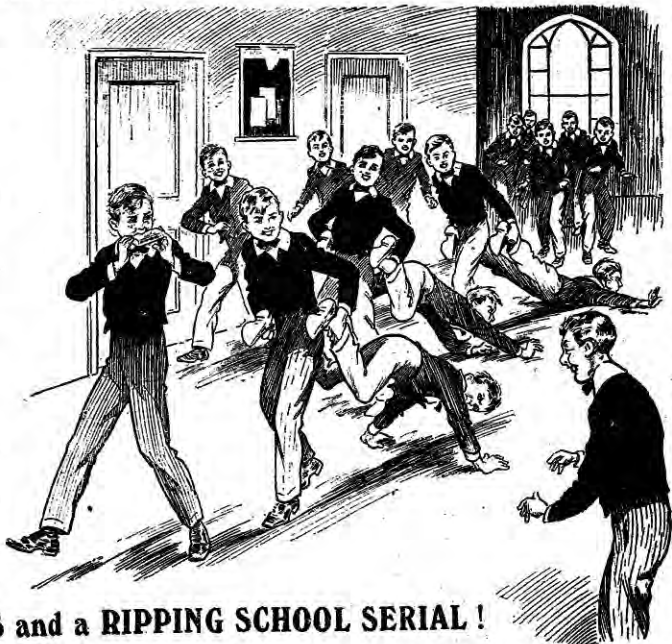
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WHITE EAGLE

(Continued from
previous page.)

storehouse, below which the street was packed with warriors ranked in close formation.

"Tom wondered where they had all come from. It was a far larger gathering than before, and on their faces was the look of expectancy of men who have received a signal and now wait for an event. As he looked at them his heart grew very cold. There was only one event they could be waiting for. These men, whom he had believed to be his friends, whose squaws and children he had fed and cared for, had assembled to see him die. And the man who was to kill him—

But he had no time for further thought. Badger Head, taking the lead, now stepped into the centre of the platform and began to speak. He had apparently fully recovered his temper, and there was an air of calm confidence and power about him, which took away the last shred of hope from Tom's heart. He wondered what Black Hawk was thinking as he stood beside him, the naked knife now pointed at his breast.

"The council has met," Badger Head said, his voice very deliberate, very quiet, but very clear. "It has resolved, and it will carry out its will before you all. This man"—indicating Tom—"is an enemy. He is sentenced to death. The chief who brought him into our midst, and who was his friend, shall carry out that sentence. Being a preface, it would be just that White Eagle be killed by torture slowly over fire. But he was made a chief. He has given service. He shall be spared this. Black Hawk"—his voice rang high

over the silent crowd—"I do give command that you kill this White Eagle now!"

He fell back a pace, and for a minute or longer there was not a sound to be heard among the packed crowd of waiting men. Then Black Hawk, still gripping Tom's shoulder, pushed him forward a step and slowly raised his right hand. "Is it your will, Apaches, that White Eagle shall die?"

He spoke in a perfectly quiet, toneless voice. There was not the slightest feeling in it, or expression of any kind. But his words created a sensation in the council. Badger Head hissed an oath between his teeth, two warriors viciously drew their knives, and the rest nodded at one another. Black Hawk had committed the crime unforgivable to authority. He had appealed at the last minute to the rank and file. He should be reckoned with presently for this. But not yet. All would depend upon the answer of the nation. The eyes of the council were fixed upon the serried ranks before them, and for a moment even their knowledge of the people failed to tell them what the reply was going to be.

But from somewhere a curious muttering began. No one had spoken. The sound was like the low intoning of some wordless song. Where it started was impossible to say. It seemed to come from all sides—from behind the house, from the middle of the street, from the steps, from the platform itself. At first it was no louder than the sigh of a wind in trees, but it increased in volume every moment.

Suddenly across it struck a sharp, shrill, wailing cry: "White Eagle!" "White Eagle!" "White Eagle!"

The cry came from a few voices first, then was repeated by many, and finally was taken up by hundreds, drowning all other sound. It was followed by a sudden movement among a section of the men, who started forward a pace and brought their rifles to their shoulders. The crowd fell silent, and one voice was heard alone:

"White Eagle is our brother," said the voice. "No man shall kill him. Let the council beware. Warriors, are you ready?"

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