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LIBRARY



## CAUGHT RED-HANDED!

(A dramatic incident from this week's long complete school story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's.)

# A DRAMATIC LONG STORY OF THE CHUMS OF ST. JIM'S—

"True Blue!" That was the opinion St. Jim's had of Reginald Talbot—once a member of a notorious gang of crooks, for everyone believed he had turned his back for ever on the old life. And then, with startling suddenness, comes apparent proof that Talbot is once again "The Toff"—thief and crackman!

## CHAPTER 1.

### Racke is Mystified!

"H I! Half a minute!" Aubrey Racke, the black sheep of the Shell at St. Jim's, halted. A look of rather startled alarm leapt into his face as he stood in the darkness of the winter's evening, peering into the trees that bordered the lane, and from which the sudden imperative hail had come.

Racke was returning to the school from the direction of Rylcombe. The look of alarm that had come into his face on hearing himself unexpectedly hailed from the shadowy trees, must have been the result of a guilty conscience. Conscience makes cowards of us all—and Racke's little visit to Rylcombe that evening had not been entirely unconnected with Mr. Jasper Banks, at one of that gentleman's many haunts—the Green Man. For a moment, the fear had come to him that some prefect had seen him emerge from that unsavoury establishment, and was now about to challenge him with the fact.

"Who—who's there?" quavered Racke uncertainly.

A figure stepped into the lane from the shadow of the trees. Racke drew a deep breath of relief. It was not a prefect, nor a master, from St. Jim's.

"Scuse me—"

Racke eyed the approaching man curiously. What could the down-at-heel individual with the pinched face and hungry eyes want with him? For a moment the St. Jim's junior wondered if it were one of Mr. Banks' shady associates. But he certainly did not recognise him as one of the dingy crowd who frequented the village inn.

The man halted opposite the junior. He was a short individual, scarcely taller than the St. Jim's junior. The threadbare cap pulled down over his eyes only half hid the gaunt lines of his cheekbones. But the man's voice was surprisingly well-educated, considering his down-and-out appearance.

"Who the dickens are you?" exclaimed Racke roughly. "You belong to St. Jim's, don't you?" inquired the other, ignoring Racke's question, with his eyes on the junior's cap.

"What's that to do with you?" growled Racke angrily. "No need to get angry," came the answer in a conciliatory voice. "Look here, since you are a St. Jim's boy, you must know Miss Rivers—Miss Marie Rivers—"

Aubrey Racke jumped.

Marie Rivers, the school nurse, was a well-known and popular figure at St. Jim's. Hers had been about the last name he would have expected the gaunt stranger to mention.

And yet, as he stared wonderingly into the gleaming eyes beneath the tweed cap, Aubrey Racke smiled a sudden malicious smile. Perhaps it was not so extraordinary, he told himself, that this unsavoury-looking character should be inquiring after Marie Rivers!

"My hat!" breathed Racke to himself. "One of the old gang!"

As everyone knew at St. Jim's, there had been a time when Marie Rivers had lived in the slums of London, among crooks and crackmen. Her father, John Rivers, had been the leader of a notorious gang of looters and law-breakers.

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It was for the very purpose of robbing St. Jim's that John Rivers had first sent his daughter to the school—Marie to be the unwilling tool of the rascally gang. She had not come alone. Reginald Talbot of the Shell had been a member of the gang, too.

But all that had been forgiven, if not forgotten, long ago. John Rivers had reformed, and was now an inspector at Scotland Yard itself! The ex-crackman had become an arm of the very law that he had once upon a time lived to break. And Marie Rivers had emerged from the shadow of her unhappy past, to become the soul of all that was good and honest. Her boy chum from the slums, Reginald Talbot, was now as true-blue as she was, and there would be no returning to the old evil life on the part of either of them—that was certain enough; any of the decent fellows at St. Jim's would have sworn to that without hesitation.

But Aubrey Racke was not a decent fellow. Hence his malicious smile when this rascally-looking individual in the seedy clothes spoke the name of Marie Rivers!

The black sheep of the Shell nodded.

"Yes," he answered. "I know Miss Rivers. What about her? Are you an old friend of hers?"

"Never mind who I am," came the answer. The man fumbled with a nervous hand in the pocket of his coat and took out an envelope. "Will you oblige me by giving this letter to her?"

Racke took the letter. It was addressed in a scrawling hand to "Miss M. Rivers, St. Jim's School."

—FEATURING REGINALD TALBOT, THE ONE-TIME "TOFF"!



# Talbot's Sacrifice!

by MARTIN CLIFFORD

"Right you are," said Racke, slipping the letter into his pocket. "I'll see she gets it all right. But look here—tell me—"

But the seedy-looking stranger had already turned with a nod and a final word of thanks, and had vanished swiftly into the darkness among the trees. Racke stood staring after him, with a brow that was knitted and thoughtful.

"Well, of all rum things!" muttered the cad of the Shell, as he turned and strode on up the lane towards the school. He was only just in time. Taggles, the school porter, had emerged from his lodge to close the gates as Aubrey Racke passed through into the deserted quad.

"What I says is, you're cuttin' it werry fine, Master Racke," growled Taggles, as the gates clanged. "Almost too late agin."

"Oh, rats!" retorted Racke, and hurried across towards the School House. Taggles was right. He was only just in time for call-over.

After call-over, Racke went slowly upstairs to the Shell passage. He entered Study No. 7 and closed the door. A few moments later, Crooke entered. He found his study-mate standing by the window, staring out thoughtfully into the quad.

"What's up?" inquired Crooke, in surprise, turning on the light. "What are you doing here in the dark, Aubrey?"

Racke turned to him, with a queer expression on his face. "Thinkin'," he said, and tossed the mysterious letter that he had promised to deliver to Marie Rivers on to the table.

Crooke glanced at it with a puzzled, questioning look. "That's what's making me think!"

"What is it?" asked Crooke. Briefly, Racke explained. Crooke whistled.

"Thunderin' queer," agreed Racke. Suddenly he crossed to the door and snapped the key in the lock. Then, with a cryptic smile, he went to the fire and, lifting the kettle from the hearth, stuck it on the hob.

"What are you putting the kettle on for?" asked Crooke, mystified. "You're not going to brew tea at this time of the evening, I suppose?"

"No," grinned Racke. "I want some steam." Suddenly Crooke understood.

"My hat! You don't mean—"

"Yes, I do," returned Racke coolly. "I mean to find out what's inside that letter! It'll be easy enough to steam it open, and refasten it later, so that Marie Rivers will never spot that it has been opened."

Even Crooke, used though he was to his chum's caddish and unscrupulous ways, watched rather uneasily as Racke stood waiting for the kettle to boil. Soon the steam was pouring from the spout. Racke picked up the letter and got to work. It did not take long to get the flap unsealed, and so carefully had Racke gone to work that when it was refastened, with the aid of gum, there would be no trace of his dastardly act.

"Now!" muttered Racke, with gleaming eyes. He drew the sheet from within the envelope and unfolded it. Crooke and he bent over it eagerly.

The note which met the eyes of the precious pair of rascals was brief:

"Dear Miss Marie.—Thanks for your letter. I am now in the neighbourhood of the school, as I told you I should be. Let us meet in the clearing by the big oak in Rylcombe Wood, on Wednesday afternoon at three o'clock. I know you will keep your promise, and that I can trust you not to forget that which I have come for.—Yours,

"JIM SMEATON."

Racke read the letter twice, with a thoughtful frown. "Funny!" he muttered. "What does the chap mean? That which he has come for! What on earth can he have come to St. Jim's to see Miss Marie for?"

"Regular mystery!" grunted Crooke. "Looks fishy to me!"

"That's what I think," nodded Racke, with an unpleasant grin. "I vote we look into this, old man. On Wednesday, at three, when this chap Smeaton meets Marie Rivers in Rylcombe Wood, we'll be there!" He grinned. "We'll hide and watch 'em!"

"Rather!" chuckled Crooke. "Oh, rather!"

And there was a grin on the faces of the two black sheep as Aubrey Racke, the blackguard of the Shell, took out a bottle of gum and refastened the flap of the envelope, sealing up the strange missive.

"I'll just slip across to the sanny and give it to Marie Rivers," said Racke.

And he left the study, with a face that was still puzzled, but which also showed a good deal of self-satisfaction.

"There's somethin' fishy here!" he told himself, as he went along the Shell passage. "And I'm goin' to find out what it is!"

And Aubrey Racke chuckled a self-satisfied chuckle.

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## CHAPTER 2.

## A Birthday Present from Gussy!

TALBOT of the Shell put his head in at the door of Study No. 6 of the Fourth Form, after classes on the following afternoon, and demanded briefly:

"Ready?"

"No, deah boy!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of St. Jim's, was seated at the table, with a writing-pad before him, and a pen in his aristocratic hand. A waste-paper basket on the floor beside him was filled with crumpled sheets of notepaper, and there was a frown on the noble brow of Arthur Augustus. Clearly, Arthur Augustus was in the throes of letter-writing. "Not ready?" exclaimed Talbot. "Then for goodness' sake get a move on, Gussy!"

Talbot entered the study, with a glance at his watch.

"I have been twyin' to w'ite a lettah, deah boy—"

"Blow your blessed letter! You've not forgotten that we're supposed to be having tea with the Head, have you?" snorted Talbot. "Leave your rotten letters—"

"Weally, Talbot—"

"We shall be late if you don't buck up!" said Talbot, breathing hard.

"I had no ideah it was so late," confessed Arthur Augustus. "But I fancy there is just time for me to finish my lettah—"

"You've got all the rest of your life to write letters in!" roared Talbot. "Come along, you dummy!"

"I have not got the west of my life to w'ite this lettah in," exclaimed Arthur Augustus firmly. "It is a lettah to a gal on her birthday, and if it is not posted to-night, it will not reach her in time."

"Oh dear!" groaned Talbot. "If you will know so many girls, Gussy! Who is it this time? The one in the Rylcombe linendrapers'?"

Arthur Augustus went very pink.

"Pway do not be an ass, Talbot! You are perfectly well awah that I am totally uninterested in the young lady in the Wylcombe linendrapers'. I am w'itin' to a gal named Molly Harwood—you will wemembah, pewwaps, that she visited the school a little while ago. A vewy charmin' gal! I have bought her a wooch as a pwsent for her birthday—"

"Never mind the blessed brooch! Come along!"

But Arthur Augustus did not heed Talbot. There was a little cardboard box on the table in front of him, and Arthur Augustus raised the lid and took from it a gleaming piece of jewellery. Talbot stared at it wonderingly.

"My hat! That's a pretty generous present, anyway!" He whistled. "You'll need to register that letter, with that brooch in it."

"I had not thought of bothewin'," confessed Arthur Augustus. "It is only worth eight pounds."

"Only?" echoed Talbot. "Why, you fathead, eight quid is a lot of money to most of us!"

He examined the brooch admiringly. It was of platinum, set with small diamonds. A very handsome present indeed for Gussy's girl friend. But there was no time to think about it now—tea with the Head was the pressing business on hand.

"Stick the blessed brooch away, and come along, Gussy!" commanded Talbot. "You can write that letter after tea—heaps of time!"

"Vewy well," agreed Arthur Augustus reluctantly. "I should certainly nevah forgive myself if I was late for tea with Doctah Holmes. The Head is a gentleman for whom I entertain a vewy great respect—"

"Hurry!" howled Talbot.

Arthur Augustus picked up the brooch and crossed to the study cupboard. He placed it on one of the top shelves, together with his half-written letter and the writing-pad, and closed the cupboard door.

"Better lock it," suggested Talbot. "You don't want to leave a valuable brooch lying around."

"Wats! It's safe enough in there!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "I twust there is no one likely to touch it!"

"Of course not," assented Talbot. "But—"

A sudden exclamation from Arthur Augustus cut in on Talbot's words. The swell of St. Jim's was gazing down into an empty hat-box with an expression of dismay.

"My toppah!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "Some wottah has bagged my best toppah!"

"Hard luck! But you've got lots and lots of toppers—"

"Only four," corrected Arthur Augustus.

"Well, won't one of the other three do?" groaned Talbot.

"No," returned Arthur Augustus, with asperity. "Of my othah thwee toppahs, Hewwies' wotten dog, Towsah, wowed one yestahday and wuined it. Blake sat on anothah this mornin', and considerably spoilt its appeah-wance. The othah toppah is quite old-fashioned in style, deah boy. I must find my missin' toppah, therefore—"

"Look here," said Talbot fiercely, "we've got about three minutes in which to get to the Head's house. Someone's

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borrowed your best topper, so you've got to wear another, even if it is out of fashion."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy adjusted his eyeglass and stared at Talbot with quite a shocked expression.

"Do I weally undahstand, Talbot, deah boy, that you are sewiously suggestin' that I should go to tea with the Head and Mrs. Holmes weawin' a toppah that is several months out of the cowwect fashion?" gasped Arthur Augustus faintly.

Talbot's face went very grim.

He realised that argument was useless. There was only one thing for it—force would have to be resorted to, where reason had failed! There were varied opinions among the juniors as to whether tea with the Head was a pleasure or an ordeal; but, at any rate, it was very kind of the Head and Mrs. Holmes to invite a few juniors at times, and it simply did not do to arrive late on those occasions. Even if Arthur Augustus should be compelled to arrive in a topper several months old, Talbot was determined that he should, at any rate, arrive in time.

"You're coming now, in this topper," said Talbot grimly, snatching up the topper that Arthur Augustus had spurned as being hopelessly out of fashion.

"Bai Jove! I wefuse—"

"Coming?"

"Bai Jove! No! Not until I have found a toppah suitable to the importance of the occasion! I—Owl! Wow!"

Talbot had seized D'Arcy, and jammed the topper on his head, and whirled him towards the door.

"Oh! Yow!" gasped Arthur Augustus wildly. "Yooop Leggo, you wuff ass! Yawooooop! Talbot, you feahful wottah, you are wuinin' my jacket! Leggo, you uttah boundah—"

But Talbot had him in a vice-like grip, and, despite his frantic struggles, the unhappy swell of St. Jim's was rushed out into the passage and along towards the stairs, with his eyeglass flying on the end of its cord, and the topper that he had disdained tilted at a rakish angle on his aristocratic head.

"I wefuse!" shrieked Arthur Augustus.

"Refuse away!" chuckled Talbot.

"You wuff wottah, you are wuinin' my toppah!" howled Arthur Augustus, struggling fiercely, but in vain. "I shall have to go back and change my jacket—"

"Certainly—after tea," rejoined Talbot cheerily.

And he raced the frantic swell of St. Jim's on towards the stairs—a whirling figure, with waving arms and legs!

All the way down the stairs Arthur Augustus protested loudly and bitterly against moving at all; but, somehow, he kept moving at a rapid speed, all the same.

Ralph Reckness Cardew, of the Fourth, lounging in the Hall, raised his eyebrows slightly in surprise as Talbot and the struggling figure of Arthur Augustus came speeding down the stairs together.

"Wessee, Cardew, deah boy!" spluttered Arthur Augustus wildly.

"My hat! Is this some new game?" inquired Cardew.

Talbot chuckled and passed on, and the swell of St. Jim's went with him. That hapless youth did not want to go, but he was going, nevertheless.

## CHAPTER 3.

## Vanished!

JACK BLAKE, Herries, and Digby, the three chums who shared Study No. 6 of the Fourth with Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, came tramping in at the school gate, later that evening, looking very ruddy and fit.

They had had tea in Wayland, where they had been shopping. But the walk back through the keen evening air had given them new appetites.

"We'll brew some cocoa—eh, you chaps?" suggested Blake, as the three crossed the quad towards the School House. "And there's a pretty decent-sized cake in the cupboard, if Trimble hasn't raided it while we've been out!"

They entered the School House and hurried upstairs to Study No. 6. Blake swung the door open with a crash.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was standing by the cupboard, busily transferring its contents to the table. Inkpots, books, jars of jam, a large cake—all kinds of things that had been on the shelves in the cupboard were now heaped on the table. Even as the three Fourth-Formers entered, Arthur Augustus was in the act of removing the last few articles from the cupboard. The swell of St. Jim's turned as they entered.

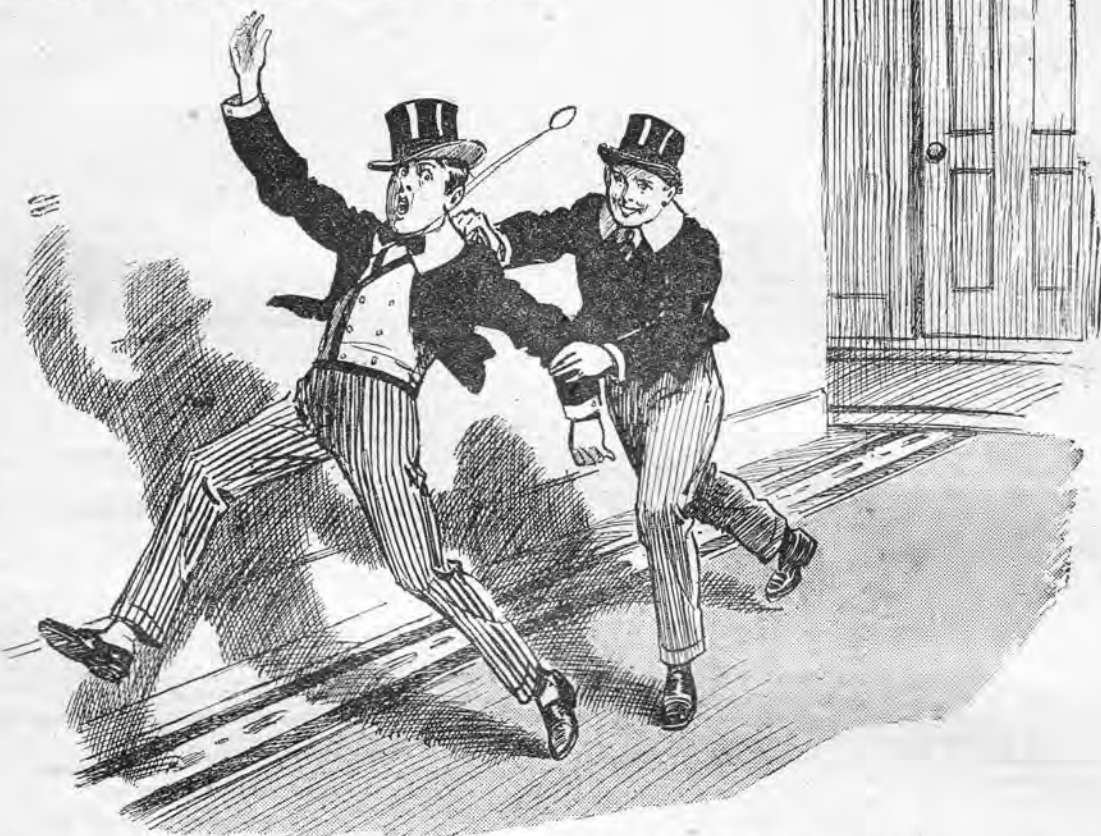
"Hallo, hallo!" sang out Blake cheerily. "What the thump are you up to, Gussy? This is the wrong time of year for spring-cleaning!"

Arthur Augustus adjusted his eyeglass and surveyed his chums, with a worried frown.

"I say, deah boys!"

"Say on, old turnip!" chuckled Herries,

In Talbot's vice-like grip, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was rushed out into the passage and along towards the stairs, with his eyeglass flying on the end of its cord, and his topper at a rakish angle on his aristocratic head. "You wuff wottah!" howled Gussy. "You are wuinin' my clobber!" (See Chapter 2.)



"Weally, Hewwies—"

"How did you get on at tea with the Head?" asked Blake.

"Bother tea with the Head!" snorted Arthur Augustus, with unusual emphasis. "I am vewy wowwied!"

"You look it," agreed Digby, "making all that mess! What the merry dickens is the idea of turning all that stuff out of that cupboard on to the table? Playing at being Mother Hubbard—the cupboard was bare, and all that?"

"You uttah ass, Dig—"

"Well, what's the idea?"

"You know that bwooch I was sendin' to Molly Harwood—"

"Rather," nodded Blake. "Fancy spending eight quid on a blessed brooch! Well, what about it, Gussy?"

"An extwaordinawy thing has happened," went on the swell of St. Jim's, with a troubled frown. "I put the bwooch in this cupboard befoah goin' to tea with the Head, but it is no longah there!"

"What!" exclaimed Blake. "You mean, you've lost it?"

"You frabjous dummy!" ejaculated Herries.

Arthur Augustus fixed Herries with a very frosty look. "Weally, Hewwies, I stwongly wesent bein' called a dummay! Were I not occupied in lookin' for the bwooch, I should administah a feahful thwashin' for that wemark."

"Bow-wow! Look here, if you really put the brooch in that cupboard it must be still there—unless you took it out," grunted Blake.

He crossed to the cupboard and stared in. Like that of the celebrated Mother Hubbard, the cupboard was bare. All the contents had been transferred to the table. There was certainly no brooch now in the cupboard.

"Sure you haven't shifted the brooch out by mistake with the rest of the things, without noticing it?" suggested Digby.

"Pway do not make widiculous wemarks, Dig! I have searched for the bwooch thowoughly, and it is not heah. Some wottah must have taken it!"

Blake, Herries and Digby stared at Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. Blake whistled.

If the brooch really had been taken, it was a very grave matter. For it seemed hard to think that anyone would

have taken D'Arcy's brooch as a joke—it was too valuable an article for a fellow to play jokes with. If the brooch had been taken, it had been stolen—there could be little doubt of that.

"Stolen!" muttered Blake.

It was not often that things were stolen at St. Jim's. The very word came to Jack Blake's lips reluctantly. He stared round at the others in silence. Then suddenly he gripped D'Arcy's arm.

"Look here," he said grimly, "are you positive you put the brooch in this cupboard? It can't be that you really put it somewhere else, and imagined that you had put it here. You know what an ass you are sometimes—"

"Bai Jove! Weally, Blake—"

"Are you certain you put it in the cupboard?" repeated Blake impatiently.

"Yaas, wathah! I can pwove it! Talbot was heah when I put it there."

"Go and find Talbot, will you, Dig?" muttered Blake. Digby nodded and hurried from the study. Blake, after a final brief glance into the bare cupboard, turned and began to search among the articles on the table which Arthur Augustus had put there after removing them from the cupboard. But it was soon quite clear to Blake that the missing brooch was not there, either.

"This is rotten," exclaimed Blake, frowning.

"Feahfully wotten!" echoed the swell of St. Jim's. "I—I scarcely like to imagine that some fellow has been dishonest enough to steal the bwooch, but weally it is beginnin' to look like it!"

"Did anyone see you put the brooch in the cupboard, that you know of?" demanded Blake. "Could anyone have known it was there?"

Arthur Augustus shook his head.

"Nobody at all, deah boy. At least, Talbot knew, as I wemarked. But Talbot, of course, could not have taken the bwooch."

"Rather not," exclaimed Herries with conviction. "We can wash out Talbot for a start."

The door swung open, and Talbot himself strode into the room, accompanied by Digby. Talbot's brow was clouded.

"I say this is rotten!" he exclaimed. "Dig says your brooch is lost, Gussy!"

Arthur Augustus nodded.

"I can't imagine what has happened to it," he said. "You saw me put it in this cupboard—"

"I did," nodded Talbot. "There can be no mistake about that."

"That's what I want to ask you, Talbot," put in Blake. "We all know what Gussy is! I thought maybe he had put the brooch somewhere else and thought he had put it in the cupboard. But if you say you saw him put it there, well, it was there all right—"

"But it's not there now!" exclaimed Herries.

"So someone must have moved it," growled Blake. "The question is, who?"

It was a grave question enough! The four chums of Study No. 6 stared at one another, and at Talbot. Talbot's face was as worried as theirs.

"It's been stolen, right enough," said Blake at last. "It's rotten to have to think so, but there's nothing else to account for the blessed thing's disappearance."

"Railton will have to be told, of course," muttered Talbot.

"Yaas. I'm afraid he will," nodded Arthur Augustus. "Oh dear! It's weally wotten."

"I told you not to leave the cupboard unlocked, Gussy," exclaimed Talbot.

"Weally, Talbot, natuwallly I did not dream that anyone would be wottah enough to come and steal the brooch!" retorted the swell of St. Jim's with asperity.

There was a tap on the door. Tom Merry, the captain of the Shell, put his head into the study.

"Oh, there you are, Talbot!" The captain of the Shell entered the study. "I was told you were seen coming in here. I want to make sure you're all right for the match against the New House to-morrow afternoon?"

"Rather," nodded Talbot. "But, I say, there's some rather bad news. A brooch has been stolen from this study, worth eight quid!"

"My hat!"

Tom's face went grave in a moment. Briefly Blake told him the facts. The captain of the Shell whistled.

"Whew! This is a bad business! Railton ought to be told at once, of course."

"I will go and tell Wailton now," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and hurried from the room.

"Herries and Dig and I have been in Wayland—only just back," explained Blake. "So the fellow, whoever it was, had all the time between Gussy's going off to tea with the Head, and his return, to pinch the blessed thing. Gussy told us that he didn't come straight back here after leaving the Head, either."

"No," cut in Talbot. He coloured slightly. "As a matter of fact, I looked in here myself soon after getting back into the House, to see Gussy, but he wasn't here."

"You didn't see anyone hanging about outside, of course?" questioned Tom Merry, and Talbot shook his head.

"Did anyone know the brooch was there?" added Tom a moment later.

"Nobody," said Blake. "Gussy is sure on that point. No one except—"

"He broke off, a trifle awkwardly. "No one except me," said Talbot quietly, but flushing again.

"Well, no need for you to colour up, Talbot!" exclaimed Tom Merry, with a slight smile. "No one in their senses would dream of thinking it was possible you had taken the brooch!"

"I hope not, anyway," returned Talbot.

"But someone must have taken it!" said Tom Merry grimly. "But who on earth can the thief be?"

That was a question that no one in the room could answer for the captain of the Shell.

#### CHAPTER 4.

##### Marie's Request!

THE excitement aroused by the news of the stolen brooch swept through St. Jim's like wildfire that evening. It was the sole topic of conversation in the Shell and Fourth Form dormitories in the School House, and caused almost as great a stir in the New House.

But, though everyone was discussing the mystery, no one had any suggestion to offer which could throw any light on it. St. Jim's fell asleep that night in complete ignorance as to who the fellow was who had been responsible for the disappearance of the valuable trinket from Study No. 6.

It was known that Talbot of the Shell had visited the study during the brief period in which the brooch must have been taken. But no one believed for a moment that Talbot could be the thief. Nevertheless, Racke & Co. found amusement in pretending that they did.

While the Shell were waiting in their Form-room for the

arrival of Mr. Linton, before classes next morning, Racke remarked to Crooke in a voice that, though low, was meant to be overheard:

"It's rough luck on Talbot that he was seen going to Gussy's study yesterday at that time. Bound to make people talk."

"Rather!" nodded Crooke, grinning.

Talbot had overheard the remark, but he pretended to have heard nothing. But Monty Lowther swung round on the cad of the Shell with gleaming eyes.

"You insinuating cad!" he snapped. "The sort of thing to expect from you, though, Racke!"

"Thanks!" sneered Racke.

The entry of Mr. Linton, with rustling gown, interrupted further talk. But there was a faint frown on Talbot's face throughout classes that morning. It still lingered there when the Shell, after last lesson, dispersed from the Form-room.

Tom Merry, in the Hall, clapped Talbot cheerily on the shoulder.

"Coming to punt a footer about for a spell before tiffin?"

"Right-ho!" agreed Talbot, brightening; and together with Tom Merry, Manners and Lowther, Blake & Co., of the Fourth, Levison and Clive, and several others, he left the House and crossed towards the Close.

A girlish figure standing under the elms caught Talbot's eye suddenly. He saw that it was Marie Rivers. The girl saw him and came towards the group of juniors.

"Hallo, hallo!" sang out Monty Lowther. "How's Miss Marie this morning? Fit and full of beans, as usual, eh?"

Marie Rivers smiled faintly. As a matter of fact, she was looking a little pale and worried.

"I want to speak to you," she said to Talbot in a low voice; and Talbot nodded, though something in her manner caused him to eye his girl chum curiously. He turned to Tom Merry.

"I'll be with you chaps in a minute," he said, and turned away under the elms with Marie Rivers. The other juniors passed on.

For some moments the pretty face of Talbot's companion was set in worried lines. Then she turned a frank look upon him.

"Toff, will you do me a favour?"

Marie Rivers still used the name by which Talbot had been known to the gang in the old days.

"Of course. What is it?"

If he had been puzzled before, Talbot was still more puzzled now by the girl's manner.

"There's nothing wrong, is there, Marie?" he asked, with a note of anxiety in his voice.

The girl shook her head quickly.

"No, no! Only something that worries me a little. Do you remember Jim Smeaton?"

Talbot started, and a queer look came into his eyes.

"Smeaton!" he muttered hoarsely. "What of him?"

The junior stared at Marie Rivers with a queer, haunted look that caused her to give a little shiver. She had not seen that look in the face of her boy chum for a long time now. It told her that the mention of Smeaton's name had brought back in a rush to Talbot—as she had known it must—ugly memories of the dark days when the Shell fellow had been known as the Toff, the prince of cracksmen!

Though Reginald Talbot had long lived down the shame of those dark days, though their memory was growing dim, nevertheless, when any circumstance arose to remind Talbot of the time when he had been the friend of scoundrels and law-breakers, that troubled shadow would darken his usually clear eyes.

"I—I'm sorry!" whispered Marie Rivers; and for a moment she touched his sleeve. "I did not want to tell you anything about this, but as things have happened I've got to. I want you to help me through—"

Talbot clenched his hands.

"Help you through?" he exclaimed in a low, tense voice. "Do you mean that this cur Smeaton has been worrying you? What's happened? Has he written to you?"

Marie Rivers shook her head quickly.

"No, no; you're wrong," she exclaimed. "Smeaton used to be a scoundrel, of course; he was one of—" She hesitated, then went on in a husky whisper, with a flush in her cheeks. "He was one of the gang, as you know. But he tells me that he wants to run straight in future, and he has asked me for help. He wants money to start life afresh. He says a few pounds will enable him to better his appearance, so that he can apply for an honest job—"

"Do you think he means it?" asked Talbot in a doubtful voice. "He was always a treacherous—"

"Oh, but I'm sure he means it!" the girl exclaimed. "You know how we have turned our backs on the old life. Why should not he? We must be generous to him, not doubt him."

Talbot flushed. He was angry with himself in a moment

for his words. As the girl had reminded him, he himself had once been in Smeaton's position—had been a crook who wanted to run straight. Had people not been prepared to trust him, when he had needed help, he could never have turned from the old, dark ways. In the same way, it was up to him to trust Smeaton now, and try to help him.

"I'm sorry," he muttered. "Tell me—where is Smeaton now?"

"In the neighbourhood," Marie Rivers answered. "He wrote and told me he was coming, asking for a little money. Now I have heard from him that he is here, and he asks me to meet him this afternoon in Rylcombe Wood."

"I see." But there was a troubled look on the face of

jewellery. He will be able to sell it, and so get the money he needs."

"I see," muttered Talbot. "I hate to think of your having to do that, Marie! If only I didn't happen to be stony just now, I—"

"No, that's quite all right," said Marie, with a smile. Then her face went grave. "I am only sorry to have to ask you—to have to tell you. I meant to say nothing about it to you, as it would only worry you. It—it is not nice, is it, remembering the old days?"

Talbot smiled faintly, and slipped the little box into his pocket.

"I'll give it to Smeaton, sure enough," he promised.

He watched his girl chum hurry away through the elms towards the sanatorium. There was a troubled shadow in

**H**EROIC batting; strong bowling. It is easy to point to Test Matches which have been won by players who have been inspired in one or other of these things. It isn't so easy to point to actual fielding feats which have won Test games; but as a general statement, it can certainly be said that many Tests have been won by brilliant fielding. In fact, it is almost literally true to say that the hands which hold the ball in the field are the hands which hold the Ashes.

When the present England side was setting sail for Australia I asked "Patsy" Hendren his opinion of the prospects of the coming Tests. "It is my opinion," he said, "that they may be won and lost in the slips."

You see what he meant by that, don't you? That the side which had the men in the slips who could hold the greatest proportion of the chances would come through victorious. Whenever there are fast bowlers on the side you want super-men in the slips—hands that can hold anything.

#### What a Dropped Catch Means!

This applies to all cricket, but it applies especially to cricket in Australia. The pitches are for the most part hard, and the ball comes off them at a quick pace. Sometimes it jumps, and before the batsman can get his bat out of the way the ball snicks it, and away it flies—into the slips. If there is a man there capable of holding it—well, a good batsman is back in the pavilion.

So one might say that first and foremost, so far as Australia is concerned, the hands that hold the Ashes are the hands of the men in the slips, and, of course, of the wicket-keeper. No bowler in Australia can be successful unless he is backed by fielders who accept their chances. There was a Test Match of a past series in which Jack Gregory—one

## HANDS THAT HOLD THE "ASHES"!

An interesting article of topical interest to GEM readers who are following the fortunes of the M.C.C. in their series of Test Matches against the Australians.

of the most brilliant fielders in the slips the game has known in our time—made six catches in the course of the game.

Catching is such an important part of Test Match cricket because you simply can't afford to give the best of Australia or the best of England two innings, and that is what is really done when a chance of catching is missed.

#### An Uphill Battle!

Let me recall just one story to illustrate the tragedy of a missed catch. England were playing Australia at Leeds in 1926. Off the first ball sent down by Maurice Tate, the England man, Warren Bardsley was caught. Off the fifth ball sent down in that game Charlie Macartney was missed in the slips. If that chance had been taken two of Australia's greatest batsmen would have been back in the pavilion with only 2 runs scored. But the second chance was not accepted; Macartney went on to play one of the most brilliant innings I have ever seen, and he achieved the unique distinction of scoring a century in a Test Match before lunch on the first day. That feat has never been equalled, and from the moment that chance was missed England had to fight uphill every inch of the way.

#### A Vital Job!

We have seen pictures in recent times of Percy Chapman making catches in the slips when he has had to roll over and over after making a headlong dive

to get at the ball. He and Wally Hammond are just great in the slips. Then we mustn't forget the importance of the hands of the wicket-keepers. They must stand there to all sorts of bowling, never slacking for a single ball throughout the time their opponents are batting; watching for a chance of stumping, or ready to snap up those snicks. So vital is the wicket-keeper's job that everybody agrees that in a Test Match the best wicket-keeper should be played, regardless of what he can do with the bat.

#### The Final Choice!

Personally, I am always surprised that wicket-keepers can ever do anything with the bat, considering the way they get their hands knocked about. But they are not the only players in the field who get it hot. The men who field at cover-point, or silly-point, go through it. There are few men who field in this position so daring or so sure as T. J. Andrews, the Australian. I once saw Andrews at lunch-time on the third day of a Test Match. His hands were so sore that he had to get somebody to cut his meat for him, as he couldn't hold his knife and fork properly.

Jack Hobbs is England's great man at cover-point, and in the long field Hendren is the star. It can be said that after a long innings by Australia Patsy has already 50 runs to his credit, because he has saved that number by his work in the long-field.

And so, though in picking a Test team, the selectors of necessity think of bowlers and batsmen first, the question of whether a player is good or indifferent in the field often decides the final choice between two men.

Reginald Talbot. Somehow, it went against the grain with him to think of Marie Rivers meeting a man like Smeaton—even though the ex-crook had professed his intention of reforming. "Look here, let me meet him for you, instead, and—"

"That is what I want to ask you to do," Marie answered, with a quick, grateful smile. "The matron cannot spare me this afternoon, as there are several cases in the sanatorium which must be looked after particularly. I want you to meet him for me under the big oak, at three. And I want you to give him this."

Marie Rivers took from the pocket of the coat she was wearing a small cardboard box, fastened with string. Talbot took it, with a puzzled glance at her.

"But—"

"It is not money," the girl explained. "Unfortunately, I do not happen to have any money just now—I have been paying off several bills, you see, and his request has come at just the wrong moment. But I am determined to help him—it is only fair. So I am sending him an article of

his eyes. As Marie Rivers had said, remembrance of the old days could only be bitter to a true-blue fellow like Talbot of the Shell.

But if a man who had once been a fellow law-breaker wanted to go straight, everything must be done to help him, as Marie had said. Talbot agreed with that, heart and soul.

Slowly he turned to retrace his steps towards the Close. The shouts of Tom Merry & Co. as they punted the ball about came to his ears. He heard the dull thudding of a football, and with that sound came the sudden thought that he had told Tom Merry that he would play in the match that afternoon.

"But I've promised Marie, too—I can't go back on that," Talbot told himself. "Smeaton has got to be helped! That's the most important thing—more important than footer!"

Tom Merry was very surprised when Talbot, looking distinctly uncomfortable, asked to be excused from playing

in the match that afternoon. Instinctively Tom connected the request with the talk Talbot had been having with Marie Rivers. But the captain of the Shell knew well enough that Talbot would not make such a request without some really good reason, so he nodded cheerily enough.

"Right-ho!" he said. "Of course, I'm sorry, but with luck we shall beat Figgins & Co. all the same. I know you wouldn't ask without a jolly good reason, old man."

"Thanks!" said Talbot awkwardly. "I'm awfully sorry."

He walked away towards the School House, without giving any reason for his unusual last-minute request. The captain of the Shell glanced after him, rather puzzled. Then he shrugged and dismissed the matter from his mind. It was very disappointing to have to be without one of his best players, but he trusted Talbot, and Talbot's reason was his own business.

"Digby," called out Tom Merry, "you'll be wanted this afternoon. Talbot's not playing."

"Good egg!" grinned Digby of the Fourth.

## CHAPTER 5.

### In Rylcombe Wood!

"SSSSSH!" hissed Aubrey Racke. "Here he comes!" Racke and Crooke, crouching among the bushes surrounding the wooded clearing, peered eagerly through the concealing branches.

It was very quiet in Rylcombe Wood. Racke and Crooke had been waiting for some time, and several cigarette ends on the ground beside them showed the manner of their waiting! But as the hour of three had approached, the two precious rascals of the Shell had thrown away their cheap cigarettes, lest the smoke should betray their presence in the bushes. And soon after that the sound of a distant footstep had caused Racke's warning whisper.

A figure came into sight among the trees, and Racke at once recognised the man named Smeaton.

"That the chap?" breathed Crooke questioningly.

Racke nodded, but with a warning gesture to his companion to keep silent. The two black sheep crouched lower, watching with intent eyes.

Smeaton halted in the clearing, and glanced round. Seeing that he was the first to arrive at the meeting-place—he never doubted but that Marie Rivers would come—he seated himself on a fallen tree-trunk, drew a packet of cigarettes from his pocket, and lit one, waiting.

He had not long to wait. Distant footsteps could be heard before long, approaching through the trees. Smeaton threw away his cigarette and rose. A few moments later the figure of a tall, athletic schoolboy came into view down one of the paths.

Crooke drew a sharp breath.

"Talbot!"

"Ssssh!" hissed Racke. But there was surprise in his face, too. He had expected to see Marie Rivers arrive to keep the strange appointment with the man named Smeaton—not Talbot of the Shell!

It was a surprise for Smeaton himself, evidently, Racke noticed. The man started at sight of Talbot, and a surprised exclamation broke from him.

"The Toff!"

And at hearing the use of Talbot's old nickname of his cracksmen days Racke's eyes glinted. So he had been right enough in his supposition! Smeaton was one of the old gang with whom both Talbot and Marie Rivers had been associated.

"Yes," came Talbot's answer, quiet and steady. "It is the Toff, Smeaton."

A flickering smile curled the corners of Smeaton's lips as he stepped forward and held out his hand. Talbot took it.

"It's plain Talbot now, though, I suppose?" he said huskily. He eyed Talbot up and down admiringly. "You're looking fine after all this time, young 'un."

"I wish I could say the same of you," returned Talbot, gazing into the gaunt face. "You look down and out!"

"And that's true!" said the other, with a sudden whine. "Well, crooks never prosper for long," said Talbot quietly.

"I'm glad to hear you have decided to chuck the old game, Smeaton, and play clean and straight in future!"

"That I have!" came the prompt answer. "No more cracking cribs for me! But I need some cash—"

"I know," nodded Talbot. "Miss Marie told me all about it. She was unable to come herself, and she has no money at the moment."

"What!" cried the man sharply; and his eyes glittered. "She isn't going to help me?"

"Oh, yes, she is! Since she hasn't any money that she can send you, she has sent you this. She tells me you will be able to raise the wind all right on this."

Talbot took from his pocket the little cardboard-box and handed it to Smeaton.

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He had been talking in a low voice, so that nothing of the conversation, save a few unimportant scraps, had come to the ears of Racke and Crooke, watching with eager interest through the bushes. But at sight of the cardboard-box changing hands the two black sheep of the Shell peered through the branches with increased attention, if that were possible.

All Racke's suspicions were back in a flood at sight of that little box. His first opinion that there was something "fishy" about this queer meeting in the woods seemed to be confirmed. What could Talbot of the Shell have brought this seedy stranger to give him in secret in Rylcombe Wood?

Crooke, too, was breathless with interest. Though it was a fact that most of the fellows at St. Jim's seldom remembered, Crooke and Talbot were cousins. There was such an absolute gulf between the two of them that the fact was rather amazing to most people, but it was true enough. But though they were cousins, there was no love lost between Talbot and Crooke, though the former would have been willing to be friendly had Crooke been ever fairly decent. As it was, Crooke hated Talbot, and would have been only too glad to have found his cousin mixed up in some shady affair.

Hence the eager interest with which Crooke watched the proceedings in the clearing!

Talbot and Smeaton were still talking in low tones. Their words did not reach the ears of the two eavesdroppers, except as an indistinct murmur. Then Talbot gripped the man's hand, and the words "Good luck!" were heard by the listeners. Talbot turned and vanished into the trees, leaving the seedy stranger alone.

Smeaton took out from his pocket the mysterious cardboard box. He unfastened the string, raised the lid, and gave a sudden, gloating exclamation. His eyes gleamed greedily.

He picked out with his fingers something from within—something that glittered and flashed in a shaft of pale sunlight that fell through the trees.

The two watchers drew in their breath with a sharp hissing sound, and in their eyes appeared a strange, startled gleam.

For it was a brooch that Smeaton held in his hand—a brooch of platinum and diamonds!

With another exclamation of intense satisfaction, the man in the clearing returned the glittering article to its box and slipped it into his pocket. Then he turned and left the clearing. His footsteps died away into the distance.

"Great pip!" breathed Racke. He gripped Crooke's arm excitedly. "Did you see it?"

"You bet I did!" exclaimed Crooke, and there was a malignant light in his eyes. "D'Arcy's stolen brooch!"

In the stillness of the wood the two eavesdroppers stared at one another in wondering silence.

## CHAPTER 6.

### Racke Causes a Sensation!

THE match against the New House was over. It had been, as usual, a hard-fought game. Figgins had put a very strong team into the field, and the School House side, without the services of Talbot, had been "up against it" with a vengeance. They had held their own until half-time, no goals having been scored on either side. But in the second half George Figgins and his merry men had broken through the stubborn School House defence and scored. Despite heroic efforts on the part of Tom Merry & Co., they had been unable to equalise, and the score was still one—nil in favour of the New House when the final whistle sounded.

"Rotten!" grunted Hammond, as the teams trooped off the field. "If only Talbot hadn't let us down—"

"I dare say Talbot would have made all the difference," agreed Tom Merry. "But we can't always win, anyway! So there's nothing to grumble about. This will only make us extra keen to win next time."

"Rather!" agreed Harry Manners. "That's the ticket!" But Tom Merry's philosophical point of view was not shared by all the School House juniors. There were loud grumbings at the absence of Talbot from the team—an absence which had, without a doubt, been largely responsible for the adverse result.

"The blessed slacker!" sniffed Trimble, the fattest member of the Fourth. "Fancy a chap shirking footer like that! Disgusting!"

As Baggy Trimble was the worst shirker in the School House, his virtuous indignation caused a laugh, which made Baggy snort indignantly. But, though they laughed at Trimble, most of the juniors still felt sore with Reginald Talbot.

After tea Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther strolled down to the Common-room. They found a big crowd of fellows



Racke and Crooke, crouching behind the bushes, drew in their breath sharply as the man in the clearing gave a sudden glowing exclamation and took something that glittered and flashed from a cardboard box. It was a brooch—a brooch of platinum and diamonds! (See Chapter 5.)

there, and the chief topic of conversation was the New House match and the defeat of the School House team. And it was soon evident that Talbot of the Shell was still the object of general condemnation.

"It's not as if the chap gave a good reason for backing out of the match!" snorted Kangaroo. "A chap has no right to back out without giving a good reason, to my mind; and if I were skipper I should have jolly well insisted on an explanation."

"Hear, hear!" chorused several of the juniors.

Tom Merry frowned. He had just entered the room. At sight of him Kangaroo went a little pink. Tom Merry strode forward.

"For goodness' sake, forget all this!" he exclaimed impatiently. "I'm skipper at present, and I was satisfied that Talbot had a good reason for asking to be let off the match."

"Didn't he give any reason at all?" demanded Gunn.

"No," said Tom. "I dare say if I'd asked for a reason he could have given a jolly good one. I feel sure he could. But I did not bother to ask for it, as I know jolly well that Talbot is a chap I can trust. You all know he is a keen footer man; he's about the last chap in the world to slack."

"Heah, heah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"That's all very well," sneered Mellish. "Talbot is a pal of yours, Merry; so I suppose he can do what he likes."

"That's enough from you, Mellish!" said Tom angrily, and there was a look in his eyes that caused the sneak of the Fourth to become hastily silent.

Tom Merry, Manners, and Monty Lowther crossed to the fire, where Jack Blake & Co. joined them.

"Still no sign of your missing brooch, Gussy?" asked Manners.

"No, deah boy!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy shook his head, with a worried frown. "None at all."

The door of the Common-room opened, and Racke and Crooke entered. No one noticed them particularly at first; but had the other juniors seen it, there was a queer, almost gloating look in the faces of the two black sheep of Study No. 7. The two crossed to the fire, where Racke planted himself alongside Tom Merry & Co.

"How did the match go this afternoon?" inquired Racke.

Such a question from Racke caused surprise. Tom Merry & Co. glanced at him, and then at one another.

"Great snakes!" gasped Monty. "The age of miracles isn't past, then, after all! Here's jolly old Aubrey taking an interest in the footer!"

"Oh, rats!" growled Racke.

"Racke, old scout," said Blake gravely, "as one footer enthusiast to another, I'll confess that we were licked. New House beat us, one-nil."

"Yes, we were licked!" grunted Wilkins of the Shell. "All because of that ass Talbot!"

"How was that?" asked Racke blandly.

"He backed out of the match at the last minute," growled Kangaroo. "Everyone knows that—except you slackers who don't take any interest in the footer! Talbot backed out, and never gave the slightest reason for doing so. I think he ought to be made to explain what the blessed urgent business was that prevented his playing this afternoon!"

"Wats!" sniffed Arthur Augustus. "Talbot is perfectly straight; he must have had some vewy good weason—"

"Oh, he had! A very good reason!" said Racke, with a glance at Crooke.

"What on earth do you mean, Racke?" exclaimed Tom Merry. "What do you know about it?"

"Just this," went on Racke evenly, "Crooke and I happen

to know what it was that kept Talbot from playing in the match this afternoon. We were in Rylcombe Wood at about three o'clock, and we saw Talbot—dear, good Talbot—meeting a shady-looking man there, evidently by arrangement!"

Racke glanced round, his eyes glittering with malicious triumph.

There was a breathless silence in the room. All the fellows stared at Racke and Crooke. Crooke nodded and grinned.

"It's true enough! An awful seedy-looking scoundrel it was. Talbot met him, and—"

"There's something else," went on Racke, interrupting. "Talbot gave this man something, and Crooke and I happened to see what it was."

Again Racke paused. An ugly grin crossed his face.

"What was it?" broke out Dick Julian.

"A brooch!" flashed Racke. "The brooch that was stolen from D'Arcy's study yesterday!"

A deathly silence followed his words. Amazement, horror, and, in many cases utter disbelief, were reflected on the faces of the juniors. Then the silence was broken by an excited babel of voices.

"You hound!" hissed Tom Merry, jumping forward and confronting Racke, his fists clenched, his face white with anger. "You'll take those lies back, or—"

"The cur! Scrag him!"

"Give him a chance!" shouted Mellish excitedly. "It may be true, you idiots!"

At that moment the door of the Common-room opened again. Instantly there was another deathly silence. All the fellows were staring at the doorway.

Standing on the threshold, looking utterly taken aback at the obvious sensation his entry had caused, was Talbot of the Shell.

## CHAPTER 7.

### Facing His Accusers I

TALBOT closed the door behind him and came slowly forward into the Common-room. All faces were fixed upon him. Talbot flushed slightly.

"What's up, you chaps?" he asked quietly, halting in the centre of the room.

He gazed round wonderingly from face to face. That something was "up" was very obvious. Finally, Talbot's gaze rested on the face of Racke, and he started when he saw the look of gloating triumph in the face of the black sheep of the Shell.

"What's up?" repeated Talbot.

"You may well ask!" sneered Crooke.

Talbot looked at his blackguardly cousin coolly.

"Well, I am asking, Crooke!"

Tom Merry stepped to Talbot's side.

"Nothing to worry about, Talbot, old chap," said the captain of the Shell quietly. "You have just come at the right time to give Racke the hiding of his life—to save me the trouble of doing it for you," he added, with a grim smile. "Racke in a feeble attempt to be funny, I suppose, has just made a ridiculous statement about you. No one believes it, of course, but you ought to hear it—if Racke dares repeat it!"

And Tom Merry swung round on the cad of the Shell with a curling, contemptuous lip.

Racke nodded calmly.

"Of course I dare repeat it, since it's perfectly true!" he said sneeringly. "Talbot, I considered it my duty to tell the chaps that Crooke and I saw you in Rylcombe Wood this afternoon, and—"

He paused. There was no mistaking the startled look that had sprung for a moment into Talbot's face. A gleam of triumph came into Racke's mocking eyes.

"I see you look a bit worried already!" he exclaimed.

"As I was saying, I've told the chaps that we saw you meet a shady-looking scoundrel in Rylcombe Wood, and that you gave him a little box. That much you know yourself. But maybe you don't know that when you'd gone the man opened the box, and we saw quite clearly what was in it—D'Arcy's stolen brooch!"

Racke fairly spat out the last three words in venomous accusation. His eyes were fixed on Talbot.

Talbot of the Shell made no movement, no sound. He stood as if rooted to the spot, staring at Racke, with ashen face.

The silence was tense and breathless.

Talbot's brain was in a whirl.

He could see that Racke was not making the story up. The very vindictiveness of Racke's voice convinced Talbot that it was no rascally fabrication on the part of the two blackguards of the Shell.

Gussy's stolen brooch!

Marie Rivers had told him that the box contained an

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article of jewellery. He had not opened it to see the contents—he would not have considered he had a right to do so, even had such an idea crossed his mind. He had taken it for granted that it was an article of jewellery that had belonged to Marie.

Talbot passed a hand dazedly across his eyes. There was a mocking laugh from Racke, and Crooke echoed it.

"What can it mean?" Talbot asked himself, almost stupidly. "I—I can't believe it!"

But as his eyes again met the accusing looks of Racke and Crooke, he realised again that the story was not just a wild falsehood. It was true.

But never for a moment would he believe that Marie Rivers was the thief who had taken Gussy's brooch. Marie a thief! In the old, dark days, it was true, she had been in the lawless gang of which he himself had been a skilled member. But all that was over and done with long ago. A thief now? Never!

There was a mistake somewhere—there must be! But Talbot's brain, dazed by the shock, seemed incapable of trying to think the problem out. He gazed round blindly at the faces of the juniors.

Their faces were incredibly startled now.

Not for one moment had the majority of the fellows believed that Racke's terrible accusation could be true. But now Talbot's white face and his silence in the face of his accusers could surely only mean one thing.

Yet, even so, Tom Merry & Co., at any rate, and Blake and his chums, and many others, could not believe this thing of Talbot.

"Talbot, old man!" burst out Tom Merry hoarsely, breaking a silence that had become almost an ordeal. "Why don't you answer? Why don't you say it isn't true?"

Talbot glanced at the captain of the Shell with a face that was drawn and set.

"It is true that I met a man in Rylcombe Wood this afternoon," he muttered—"quite true."

"My hat!" breathed Clive.

"But—but the stolen brooch!" cried Tom, almost angrily in his eagerness to hear Talbot's denial. "Of course, it isn't true about the brooch!"

Talbot moistened his dry lips, and did not answer.

He could not. He did not know what had been in the box he had delivered to Smeaton. So how could he deny that it had contained the stolen brooch? Racke declared that it did, and he was supported in his conviction by Crooke. The dead certainty of the fact was so obvious that it was impossible to think that they had made up the story for some unknown purpose. Besides, they could have had no purpose in making up such a story.

"I—I—" Talbot broke off haltingly. "I did give the man a box," he went on, in a queer, strained voice, utterly unlike his own. "But I don't know what was in it."

"You gave him a box without knowing what was in it?" ejaculated Grundy incredulously.

"A likely story!" sneered Racke.

"But if you didn't know what was in the box, dear boy," broke in Arthur Augustus D'Arcy wonderingly, "why did you give it to the chap in Wylcombe Wood? It seems extraordinary to hand over a box without knowing what's inside!"

"A jolly sight too extraordinary to be likely, if you ask me!" put in Mellish.

"Shut up, Mellish!" snapped Manners.

"Someone gave me this box, and asked me to give it to this man whom Racke and Crooke saw me meet," said Talbot, in a low voice.

"Oh, that's very likely!" mocked Racke. "But if it is true, you'll have no difficulty, I suppose, in proving it? Whoever gave you the box to give to the man—that person must be the real thief, according to your story. So tell us who it was!"

Talbot did not answer.

His lips were set now in a tight, obstinate line. Whatever the consequences of silence might be, he would not breathe a word that might cast suspicion on Marie Rivers.

That she was innocent of the theft of D'Arcy's brooch, Talbot felt certain. He could not doubt her. But, though he was so certain of her innocence, others might not see it as he did. Suspicion would be cast upon her for certain if he spoke, so speak he would not. There was some mistake somewhere, of that he was sure. But until he could prove that fact he must bear the suspicion—not his girl chum!

"Well," demanded Kangaroo, "who gave you that box?"

"I can't tell you!" said Talbot hoarsely.

There was a startled silence. Tom Merry's face took a stern look.

"But, hang it all, Talbot, old man!" he expostulated. "I know you aren't a thief, but it looks as though the person who gave you that box to deliver to the man in the woods is a thief! You can't shelter that person, or you're aiding the thief! Surely you realise that?"

"I've got nothing to say," muttered Talbot. "Nothing." His eyes gleamed with determination as he met Tom Merry's troubled gaze. There was an exclamation from Racke.

"What can you expect from a chap like that?" he sneered. "A fellow that no decent chap would speak to, except out of kindness." Racke had always had his knife into Reginald Talbot, and now he was glad of this opportunity of heaping insult upon him in his hour of trouble. "What is he, anyway, but an ex-cracksman, a pal of thieves and criminals," and evidently still the same."

Talbot did not speak. His eyes were fixed on the floor, and though he had clenched his hands as if to fling himself at Racke, and make the blackguard of the Shell take back his words, he now unclenched his hands and remained silent. After all, Talbot told himself bitterly, a great deal of what Racke had said was true. He was, indeed, an ex-cracksman, once a friend of thieves and criminals. And as for the accusation that he was the same still—well, in the face of the evidence, how could he resent it?

Abruptly, Talbot swung on his heel and headed blindly for the door. Tom Merry & Co. watched him go, aghast.

Their faith was shaken. A little while ago, and they would have laughed to scorn any suggestion that Talbot was not the straightest fellow at St. Jim's. But his failure

to explain Racke's story of his actions that afternoon—what else could it mean, but that Talbot was aware of his own guilt? Even if he were not the actual thief of D'Arcy's brooch—and Tom Merry & Co., at any rate, did not believe that—without doubt, he was, at any rate, shielding the real culprit.

Talbot reached out for the handle of the door. In utter silence he opened the door, and hurried from the Common-room. The door closed behind him, leaving Tom Merry & Co. silent with amazement and horror.

## CHAPTER 8.

### Friends Fall Out!

"B A I Jove!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was the first to break the tense hush. The swell of St. Jim's adjusted his eyeglass, and gazed round at the other juniors with a look of great trouble on his face.

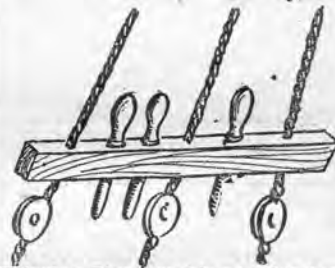
"Oh deah! This is wotten! Poor old Talbot! I will nevah believe he is a thief! But, weally, he has no wight to shield the weal thief in this extraordinary mannah!"

Aubrey Racke lounged against the mantelpiece with his hands in his pockets. He grinned.

(Continued on next page.)



question and rather more than forty others of a nautical nature. He has, he states, been reading a sea yarn in which the bo'sun knocks the skipper, mate, cook and helmsman overboard in turn with a belaying-pin. This is a pin used in a sailing ship or boat, usually fixed in the lower part of a mast for use as a cleat—that is, for twisting a line round. The ones shown in the illustration are fixed in the manner of cleats, but can be pulled out and welded in the manner of a club as, apparently, the bo'sun used one. But I say, chum,



Belaying-Pins—used in a sailing boat. what a book that must be you have been reading!

**Q. Do you know any tongue-twisters?**  
A. Heaps, Molly Sanders! The only trouble is that it's such a sad strain saying them through my type of beard. Here is one for your forthcoming party:

The swan swam over the sea,  
Swim, swan, swim!  
The swan swam back again.  
Well swum, swan!

I suggest, Molly, that if you can find someone to say that over ten times quickly without a mistake, you should present him with a prize of a monkey-nut.

**W. What is molybdenite?**

A. This is a flaky mineral of a green colour found in Northern Queensland and is used for the purpose of hardening steel and making it rustless. It was in much demand during the Great War, and although the price of it is down now, in time it may be very valuable again.

**Q. What does Acropolis mean?**

A. "The high town." Actually it was the citadel of most of the important cities of ancient Greece. The Acropolis was usually built on the summit of a hill and formed a sort of centre and fortress round which the town gradually grew. The most famous was the Acropolis of Athens.

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**Q. What is the meaning of S.P.Q.R.?**

A. These initials, "Scholarship Boy," were used on the coins of ancient Rome and carried on the standards before the Roman armies. They stand for Senatus Populus Que Romanus, which by interpretation is the Roman Senate and People.

**Q. What is an agouti?**

A. A South American rodent, olive-brown in colour and rather like a guinea-pig in shape and size. Usually it inhabits forests and moves about only in the night-time.

**Q. What is a pterodactyl?**

A. Imagine a cross between a great reptile and a bat, "Eager Pupil," and you will have a very fair idea of what this



S.P.Q.R.—the letters on the old Roman Standards mean, "Senatus Populus Que Romanus," says the Oracle

**Q. What is persimmon?**

A. The American date-plum. It has a yellow fruit which becomes sweet when softened by frost; and the wood of the persimmon is much used for the heads of certain kinds of golf clubs.

**Q. From what great man does the province of Rhodesia in South Africa take its name?**

A. Cecil Rhodes. His name is also perpetuated in the Rhodes Scholarships, which enable selected scholars from various parts of the world to go up to Oxford University.

**Q. How many points are there on the compass?**

A. Thirty-two. Every boy ought to be able to read the compass—that is, to say straight off the thirty-two points from N (north) clockwise round to north again. Try and learn them, chums, and say them off like this: "North—nor' by east—nor' nor' by east—nor' east by north—north-east, etc."

**Q. What is a scarab?**

A. The sacred beetle of ancient Egypt. The term is also applied to a gem cut in the form of this kind of beetle and engraved with lucky symbols.

**Q. What is moko?**

A. This, "Thirster for Erudition," is the term applied to the Maori system of tattooing themselves. And how the thump some of you readers get hold of questions like this to ask, has got me licked!

**Q. Where is the home of the kroo?**

A. The coast of Liberia in West Africa, B.C.C. The kroo—or krooman—is a member of a negro race and noted for his skill in seamanship.

**Q. What is a belaying-pin?**

A. A Woolwich boy who signs himself "Jolly Jack the Sailor" has sent in this

night after too many whelks for supper!

"One thing is pretty near as bad as the other," he exclaimed. "If Talbot isn't guilty, what would he be doing meeting rotten, shady customers like this man, Crooke, whom I saw to-day? I tell you the man was a rank scoundrel by the look of him. And he called Talbot—the Toff. That was Talbot's old nickname in the gang, of course. It's as clear as daylight that Talbot is still mixed up with the old crowd, for all his pretence of virtue these days."

"Absolutely clear!" chimed in Crooke. "And to think the rotter is a cousin of mine! It's pretty beastly!"

And Crooke shook his head with hypocritical gloom.

"There must be some mistake," muttered Tom Merry. "It seems impossible! And yet—"

"A pretty big 'yet'!" sneered Racke. "By the way," he added suddenly, "there is something else that might interest you chaps. On Monday I was stopped in the road by this very scoundrel, whom Crooke and I saw meet Talbot in the wood to-day. He asked me to deliver a note for him to Miss Marie, which I did. Funny, isn't it? I—"

Tom Merry clenched his fists.

"You can keep Miss Marie's name out of this!" he said sharply.

"Oh, I'm not suggesting she's mixed up in it," said Racke hastily. He did not like the look in Tom's face. "I only mention the fact. It looks to me as if the chap has been in the neighbourhood to see Miss Marie and Talbot, being an old member of the gang. No doubt Miss Marie told him to go and eat coke, if he put any dishonest suggestions to her. But it looks as if Talbot has fallen in with the man's schemes, and they're now hand in glove together."

An hour before, anyone who had dared to make such a suggestion about Reginald Talbot would have had to reckon with Tom Merry. But now Tom only stared with deep trouble at the floor. After all, Racke was saying no more than the truth. It certainly did look as if Talbot was mixed up once more with one, at least, of his old scoundrelly associates.

Not that Tom Merry believed even now that Talbot was the thief who had taken the diamond brooch from Study No. 6. He would never believe that, any more than Manners or Monty Lowther would have done, or Blake & Co.

But there was no doubt that Talbot was shielding some mysterious person who seemed to be the real thief. And even Tom Merry, old friend of Talbot's as he was, could find no excuse for that extraordinary course on his part.

"The rotter ought to be made to speak out!" cried Clampe.

"Railton ought to be told, you mean!" squeaked Baggy Trimble excitedly.

"Let's find him, and jolly well force him to speak!" suggested Crooke, with gleaming eyes.

There was an excited yell of agreement. But Arthur Augustus D'Arcy held up his hand in an authoritative way.

"I protest!" exclaimed the swell of St. Jim's. "The stolen brooch is my property, and I do not wish to pursue this unpleasant matter any farther. I am going to let it drop."

"Rats!" roared Grundy. "It's too late, Gussy. Whether you want your blessed brooch back doesn't matter. But it does matter, to all of us, to find out who the thief is at St. Jim's. Dash it all, none of us are safe from being robbed!"

"Hear, hear!" shouted Kerruish.

"We'll make Talbot tell us who gave him that brooch, or else admit that he stole it himself!" roared Mulvaney minor angrily. "That we will—begorrah!"

There was a rush for the door, and the excited, angry juniors poured from the Common-room, leaving Tom Merry & Co. and Jack Blake & Co. alone with a few others, such as Levison and Clive.

"This is the rottenest thing that's happened for a long time," muttered Levison.

"I can't understand Talbot, dear boys," said Arthur Augustus sadly. "I should never have thought it of him."

"This is sure to come to Railton's ears, and then the Head's," said Tom Merry quietly. "That would mean the finish for Talbot, if he still refused to say anything about it. It's up to us to find him, and persuade him to speak. I feel sure he's innocent—that he could explain if he would."

"Of course, he could!" snapped Blake. "Let's find him!"

And the group of worried juniors hurried from the room to find Talbot of the Shell.

But they did not find him, any more than did the excited mob that was seeking for him under the leadership of Racke and Crooke.

For Reginald Talbot was not in the School House. He had, on leaving the Common-room, hurried out into the

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dark quad and across to the sanatorium buildings. Miss Pinch, the matron, had been a little surprised at the expression on his face when he had asked to see Marie Rivers, but had soon dismissed the matter from her mind.

Talbot had tapped on the door of his girl chum's room with a whirl of anxious, troubled thoughts in his mind. Marie's voice had answered cheerfully from within, and Talbot stepped into the room, closing the door behind him.

"Oh, it's you!" exclaimed Marie Rivers, jumping up with a bright smile. "You went to Rylcombe Wood?" she asked quickly, almost anxiously.

Talbot nodded without speaking.

"Oh, thank you! It was ever so kind of you, Toff!" she said gratefully. "We had to do all we could to help Jim Smeaton, now that he wants to become honest, and start life afresh, hadn't we?"

"Yes," answered Talbot, in a strained voice, "of course."

She looked at him oddly. The expression on his face puzzled her.

"There is nothing wrong, is there?"

Talbot forced a smile. He did not believe for a moment that his girl chum had stolen D'Arcy's brooch. How it had come into her possession was a mystery that he could not understand. But he felt that it must be solved—that was only fair to Marie, as well as to himself. But he dreaded lest she should think he suspected her of any dishonesty—that was why he hesitated to put a question to her bluntly concerning the brooch that she had sent to Smeaton.

"I—I—" he stammered. "I hope you won't think me rude, Marie, if I ask you something—"

"Why, whatever do you mean?" she asked, in bewilderment. She felt sure now that something was wrong.

"You told me that there was an article of jewellery in that box that I was to give to Smeaton," went on Talbot desperately. "You—you didn't say exactly what sort of jewellery."

"Well, that wasn't very important, was it?" she said wonderingly, her eyes fixed on his flushed, troubled face.

"No. But—well, if you don't mind, I should like to know. There's a reason—"

"It was a brooch," Marie Rivers did not understand Talbot, perhaps for the first time in her life, and there was something in the way he was looking at her now that caused her to colour slightly. "Why do you want to know?"

"One of your brooches?" said Talbot haltingly.

"You don't suppose I would give away a brooch that belonged to someone else, surely?" exclaimed Marie, clearly very displeased. "I don't think I understand you at all!"

"I—I'm sorry, Marie! But, you see—" Talbot broke off, flushing. "You are sure about that brooch, Marie? It couldn't have got—have got mixed up with anyone else's by mistake, or something like that? I—I—"

Marie looked at him in icy surprise. Talbot blundered on.

"You see, there was a brooch stolen from D'Arcy's study. He had bought it as a present for a friend of his, and—and it's been taken, and I thought—I wondered—"

Marie had given a sharp exclamation. The colour had left her cheeks, leaving them very white. Her eyes burnt with a strange brightness.

"Are you accusing me of stealing D'Arcy's brooch?" she asked in a low, trembling voice that cut Talbot to the heart. "How can you be so wicked and foolish as to think such a thing as that?"

"Oh, but I don't think so!" cried Talbot pleadingly. "I—I thought perhaps there had been some strange mistake, which you could explain. I thought—"

"You thought that it was possible that I had stolen a brooch from D'Arcy. That is quite clear," answered Marie Rivers, in a breathless voice. She was very near to tears.

"I have nothing more to say to you. Please go!"

"But, Marie—"

"Please go."

She opened the door for him. Talbot stared at her white face, with its trembling lips, and hated himself. He took a step towards her, and his haggard eyes were pleading.

"Marie dear, I—I only wanted to ask—"

"Will you go, please?"

She stamped her foot in tearful anger. Talbot tried to speak, but something in Marie's brimming eyes prevented the words from coming. Before he realised it almost he had turned and stumbled from the room. He heard the door close behind him. He turned.

"Marie! Marie, I—"

He heard the key click in the lock of the door. He was shut out. She would not listen to him. And, in his bitterness, Talbot told himself that he deserved it. He had spoken blunderingly, had naturally roused her to passionate indignation at what she must think were his suspicions of her.

There could be no chance of an explanation now. Marie was innocent of the theft, he knew. He had known that all

along. But she could tell him nothing, it was clear, of the strange, terrible mistake that must somehow have happened regarding the missing brooch. The chance for questioning her, and seeking the truth, had gone. There could be no explanations now. He himself was under suspicion, but he must face the music!

For, whatever happened, Talbot told himself as he stumbled out into the dusky quad, he would breathe no word to anyone of the part Marie Rivers had played in the strange affair.

It was he who must shoulder the burden!

## CHAPTER 9.

### Terrible for Talbot!

FOR nearly an hour Talbot of the Shell paced to and fro under the eaves in the dark old quad.

What was the solution to the terrible riddle? How could D'Arcy's brooch have come to be in the little box that Marie had give him to take to Jim Smeaton? Talbot racked his brains for an answer, but no answer would come.

The only possible solution seemed to be that the thief had hidden the brooch he had taken from Study No. 6 in just such a box as Marie Rivers had used for packing her own brooch, to send it to Smeaton, and that in some strange way the two boxes had become interchanged without the girl's knowledge. But Talbot had to dismiss that theory from his mind as impossible. It was too unlikely to be true. For how could such an interchanging possibly have occurred?

At long last Talbot turned and made slowly for the lighted doorway of the School House.

He entered the hall, and found it deserted, for which he breathed a sigh of relief. The fellows who had been searching for him had given up their search and gone to their studies to do their prep, for prep, like time and tide, would wait for no man! Talbot hurried across to the stairs and up to the Shell passage.

"Talbot!"

Talbot started as he heard his name called, and glanced back. Tom Merry was hurrying up the stairs after him.

"Well?" said Talbot dully.

Tom dropped a friendly hand on his chum's arm.

"Look here, old man," he muttered, "this can't go on! For your own sake, you must say who gave you that brooch. You can't shield whoever it is who's guilty. Don't you see, when the Head hears of this it will mean expulsion, unless you speak out!"

Talbot's lips were set in a dogged line. He did not answer. Tom Merry almost groaned.

"Talbot, old man—"

"I've nothing to say," said Talbot in an even voice.

"But you must tell us—you must! Don't you see—"

"I have nothing to say."

"You must be crazy!" said Tom, almost roughly. "I'm your pal, but I can't admire you for playing the fool like this. It's not as if you were sneaking to the beaks. Tell me, as skipper of the Form, and I promise not to let it get to the ears of the Head, if you're still intent on shielding the thief. If you tell us, we can deal with the thief in our own way, and the Head need never know. If you keep silent now, it's bound to get to the ears of Dr. Holmes in the end—perhaps very soon, for everyone's talking about this rotten business."

Talbot smiled a faint, wan smile.

"You're a good sort, Tom," he muttered. "But I can tell you nothing—nothing! I'm sorry!"

Slowly Talbot turned and hurried on up the stairs. Tom made a movement to follow him. Then the captain of the Shell halted, and a startled look appeared in his face.

A tall figure had loomed up at the top of the stairs. It was Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, and the captain's face was very stern as his glance fell on Reginald Talbot.

"I've been looking for you, Talbot," he said grimly. "The Head wants you. You're to come along with me at once to his study."

Talbot gave a low, despairing exclamation. Then he pulled himself straight and faced Kildare steadily.

"Very well, Kildare."

The two turned and descended the stairs. Talbot did not glance at Tom Merry as the captain of the Shell moved against the wall to let them pass.

It was with a leaden heart that Tom Merry watched Reginald Talbot vanish down the stairs, together with the big figure of the captain of St. Jim's.

It was too late! Already the Head knew. Possibly, thought Tom bitterly, Crooke himself had been to the Head and told him, for Tom Merry knew that Crooke would be only too glad to disgrace his cousin, if he could. Their uncle, Colonel Lyndon had always clearly shown that he thought far more of Talbot than Gerald Crooke; and Crooke, with the object of currying favour with the wealthy old gentleman, would rejoice at such a chance as this of turning Colonel Lyndon against his favourite nephew.

Too late! Unless Talbot chose to speak.

"But he won't speak," groaned Tom. "He's determined on that, the—the obstinate ass! I could see it in his face as he went down the stairs. Whom can he be shielding?"

But that was a question without an answer, as far as Tom Merry and the rest of St. Jim's were concerned.

When bed-time came, Talbot did not put in an appearance in the Shell dormitory.

It had already spread through the school that the Head had sent for Talbot, and there was no doubt concerning the reason of the interview. When Talbot failed to join the other Shell fellows in the dormitory, and Darrell of the Sixth, shepherding up the stragglers, made no comment on his absence, it was realised that the worst had happened—the worst, that is, from the point of view of Talbot's friends.

But Crooke smiled an ugly, triumphant smile.

"Talbot's spending the night in the punishment-room!" he remarked sneeringly. "He must be, or he would be here by now. And that means that he is going to be expelled!"

"I always doubted if Talbot had really reformed," grinned Racke, glancing across at Tom Merry & Co. He knew how Talbot's trouble hurt them, and he enjoyed "rubbing it in."

"It's clear now that the chap was only biding his time, waiting till something really worth while turned up to be stolen."

"It's not yet proved that Talbot is a thief, you cad!" cut in Monty Lowther hotly.

"It's pretty clear, though, I fancy," grinned Crooke.

"Talbot has not been proved a thief," said Tom Merry quietly. "And since he's my friend, I'm not going to stand here and let slandering cads say that he is, in his absence! The next chap who says he is will get the licking of his life, here and now."

The conversation ceased abruptly.

"Anyone say that he is?" demanded Tom.

There was no answer, Racke and Crooke and Scrope and their friends seemed suddenly to be very intent upon getting undressed.

(Continued on next page.)

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"No takers!" grinned Gunn.  
And Talbot's name was not mentioned again in the Shell Dormitory that night.

But Tom Merry, after lights out, lay awake for a long, long time, staring into the darkness. And when at last he fell into broken sleep, it was with his mind full of thoughts of his expelled chum—spending his last night at St. Jim's in the grim and lonely punishment-room.

## CHAPTER 10.

### Good-bye to St. Jim's!

**B**REAKFAST next morning was a gloomy business for Tom Merry & Co., and for Blake & Co. of the Fourth.

After breakfast Tom Merry approached Mr. Railton and asked him about Talbot. The Housemaster confirmed what Tom had already guessed to be the truth. Talbot was to be expelled, and he was leaving St. Jim's that morning. Tom's request to see his chum before he left the school for good was refused. Mr. Railton laid a sympathetic hand on the junior's shoulder, and shook his head sadly.

"The headmaster has thought it wisest to allow no one to see Talbot," explained the Housemaster. "The boy is under a dark shadow, Merry, and in his disgrace he is to be allowed to see none of his old schoolfellows."

"But Talbot isn't a thief, sir!" burst out Tom.

"Very likely not. But he is clearly in league with the thief who stole the brooch from D'Arcy's study, so that he shares the guilt," Mr. Railton sighed. "This is a terrible matter! No one regrets it more than I. I had imagined that Talbot had quite lived down his old associations, and was now one of the most upright and manly boys in my House. I am shocked and grieved to think that he should have again sunk into the old evil ways."

"But it isn't proved that he has, sir!" muttered Tom.

"His silence in face of the accusation against him proves it!" rejoined Mr. Railton sternly. "If he were innocent, he would declare his innocence!"

With a heavy heart, Tom Merry turned away.

But Talbot was not to leave St. Jim's without a last meeting with his chum, after all. During classes that morning Tom kept his eyes more on the window of the Shell Form room than on his books, with the result that Mr. Linton spoke sharply to him more than once. But at last Tom's vigilance was rewarded. A figure came into sight, crossing the quad towards the gates, and carrying a heavy suit-case. It was Talbot of the Shell crossing the old quad of St. Jim's for what promised to be the last time.

He was accompanied by Taggles, the porter. As he strode towards the gates, Talbot glanced round, with a pale, drawn face, at the grey old buildings of St. Jim's.

On a sudden impulse Tom stood up.

"Well?" snapped Mr. Linton.

"I—I see that Talbot is—is going now, sir," said Tom Merry huskily. "Couldn't I say good-bye to him, sir?"

Mr. Linton's glance turned from Tom Merry to the window, and the distant figure crossing towards the gates. The Form master's face softened. He hesitated.

"Well," he began doubtfully, "I—ahem!"

Tom seized on the master's hesitation as his chance. He did not mean to give Mr. Linton time to refuse.

"Thanks very much, sir!" exclaimed Tom swiftly, and in another moment he had darted from the Form-room.

Talbot halted as he reached the gates. He turned his head, casting a last look round the old quad. Then he turned to Taggles.

"Good-bye, Taggy."

Even the stony heart of old Taggles could not harden itself against Talbot now. The old porter pursed his lips and looked down his nose.

"Wot I says is, as I'm werry sorry this has happened, Master Talbot," mumbled old Taggles. "You've brought it on yourself, I s'pose, an' the 'Ead knows best, I says. But I'm sorry, all the same, and wot I says is—"

"Thanks, Taggy!" Talbot gripped the old man's hand. "I suppose I've helped to pull your leg as much as most of the fellows in my time, but—well, you're a good sort! Good-bye!"

And, with a faint, unsteady smile, Talbot turned and passed out of the gates.

He had not gone many yards when he heard his name called. He looked back, and a swift exclamation broke from his lips as he saw Tom Merry racing across the quad towards the gates.

"Tom!"

"I couldn't see you go without saying good-bye!" gasped Tom, gripping his chum's hand. "If Linton had refused to let me come and speak to you, I should jolly well have come, all the same!"

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Talbot did not speak. He looked into Tom's face curiously.

"Talbot, old man——" Tom's voice was broken.

"Yes, old chap?"

"I—I can't understand this!" muttered Tom. "I know you're innocent! Why wouldn't you clear yourself? Whoever the real thief is, he deserved to suffer, not you! Whoever he was, he wasn't worth the sacrifice!"

"We won't talk of that," said Talbot quietly, "if you don't mind. I've chosen my course, and I'm sticking to it, for good or ill. You see, if I were to tell all I know—and that's really little enough, Tom—an innocent person might suffer."

"You don't know who stole Gussy's brooch?"



"Help!" The ruffian made a swift movement to escape when Marie heard pelting in their direction, and half a dozen figures loomed up rotter!"

"No. But I can't explain; please don't ask me!"

Tom tightened his grasp on his old chum's hand.

"You know best, Talbot. If you feel that you're doing right, there's no more to be said. But where are you going to now? Your uncle, I suppose, Colonel Lyndon?"

Talbot shook his head.

"No," he said, and seemed to wince slightly. "I couldn't go to him—now. I shall try to get some work somewhere, and earn my own living."

"But, Talbot, old chap——"

"It's the best way. Since Dr. Holmes believes me guilty of sharing in a theft, how could my uncle believe otherwise? I shan't trouble him by going to him now. I shall sink or swim alone!"

"How did the Head hear of—of this——"

"Crooke told him." A bitter smile appeared for a moment on Talbot's lips. "He thought it his duty, I suppose! Perhaps it was. I'm not blaming Crooke," he added swiftly, as Tom clenched his fist.

"Look here!" said Tom, in a low voice. "Since you're not going to your uncle, stay here—in Rylcombe or Wayland—for a little while. Write and tell me your address,

and I and some of the other chaps will come and see you. Maybe we can help you. Will you promise?"

Talbot hesitated.

"It sounds tempting," he admitted huskily. "I was thinking I should never see any of you again, but—"

"There's no reason why not," said Tom, and there was a lump in his throat. "Monty and Manners, and Blake & Co., and Gussy—none of 'em think you're a thief; they all want to see you again! Promise you won't leave this part of the world at once?"

Still Talbot hesitated.

"You see," he said quietly, "I must get a job at once. I haven't much money—"

"We can help you!" exclaimed Tom, plunging a hand

given Tom Merry permission to leave the room so abruptly; but, on the other hand, he had not refused him permission.

On the whole, Mr. Linton thought it was best to say nothing. The lesson proceeded, therefore, in silence.

But many curious glances were cast in the direction of Tom Merry by the other members of the Form.

The fellows were wondering what had passed between the two old friends out there by the gates? What had the captain of the Shell and the expelled junior to say to one another?

And on the faces of Racke and Crooke, at least, there was a triumphant sneer!

## CHAPTER 11.

### A Scoundrel Unmasked!

MARIE RIVERS walked slowly along Rylcombe Lane in the direction of the school. It was after tea on the same day. The face of the pretty young school nurse was deeply troubled and unhappy.

Though Marie Rivers had bitterly resented what she had thought to be Talbot's suspicions regarding her honesty, she had been terribly distressed when she had heard of his expulsion. She still felt very, very hurt with Talbot; but the fact of his sudden expulsion had at once made her forget her resentment. She only knew now that her boy chum had left St. Jim's under a dark shadow, without even the opportunity of saying good-bye to her.

Though she had learnt that Talbot was suspected of being concerned in the theft of D'Arcy's brooch, the full facts were not known to her. Had they been, she would at once, of course, have admitted that it was she who had sent Talbot to Rylcombe Wood with the box for Smeaton.

But never for one moment did she connect that matter with Talbot's expulsion from St. Jim's.

That Talbot was innocent of the charge against him she never doubted. But why he had come to ask her about the brooch that had been sent to Smeaton was an utter mystery to Marie, and a problem that troubled her.

"Why, hanged if it isn't Miss Rivers!"

A sudden voice cut in on the girl's thoughts, causing her to glance up swiftly. Without noticing, she had rounded a corner in the lane, and come face to face with a seedy-looking figure in a cloth cap. It was Smeaton himself.

"You!" breathed Marie in amazement.

"Little me," nodded Smeaton amiably. "How are you?"

"But you told me in your first letter that if I helped you you would at once go to the North of England, where you knew of work you could get!" exclaimed the girl. "What are you doing here still?"

Smeaton's eyes dropped.

"Hum! I—I changed my mind," he muttered. "I found that I hadn't enough cash to go—"

He broke off, still avoiding the girl's gaze. Marie stared at him in troubled bewilderment. She had never doubted but that Smeaton would leave the neighbourhood at once in search of honest work, as he had promised to do, when she had provided him with the means to do it. Yet there he was still in the neighbourhood of St. Jim's.

"You are not going to the North of England to get this work you spoke of?" she exclaimed.

"No!" answered Smeaton defiantly. "I tell you I've changed my mind about that."

The girl's look changed to one of scorn.

"You were deceiving me!" she breathed.

Smeaton made an impatient gesture and took a step forward, laying a hand upon her arm. She shook the hand off.

"I want more money!" Smeaton hissed. "Understand? You can't fail me! I'm one of the old gang; you can't let me down now!"

"But that brooch I gave you—it was worth seven or eight pounds—"

"I want more!" the man exclaimed, his voice changing to a whine. "You're very comfortable at the school—you ought to help me!"

"I have helped you!" Marie cried bitterly. "I trusted you. I thought your request for help was genuine! I only helped you so that you could become an honest man!"

"I'll turn honest all right if you'll let me have more cash!" Smeaton growled, avoiding her eyes.

"But you can't have spent all the money that you must have got by selling that brooch!" the girl exclaimed.

"What have you done with all that money?"

Something that could be seen protruding from the man's inner pocket caught the girl's eye—the corner of a folded pink newspaper. Marie Rivers gave an exclamation, and wrenched the paper from his pocket. It was a copy of "Turf Tips," and the girl's lips curled scornfully as she threw it to the ground.

"I see!" Her voice was quivering with angry disgust. "So that is where the money has gone? Horse-racing!"

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clutched his arm. But it was too late. Running footsteps could be piled in, you chaps!" came Tom Merry's grim voice. "Collar the chap—"

into his pocket. "Here's a couple of quid—just a loan, old chap—"

Talbot shook his head.

"No, thanks," he said; but there was gratitude in his eyes. "You see, I might never be able to pay it back. But I promise to stay in Wayland for a few days, at any rate. I'll get some cheap lodgings, and write and tell you where they are."

"That's a promise?"

"Rather!" And Talbot smiled quite cheerfully for a moment. "So it's not good-bye—only so-long!"

Again the two chums gripped hands. Then Talbot picked up his suit-case and strode away along the lane. Tom Merry stood watching him until he vanished round the bend. Then, with a troubled face, the captain of the Shell turned and retraced his steps slowly back towards the School House.

In the Shell Form room, Mr. Linton eyed Tom a little severely as the junior entered the room and slipped quietly to his place. The Form master was not quite sure whether his authority had been flouted or not. He had certainly not

"Well, what if I did have a bit of a flutter this afternoon?" muttered Smeaton. "I wanted to win more money!"

"And instead of that you lost it all, I suppose?"

"I did!" he confessed grimly. "So now I want some more!"

"Not another penny will you get from me!" Marie told him bitterly. "What a fool I was to believe your story, to think you really did mean to run straight! You were tricking me, that's all! I can see it now. I think you are despicable!"

An ugly look came into the man's face. He caught Marie's wrist in a grip that caused her to cry out.

"See here," said Smeaton, thrusting his face close into Marie's, "I want money, and you've got to help me get it! If you won't give me some, do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to rob the school!"

Marie gave a low, breathless exclamation.

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Oh, wouldn't I? I tell you, my girl—"

Marie struggled to get away, but Smeaton's hand held her fast. She did not for one moment believe his threat to rob St. Jim's, and she was determined that no threats should persuade her to give the scoundrel more money. That he had tricked her, fooled her, was clear to Marie Rivers now. She realised only too well that he had never intended to run straight—that had just been a ruse to get money from her. She felt bitterly angry, and humiliated, too.

"Let me go!"

"Let's have a look at that purse of yours first!" said Smeaton.

"Help!"

Marie's voice rang out in a desperate cry down the dark lane. Smeaton made a swift movement to clap a hand over the mouth of the struggling girl, but already it was too late. Running footsteps could be heard, pelting in their direction. Someone had heard Marie's cry, and was racing to the rescue!

Smeaton let go his hold of Marie, and turned to dart into the trees bordering the lane. But the girl caught hold of his arm and held on pluckily, though he tried to beat her off. She was determined that he should be caught, if possible, and made to answer for his rascality.

Half a dozen running figures loomed up. Marie Rivers gave a gasp of relief when she saw help coming. The next moment Tom Merry & Co. and the four chums of Study No. 6 had come racing up.

"It's Miss Mawie!" panted the excited voice of Arthur Augustus D'Aroy.

"Pile in, you chaps! Collar the rotter!" cried Tom Merry grimly; and the next moment, as he broke away from the girl's grasp, Smeaton was gripped and held by many hands.

The chums of the Fourth and Shell had been going for an evening stroll together, discussing the gloomy subject of Talbot's expulsion, when they had heard Marie Rivers' cry for help, and they had wasted no time!

Smeaton hit out in savage desperation, and Manners reeled before a lashing blow that caught him on the point of the jaw. Blake gave a gasp as a blow landed in his stomach, causing him to double up, utterly winded. But the others held on, and the ruffian was borne to the ground, a struggling, cursing figure.

"Scrag the rotter!" panted Digby.

"Yaas, wathah! Scrag him!"

Marie Rivers had drawn back to the edge of the road, breathing fast. Tom Merry turned to her.

"What was he up to, Miss Marie?"

For a moment Marie Rivers was on the point of explaining everything. But, badly though Smeaton had treated her, she could not find the heart to do so. It would have been too much like hitting a man when he was down!

"He stopped me," she said in a low voice, "and—and insulted me."

It was true enough, though by no means the whole truth! But it caused the faces of the St. Jim's juniors to go very grim.

"You cur!" breathed Tom Merry.

Smeaton lay on his back in the muddy road, glaring up at his captors with hatred in his eyes. But he was pinned down too firmly to make further struggles of any use, as he realised.

"Let me go, hang you!" he muttered thickly.

"Wathah not, you wottah!"

Tom Merry glanced round. There was a pond at the edge of the road a few yards away, and a grim smile came into the face of the captain of the Shell.

"I fancy a ducking is what this bird wants!" he growled.

"Yank him up!"

Smeaton gave a yell of fear as he was yanked bodily into the air by a dozen willing hands.

"In with him!" rapped out Blake.

With a rush, the juniors swept across the road in a

body, Smeaton struggling frantically in their midst. At the edge of the pond he was swung high, shouting incoherent abuse.

"One, two, three——" shouted Tom Merry.

On the word three Smeaton went sailing through the air. Splash!

It was a stupendous splash! The ruffian's breathless yell ended abruptly in a gurgle. Splashing and kicking, he vanished beneath the muddy surface of the pond. He appeared a few moments later, dripping with water and covered with mud. Choking and gasping, he struggled madly for the bank.

"I think he ought to stay in a bit longer, you chaps," grinned Herries.

Smeaton, as he scrambled up the bank, was, therefore, met by a gentle push from the end of a thick stick which Monty Lowther had found lying to hand. With a howl, Smeaton went pitching backwards into the pond again, and vanished once more.

"Oh! Yarrooooooh!" he spluttered, as he floundered wildly. "Grooooooh! Curse you——"

"Moderate the language, please!" said Monty Lowther severely; and again the man was met by a push from Lowther's long stick as he tried to scramble out of the water. Once more he was sent toppling backwards with a yell and a splash.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Better stay where you are for a bit," warned Monty Lowther.

And Smeaton, struggling to his feet in the pond, with the dark, slimy water up to his waist, decided that he had better. Glaring and muttering and shivering, the scoundrel stayed where he was, and watched the St. Jim's juniors troop off down the lane with Marie Rivers. Then only did Smeaton dare to scramble out of the muddy water on to the road.

"The young hounds!" he muttered ferociously. "But I'll get my own back!"

Suddenly his eyes fell on a dark object lying in the road. He picked it up, and saw that it was a girl's glove—one of those which Marie Rivers had been carrying.

Smeaton stood staring down at it, with an odd gleam in his eyes. Suddenly he chuckled in a low, evil way. And he was still clutching Marie's glove as he turned and hurried away into the darkness.

## CHAPTER 12.

### Smeaton's Revenge!

"GOOD-BYE, old chap!"

Tom Merry gripped Reginald Talbot's hand and wrung it with an affectionate clasp.

Tom Merry & Co. and the chums of Study No. 6 had been spending most of the evening with Talbot. That morning Tom had received a letter from their old chum, telling them the address of the lodgings he was in at Wayland, and directly after afternoon classes they had cycled over to see him. It was the day following Smeaton's discomfiture at their hands in Rylcombe Lane.

During the evening the juniors had told Talbot of that episode, and he had been quick to guess from their description that the man had been James Smeaton. But he had not explained that fact to his friends. Had he told them that the man to whom he had given the box in Rylcombe Wood was the man whom they had found in company with Marie Rivers, Tom Merry & Co. might have connected Marie with the affair of the brooch. And that was the last thing that Talbot wanted.

The juniors had spent their time tramping along the lanes outside Wayland. Talbot's lodgings were very cheap and dingy, since he had to think before spending every penny; so he had not invited them to spend their time there. It was pleasanter in the lanes, despite the cold nip in the evening air.

By common consent, the question of Talbot's expulsion and the mystery in connection with it, had not been referred to by the party from St. Jim's. Talbot did not wish to discuss it further, they knew.

So most of the talk had been about Talbot's plans for the future.

He told them that he intended to stay in Wayland over Saturday and Sunday, in order to see all he could of his old chums before passing out of their lives. It would be a terrible wrench to say good-bye, but so he must. On the following Monday he intended to take the train to Southampton, and there get a job on a ship if possible—perhaps as a bell-boy or steward. That prospect appealed to him far more than the idea of taking up a clerkship in an office.

At last the time had come when the juniors had to return to St. Jim's, and outside the garage at which they

had left their cycles, the seven of them gripped Talbot's hand in turn and said good-bye.

"But we'll see you to-morrow afternoon, old man," Blake reminded him as he jumped on to his cycle.

"Rather!" returned Talbot, and smiled.

"So-long, deah boy!"

"Cheerio!"

Talbot waved a cheery hand as the juniors pedalled off up the road.

But when they had vanished it was with a less happy face that Talbot turned towards his dingy lodgings. He had kept up a cheerful countenance before his friends, but his heart was very heavy. Though the prospect of life on board ship, with many strange lands to be visited, appealed to him strongly, it cut him to the heart to know that in a couple of days he would be saying a last good-bye to his chums, perhaps for ever.

It would not have been quite so hard to bear had he been leaving with an honourable name. But the knowledge that he had left in dark disgrace—and that for no guilt of his own—weighed heavily on Talbot. If St. Jim's remembered him at all it would not be as an Old Boy to be proud of, but as a fellow expelled for theft.

But it would not do to brood, he told himself, and he gritted his teeth, and held his head a little higher as he drew near the door of his lodgings. After all, he had nothing to be ashamed of. It was all just a ghastly trick of chance that had made cruel sport of him!

But at the door of his lodgings he paused. His rooms were dark and not very clean—though the best he could possibly afford, since he refused to borrow so much as a penny from his chums. The idea of entering them seemed suddenly repellent to him, and he turned away abruptly, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his coat. It was better out of doors, in the fresh, clean air.

Despite his resolve, unhappy, brooding thoughts persisted in returning to him. As his mind revolved round and round the baffling mystery of Marie Rivers' connection with Gussy's stolen brooch, he tramped on and on along the dark roads, heedless of how far he went.

He wondered if he could see Marie to say good-bye to her. Tom Merry would take a message to her for him. But he dreaded meeting her. She had been so bitterly angry with him at their last meeting, when she had thought he doubted her honesty. But could he face her, after that?

And perhaps she believed his expulsion had been justified, that he was the real thief of D'Arcy's brooch, and that in some way he had been base enough to try to place the guilt on to her by getting her to admit that it was a brooch she had sent to Smeaton.

With these dark thoughts in his mind, it was a shock to Talbot, on trudging through an unfamiliar village, to hear the church clock strike midnight.

Midnight already! He had no idea that it was as late as that. He turned, with a startled exclamation, to retrace his steps. A signpost at the corner of the village street told him that he was five miles from Wayland. Clearly, he had been tramping in a great circle, for he had walked far more than five miles since saying good-bye to Tom Merry & Co. that evening.

One o'clock struck as he was approaching Wayland.

Till now the roads had been utterly deserted. But now he heard footsteps on the road ahead of him. He himself had been striding along the grass at the edge of the road, so that the man ahead could have heard nothing of his approach as he overtook him.

In the cold moonlight Talbot made out a short, rather hunched figure ahead. He stepped out on the road, and at the sound of his footsteps the man ahead turned sharply, as if startled. Talbot drew a quick breath.

The moonlight revealed the face of Smeaton!

"You!" muttered Smeaton, as Talbot strode swiftly up to him. "The Toff!"

"Yes, it's the Toff!" answered Talbot, using his old nickname with bitter irony. "But what the dickens are you doing here, Smeaton? I understood that you were going north in search of honest work! What does this mean?"

Smeaton chuckled, sourly.

"I've changed my mind," he said savagely. "Honesty doesn't appeal to me, Toff!"

Talbot's eyes blazed. His fists clenched.

"You hound! So it was a lie you told Miss Marie, when you said you were going to turn honest? It was a trick to get money from her?"

"Exactly!" sneered Smeaton. "But what has that got to do with you? What are you, a St. Jim's boy, doing out here after one in the morning, eh? Looks to me, Toff, as if you must be out on some crackman's job!"

Talbot breathed hard. He longed to plant his fist in that sneering face, and only an iron self-control prevented him from doing so. But what would be the use of hitting a man like Smeaton?

"I'm not a St. Jim's boy any longer," the junior muttered. "But if you say that again—that I'm a crackman—I'll knock you down!"

"Oh, cut out the rough-stuff!" said Smeaton hastily. "Only my joke!" He eyed Talbot curiously. "So you're not at the school any longer, eh? How's that?"

"Mind your own business!" snapped Talbot. He gripped the man by the shoulder. "I've got a bone to pick with you! You saw Miss Marie in the road last night. I heard all about it. What were you doing? What had you to say to her? You hound, tell me!"

"Hands off!"

"Tell me why you stopped her and spoke to her! You admit that you got money from her by a trick in the first place—were you badgering her for more money?"

Smeaton laughed uneasily.

"I did ask her for money," he admitted sullenly, since he was not quite sure how much Talbot already knew. "She was so easily fooled before, that I thought there was no harm in trying to get more out of her. Green, she was, to give me that brooch! I sold it for seven quid! Ha, ha, ha!"

He broke off with a choking cry as Talbot's fist crashed into his face between the eyes. He dropped like a sack of coals.

"You cur!" breathed Talbot. "You receive a kindness at the hands of a free-hearted girl, then sneer at her for trusting you! You're about the lowest worm it's been my bad luck to meet for a long time!"

Smeaton lay in the road, glaring up. His lips were working with fury. He staggered to his feet, fists clenched.

"Hang you!" he hissed. "You'd hit me, would you? Well, I'm getting my own back for that! I'll tell you something to make you lie awake to-night!"

"What on earth are you talking about?" demanded Talbot contemptuously.

Smeaton, in his blind, mad fury, seemed scarcely to know what he was doing. He plunged a hand into his pocket and brought out what seemed at first to be simply a small roll of cloth.

But there was a sharp intake of breath from Talbot as the man swiftly flung open the little roll.

Revealed within, by the moonlight, were neatly arranged tools, that gleamed with the brightness of steel. Talbot's face set.

"A crackman's tools!" he muttered.

"That's right!" whispered Smeaton evilly. "A crackman's outfit! And they've been used to-night. I'm just back from the job—an hour ago, at midnight I was breaking into St. Jim's! I opened the safe in the headmaster's study, Toff!"

Talbot stared at him, struck dumb.

"There was nothing there in cash—only papers that were no use to me," went on the man savagely. "It was cursed bad luck, that!"

Talbot drew a deep breath of relief. He gave a low, grim laugh.

"So your trouble was all wasted, Smeaton?"

"No, not quite!" A horrible smile spread over the man's face. "Oh, you'll like to know this, Toff. I swore to get my own back on that girl, Marie Rivers, when she wouldn't help me, and had her friends throw me into the pond! She had left a glove in the road yesterday. Well, next time the headmaster of St. Jim's opens his safe, not only will he find that all the papers are in disorder, proving that someone has broken in, but he'll find her glove!"

Talbot gave a low, startled cry. Smeaton's eyes flamed wickedly.

"That's my revenge on her!" he cried exultantly. "That glove, left there as if by accident, will seem to prove that it was she who has opened his safe. The headmaster knows she was once the pal of crackmen—he'll never doubt, then, that she's capable of opening a safe, even if she denies it. And what's more," he went on jeeringly, "no one will believe your story if you tell 'em the truth about that glove, as I've told it to you! They would only think you were making up a wild story to shield her!"

And Smeaton broke into an evil laugh.



Talbot stared at the scoundrel dazedly. The fiendish scheme left him horror-struck.

"You cur!"

The words broke from him violently, and he flung himself forward at the man. Smeaton leapt back and turned to run, with sudden fear in his face. Away up the road he sped, at a speed of which Talbot would not have believed him capable. Talbot sped off in grim pursuit, but he caught his foot in a rut of the lane, and went sprawling full length.

When he staggered up, Smeaton had vanished into the darkness. Pursuit would be in vain.

Then Talbot started. His eyes were fixed on something lying in the road. Smeaton's set of cracksmen's tools!

Clearly, in thrusting them into his pocket as he raced off, Smeaton had, without knowing it, let them slip from his pocket on to the ground. Talbot snatched them up.

In a moment, a wild, desperate scheme had flashed into the brain of Reginald Talbot—the "Toff!" as he had once been called, in the days when he, too, could open a safe with uncanny skill.

"Marie's glove—in the Head's safe!" he muttered hoarsely.

It had been a terrible, fiendishly clever scheme on the part of Smeaton, to bring ruin to the girl upon whom his warped mind wished to have revenge; revenge, simply because she would not give him more money, now that she knew he was still the same scoundrel as of old, with no wish to reform his crooked ways!

If Marie's glove were found shut in the safe, no one would doubt but that it was Marie who had opened the safe that night in a search for valuables. Had she really done so, she would have worked in gloves, and one might well have come to be shut in the safe by accident. It would seem positive proof of her guilt.

If that glove were found, Marie Rivers would be banished from St. Jim's, with an indelible stain upon her character.

"But it shan't be found there!" whispered Talbot, clutching the cracksmen's tools in a fierce grip.

He knew that the old skill would serve him now as well as ever. He would break into St. Jim's himself, open the Head's safe, and remove that fatal glove! It was a desperate plan. But it was the only way.

Slipping the cracksmen's outfit into his pocket, Reginald Talbot turned and strode swiftly along the shadowy lane in the direction of St. Jim's!

## CHAPTER 13.

### The Schoolboy Cracksmen!

**B**AGGY TRIMBLE of the Fourth, sighed.

It was quite a noisy sigh, but no one heard it, for the rest of the Fourth Form dormitory was sleeping. On all sides, the steady breathing and the gentle snores of his Form-fellows could be heard as Baggy Trimble lay staring into the gloom.

"Oh, lor'!" muttered Baggy. "I'm peckish!"

He sighed again.

Baggy Trimble had an appetite like that of a hippopotamus. And though he had had an excellent supper that evening, thanks to the generosity of his study-mate, Kit Wildrake, Baggy had awakened feeling decidedly hungry.

"That rotter Wildrake only gave me two kippers for supper, instead of three," grumbled Baggy to himself. "No wonder I'm starving!"

Baggy's was not exactly a grateful nature.

"Dare say I shall be unconscious, for want of food, by morning," moaned Baggy. "Oh, dear. A delicate constitution like mine needs constant nourishment."

He blinked round at the sleeping juniors, in the gloom.

"All asleep," muttered Baggy. "Good! Blessed if I don't trot downstairs and have a snack in one of the studies. I saw Blake laying in some tuck this evening. Only a mean rotter would object to me taking a little snack."

Full of his sudden resolve, Baggy Trimble put a fat leg from the blankets and cautiously climbed out of bed. He drew on socks and trousers, wrapped a warm dressing-gown round his tubby frame, and rolled silently towards the dormitory door.

A few minutes later, the fat junior was stealing along the Fourth-Form passage, heading for Study No. 6.

He crept in cautiously, and closed the door noiselessly behind him. With a grin of satisfaction on his fat face, Trimble pulled down the blind, took the stump of a candle from the pocket of his dressing-gown, and lit it, so placing it that none of the light from the little flame fell directly on the window.

Baggy smacked his lips and turned towards the cupboard in which he had seen Blake stowing away the good things that he had purchased from Dame Taggles that evening.

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He opened the cupboard door and gazed in greedily. His eyes shone with a joyful light.

"Oh, ripping!"

Cakes and jam-tarts, a rabbit-pie and slices of ham, doughnuts and chocolate biscuits were displayed before his greedy eyes. Baggy rubbed his hands together, and his mouth fairly watered.

"I won't take the lot," he murmured virtuously. "Just a snack!"

With eager hands he began to take the good things from the cupboard and spread them on the table. Then he drew up a chair and set to work on the gorgeous spread.

Quarter of an hour later, Baggy Trimble was still sitting at the table in Study No. 6, eating hard, with his jaws working like a machine. Empty plates surrounded him, but there was still plenty more tuck to be disposed of, and Baggy's appetite was as good as ever, though his breathing was now perhaps a little heavy.

Despite his good resolution not to take the lot, it was beginning to look as though Blake & Co. would not find any tuck worth speaking of when they opened that cupboard in the morning!

Softly as a cat, Reginald Talbot dropped from the wall into the dark quadrangle of St. Jim's.

He had made his way up to the high wall by means of a tree on the outer side, and it was easy for an athletic fellow like himself to take the drop inside without falling. Once in the quad, Talbot straightened himself in the shadow of the wall and stared across at the dark outline of the School House.

There was a patch of moonlight to be crossed, but he had to take that risk, since it was inevitable. He stole along in the shadow of the wall for some little distance, then boldly hurried across the moonlit space between him and the shadows beyond. There was very little chance indeed, of his having been seen; everyone, even the masters, would be in bed by now, Talbot told himself.

From the wall of the chapel, he crept across to the shadow of a lofty buttress against the wall of the School House.

He was making for a window at the back of the building. He reached it in another few moments, and examined it carefully. It was fastened on the inside, but to a fellow of "The Toff's" skill it presented few difficulties. In another minute he had opened the window, with no more sound than a faint click, and was climbing in.

Talbot knew the geography of the building perfectly, and soon he had emerged from the kitchen quarters, despite the locked doors that barred his way. Thanks to Smeaton's tools, he had been able to deal with the locks easily enough!

At the foot of the stairs he stood listening.

There was no sound in the big building. With a nod of satisfaction, Talbot crept up the stairs, silent as a ghost. Like a shadow he turned in the direction of the Head's study. In a few moments more, he was inside, breathing a little quickly, but perfectly cool.

He had found a small flash-lamp among Smeaton's tools, completing the cracksmen's outfit. Talbot shot a ray of vivid light into the darkness.

The circling beam lit up the walls and furniture. Then it steadied on to the big safe.

"Now for it!" breathed Talbot.

He crossed silently to the safe, laid the flash-lamp on the floor in such a way as to direct its ray on to the safe's door, and knelt in front of it. He drew on a pair of gloves, slipped off his overcoat, and examined the lock intently, with an expert eye.

It was a long, long time since Reginald Talbot had been kneeling before a safe at the dead of night! But his old skill remained. There was no doubt in his mind but that he would succeed in his task, despite the difficulties of the lock. If Smeaton had been able to open it, "The Toff" was not likely to fail!

With quick, clever fingers, Talbot got to work in the midnight silence of the Head's study!

## CHAPTER 14.

### Face to Face!

**T**OM MERRY, in the Shell dormitory, had slept little better that night than had Baggy Trimble of the Fourth, though the reason of his sleeplessness was very different!

It was about Talbot that Tom was thinking. And his troubled thoughts caused him to sleep badly, with long wakeful periods, in which he would lie staring at the moonlit splashes that fell through the tall windows, and wonder ceaselessly about his expelled chum.

After a troubled doze, Tom woke again, to hear the school clock striking the half-hour. He glanced at the luminous dial of his watch.

"Half-past one!" Tom turned restlessly. He tried to sleep again, but sleep would not return. His troubled thoughts had banished sleep for the time being.

It was a sudden faint sound in the hush of the night that caught Tom's ear some time later, and caused him to sit up in bed, listening. Faint though the sound had been, it had attracted his attention in the utter silence.

It seemed to have come from somewhere outside. A faint metallic click, as if from one of the ground-floor windows.

"Must have been mistaken," muttered Tom.

But the idea persisted, and at last he got out of bed and crossed to one of the windows. He raised the sash, and peered out.

The window over-looked a dark gravelled space at the back of the School House. It was deserted, as he had known it would be. Yet somehow he could not rid himself of the conviction that he had heard a sound at one of the windows below.

Suppose a burglar—

"Oh, that's rot," Tom told himself, but rather uncertainly.

Knowing the building as he did, Tom Merry realised that it was just such a window as one of those below which a burglar would be likely to choose, in effecting an entry into the building.

Had he heard anything? He thought that most likely it had been imagination, and nothing more. But there was the chance that he had been right, that he had really heard that sound, and that it had been made by someone breaking in!

It was clearly his duty to take no risk, but to investigate. And yet he felt so uncertain about it that he hesitated to awaken any of his chums.

"I'll just buzz downstairs and make sure everything is O.K.," Tom told himself. "I expect it was just imagination on my part, anyway. It would be silly to wake anybody up about nothing!"

He crossed to his bed, slipped on a dressing-gown and slippers, and left the dormitory.

Utter silence greeted him at the head of the stairs. He groped for the banister and stole down into the darkness.

On the second landing he paused again, listening. And suddenly he stiffened, and his face went startled in the gloom.

A faint sound had broken the silence—a sound so soft and slight that he would not have heard it had he not been straining his ears. It came from somewhere to his right, and he realised a moment later that it was from the end of the passage leading to the Head's study.

"The Head's study!"

Tom caught his breath. So his suspicions had not been ill-founded, after all!

With gleaming eyes, Tom Merry stole along the pitch-black passage in the direction from which that sound had come.

He reached the Head's door and paused, listening. Again a faint sound came to his ears from within. Tom's fingers went out to the door-handle, and the next moment he had swung open the door.

There was a startled exclamation from within the room.

Tom was just in time to see a dim figure kneeling before the door of the Head's safe—and the safe was open!

Instantly the shadowy figure reached out a hand and snapped out the light of the electric torch on the floor. Then the captain of the Shell launched himself at the



Baggy Trimble's eyes shone with a joyful light as he opened the cupboard door and gazed in greedily. His mouth fairly watered at the sight of cakes and jam tarts, a rabbit pie and slices of ham, dough-nuts, and chocolate biscuits. "Oh, ripping!" he murmured. (See Chapter 13.)

intruder, and in another moment the two were grappling and struggling in the darkness.

In utter silence they reeled and swayed across the floor. Tom had his arms round the other's body, and strove desperately to throw him. But he soon realised that he had just about met his match in strength.

In grim silence—their panting breath and padding feet the only sound—the two staggered in a fierce embrace.

Tom Merry did not cry out for help, for the simple reason that he had not an ounce of breath to spare if he were to prevent himself from being overcome by his unseen antagonist. And believing as he did that the intruder was some desperate burglar and safe-breaker, he was grimly determined that the cracksmen should not escape.

Talbot had not the faintest idea who his attacker was. That it was some strongly-built junior he realised. But even had he realised that it was Tom Merry, he would have exerted every effort to gain the mastery, so that he could escape from the premises without being recognised.

For how could this other fellow, Talbot, asked himself, believe anything but the worst of him, finding him at work on the Head's safe in this guilty manner in the dead of night?

The two strove and strained, and suddenly they went down together with a crash. Tom Merry fell uppermost, and fought to pin the other to the floor. But a tremendous heave threw him off for a moment. He clutched desperately at the struggling figure again, and they rolled across the floor, to crash into the legs of the Head's table. This time Tom was underneath.

But not for long! He hit upwards with his clenched fist, and his knuckles struck a strong chin in the darkness. He heard the other's teeth click together as his head jerked back, and the grip on Tom was relaxed. In a moment the captain of the Shell had fought free.

He heard the intruder stagger to his feet and make a swift movement as if towards the door. In an instant Tom Merry hurled himself in the direction of the sound. But the shadowy figure eluded him in the dark, and like a flash Tom jumped in front of the spot where he judged the door to be, to bar the way should the cracksmen seek to escape.

Tom's hand flashed forward at a venture, fist clenched. He heard a stifled cry in the gloom, and felt his fist crash into the intruder's face. There was a thud as the mysterious marauder fell, knocked clean off his feet by the force of Tom's deadly blow.

Instantly Tom's left hand groped for the switch of the

electric light. He found it, and the next moment a flood of light filled the room.

Tom stood with his back to the door, staring down at the fellow on the carpet, who was raising himself dazedly after that knock-down blow. Tom Merry's heart seemed to miss a beat.

"You!"

An icy hand seemed to close upon his heart. With horror-stricken eyes Tom Merry stared down into the face of Reginald Talbot. Talbot stared back at him, the shock of the revelation of his assailant's identity reflected in his haggard eyes.

"You!" breathed Tom hoarsely. "You—at the Head's safe!"

## CHAPTER 15.

### The Great Sacrifice!

**S**LOWLY Talbot rose to his feet and stood facing Tom Merry.

"You!" repeated Tom almost dazedly. "You must be mad! I could never have believed this of you—"

"What do you mean?" muttered Talbot thickly.

"Why, it's pretty obvious what I mean!" Tom Merry made a despairing gesture. His eyes went to the open safe, with the disordered papers within.

Talbot took a step towards him.

"You don't believe—"

Tom stared at him in amazement.

"How can I doubt the evidence of my own eyes?" he exclaimed in a shaking voice. "You can't deny this—caught red-handed at the safe—"

"You—you don't understand!" muttered Talbot huskily. "Listen! I—"

"There is no possible excuse," said Tom Merry, and his voice was hard. "I believed you about Gussy's brooch, but this is—this can never be explained away!"

"I tell you it can! You must believe me, Tom! Look! This is all I came to take from the safe—this!"

Talbot plunged his hand into his pocket, and held out Marie's glove in a shaking hand. Tom stared at it in angry bewilderment.

"What do you mean?"

"A man who wanted to do Marie Rivers a bad turn has been here to-night before me," said Talbot quickly. "He found no money; but he left this glove here in the safe—Marie's glove! So that when it was found that someone

had been at the safe, Marie should be accused. I got to know of this, and so I came here to open the safe and remove this glove. That's all—"

He broke off stammeringly. Even as he spoke he realised how terribly wild and improbable his story must sound to Tom, true though it was.

"You don't believe me?" whispered Talbot, and his eyes dropped before the accusing look in Tom Merry's.

There was a moment's silence. When Tom's answer came his voice was low and unsteady.

"How can I believe you?" Tom's tone was almost pleading, as though he sought Talbot's forgiveness for his disbelief. "It's an impossible story! Do you really ask me to believe that Marie is in such close touch with a man of the type you suggest, that he could come to have her glove in his possession?"

Talbot started, and a flush mounted to his cheeks.

He had not realised that his story might cast a reflection upon Marie in that way.

"Do you ask me to believe that?" repeated Tom.

And Talbot, who had already sacrificed himself so much for his girl chum, made now the greatest sacrifice of all; for he gave up Tom Merry's friendship in that moment for her sake. He shook his head.

"No," he muttered thickly. "You must not believe that!"

Quickly he put the glove back in his pocket, and blindly stooped for his coat and began fumblingly to draw it on. He did not look at Tom.

Tom Merry spoke brokenly.

"Talbot, if this were anyone but you I should not let you leave this building to-night without raising the alarm. But I can't do that—even though it's really my duty. But before you go you must return to that safe any valuables that you have taken from it."

"I have taken no valuables, I swear!" answered Talbot very quietly.

Tom Merry eyed him searchingly. Then he nodded.

"I'll believe that," he said; and then: "But why, if you wanted money, wouldn't you take it from me when I offered it? Why refuse that, and then—this? It can't have been from pride that you refused—not real pride—if you would stoop to this!"

"Don't ask me!" said Talbot roughly. "Let me go!"

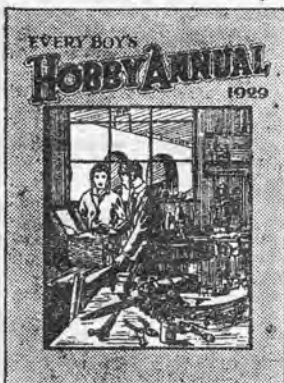
He turned away from Tom, dashing a hand across his eyes as he fumbled to close the safe. The heavy door shut

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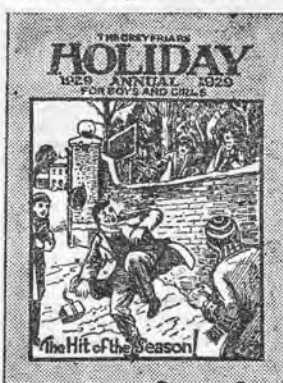
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with a click. Then Talbot swung round and moved swiftly to the door of the study.

Tom stepped aside to let him pass. As Talbot went past him into the passage the captain of the Shell let a hand fall for a moment tremblingly on his old friend's shoulder.

"No one shall know of this, old man," breathed Tom huskily. "And I—I shall try to forget!"

Talbot halted and stared at him, wide-eyed.

"You can say that, even though you believe that I—that I—"

The words snapped off. Suddenly he gripped Tom's hand and pressed it tight. Then he hurried away down the passage.

Tom snapped out the light in the Head's room and softly closed the door. He moved quickly after Talbot, catching him up by the stairs.

"You came in by a window downstairs?" asked Tom quietly, and Talbot nodded. "I'll go down with you, and close it after you."

Slowly Tom Merry went up the stairs.

On the Fourth Form landing he paused, staring in amazement along the passage to his right. A light was gleaming out from beneath the door of one of the studies, and from within he fancied that he heard the faint rattle of a knife and fork.

"My hat!"

What could it mean?

Then the true solution flashed into Tom's mind. He guessed that it was probably Trimble, indulging in a midnight raid on someone else's tuck. After that tragic meeting with Talbot, Tom Merry had little heart for dealing with a fat robber of tuck. But he felt that it was not fair to the owner of the tuck in question to ignore the matter.

With clouded brow, the captain of the Shell stepped softly along the Fourth Form passage to Study No. 6 and flung open the door.

## CHAPTER 16.

### In Study No. 6.

**B**AGGY TRIMBLE was almost bursting.

He had eaten about as much as six normal fellows could have disposed of in the same space of time. But he was still eating, though very slowly now.

Empty plates were stacked at his elbow, and empty cake-tins and biscuit-tins, empty paper bags, and empty bottles of ginger-beer, covered the table at which he sat. There was



"I—I'm not here!" squeaked Baggy Trimble desperately from under the table. "I—I'm upstairs in bed! I—Ow! Yooop!" A groping hand grasped the fat Fourth-Former by the ear, and he was hauled out from his hiding-place, gasping and panting. (See Chapter 16.)

Without a word, the two went silently down the staircase together.

They did not speak again till Talbot halted by the window through which he had entered. When he had raised the sash he turned a haggard face to Tom.

"Good-bye!"

"Good-bye, old man! And, for the sake of us who were your chums here at St. Jim's, don't be mad enough to try this kind of game again!" Tom's voice was pleading. "Keep straight—as straight as we always believed you to be!"

For a moment a curious, pathetic smile flickered in Talbot's face. Something very like tears glistened in his eyes, and he turned his head away quickly. Then, without another word, he turned and swung himself out through the open window. Tom saw him vanish, and closed the window, fastening it.

"Poor old Talbot!"

And there were tears, too, in the eyes of Tom Merry as he groped his way blindly back to the stairs.

He was sick at heart. After this, how could he but believe that Talbot had been indeed guilty of the theft of D'Arcy's brooch—that the Head's expulsion of Reginald Talbot had been a proper and just act?

Tom Merry & Co. had stood by Talbot then. But now it looked as though their chum had deceived them, and their blind faith in his honesty had been utterly misplaced.

very little left to eat, but Baggy Trimble could not bear to go while there was yet a crumb remaining.

Though he was breathing with difficulty, and his face was shining with the exertion of it, Baggy's jaws still clamped on, game to the last!

Half a pork-pie, couple of doughnuts, a solitary jam-tart, and a few mixed biscuits still remained to be disposed of, and he was carrying on with the menu, with every intention of polishing off the lot, when sudden footsteps in the passage caused the fat raider's heart to jump unpleasantly. His jaw dropped and beads of perspiration stood out on his frightened face.

"Oh, lor'!" breathed Baggy.

He listened. No, he was not mistaken. They were footsteps right enough, and they were approaching the door of the study in which he sat. Baggy gazed round wildly for a place of concealment.

No place seemed to offer itself except the table. Baggy gave a violent blow at the candle, succeeded in extinguishing it first shot, and dived under the table. He heard the door open a few moments later.

"Oh dear!" moaned Baggy to himself.

There was a sharp click, and the study was flooded with electric light. Baggy scarcely breathed.

"Now then, where are you hiding?" came an angry voice—the voice of Tom Merry.

Baggy almost fainted. He could not understand how Tom could know that he was in the room.

"I—I'm not here!" bleated Baggy desperately.

"What?"

"I'm not here!" squeaked Trimble. "I—I'm upstairs in bed! I—Ow! Yooooop!"

A groping hand had come under the table and grasped him by the ear. The fat Fourth-Former was hauled out from his hiding-place, gasping and panting.

"You fat thief!" exclaimed Tom Merry contemptuously.

"So you've been raiding Blake's grub, have you?"

"Nunno!" squeaked Baggy. "Only just a snack, you know. I—I wouldn't bag another fellow's grub! It wouldn't be honourable! We Trimblees are the soul of honour!"

Tom jerked him to his feet. He had no time to waste on Baggy, and he was not very gentle in his handling of the fat junior. Baggy gave a painful gasp.

"Ow! Don't be a beast, Merry!"

He broke away from Tom and dodged hastily to the far side of the table.

"Come here!" snapped Tom.

"Ow! Rats!"

"I shall let Blake know who has looted his grub in the morning, of course," said Tom angrily. "Get out of here, you fat rascal! Get upstairs!"

But Baggy stayed where he was, eyeing Tom warily.

"What are you doing down here at this time of night, anyway?" demanded Baggy loftily. "It looks fishy to me. I suppose you came sneaking down to collar Blake's grub yourself, and you're wild because I got at it first! That's about the size of it!"

"Why, you fat sweep—"

Tom was in no mood to stand very much from Trimble. He had forgotten for the moment that there was the risk of bringing Mr. Railton from his bed if any noise were made. Angriest he took a quick step round the table to give Trimble the box on the ear that he deserved. Trimble dodged wildly, and the next moment there was a crash as the fat Fourth-Former cannoned into the corner of the table, and sent several articles upon it flying to the floor.

"Now you've done it, you awful idiot!" bleated Trimble. "We'll have Railton here in a jiff!"

Tom had no wish for the Housemaster to arrive on the scene. His own presence downstairs, though it had been perfectly innocent, would be difficult to explain—impossible to explain, in fact, under the circumstances, since he could not mention Talbot, whatever happened.

"Quiet, you fat idiot!" hissed Tom, and stepped hastily to the door, listening.

But apparently the noise had not penetrated to Mr. Railton's quarters, for the silence remained unbroken. Relieved, Tom turned again to Baggy.

"Hop it!" he commanded angrily.

Trimble did not stand upon the order of his going, but went—at once. He scuttled out of the study and vanished. Tom put out a hand to switch out the light and follow Trimble, when his eyes fell on something on the carpet that caused him to give a quick, breathless exclamation.

A plate had fallen to the carpet and smashed, and one of the cake-tins had fallen, too, when Trimble had lurched into the table. The remains of a pork-pie lay scattered there as well, and a jam-jar had fallen with the other things and broken. The contents were oozing out of the broken glass on to the floor—a sticky red mixture. It was something in that pool of plum jam that had caught Tom's eye and held his gaze riveted to it, wide-eyed and amazed.

As the sticky liquid flowed from it the broken jar could be seen to contain something else as well as plum jam! In a moment Tom was kneeling by it, and his fingers had picked out this startling object from the sticky mess surrounding it.

A diamond brooch!

"Good heavens!" breathed the captain of the Shell.

It could only be D'Arcy's missing brooch—not stolen, after all!

## CHAPTER 17.

### The Riddle Solved!

**I**N bewildered amazement, Tom Merry stood with the brooch in his fingers, staring down at it, with a whirl of strange thoughts.

In that moment he was beginning to understand a great deal.

Gussy's brooch!

So Talbot had not stolen it—no one had stolen it! How

it came to be where he had found it was as yet a mystery. On a sudden impulse, Tom stepped to the cupboard and thrust a hand in, groping at the back of the shelf on which, as Arthur Augustus had told him, the brooch had been placed prior to its disappearance.

"My hat!"

His half-formed idea was proved to be right. There was a wide crack at the back of the shelf, sufficient for the brooch to have slipped through.

Tom realised at once what had happened. The brooch had dropped from the top shelf, through the crack at the back, into the mouth of the jam-pot on the shelf beneath! It had sunk, of course, beneath the surface of the dark liquid, so that even if Blake & Co. had used that very jam-pot for tea since it was easy for them to have failed to find the brooch among the thick red jam.

And Talbot was innocent.

That was the thought that kept hammering in Tom Merry's brain. At first he had refused to doubt Talbot, but since to-night's discovery in the Head's study, Tom had come to believe, in his heart, that Talbot must have been the actual thief. He would never forgive himself now for having doubted.

And if Talbot was innocent of the first charge, might not his story concerning his midnight visit to Dr. Holmes' study be true, as well? Instinct now told Tom Merry that Talbot had only spoken the truth.

"And I wouldn't believe him!" breathed Tom hoarsely. "What a blind fool I was!"

But if Talbot had been innocent regarding D'Arcy's brooch, why had he kept such dogged silence regarding the matter of the brooch that had been given by him to the man in Rylcombe Wood?

It was clear now that Racke and Crooke had mistaken a very similar brooch for that which D'Arcy had lost. Tom did not doubt for a moment but that the two had genuinely believed it to be Gussy's brooch which they had seen in the hands of the man in the wood. And in a flash Tom understood that Talbot, too, had come to believe that the other brooch, that which Racke and Crooke had seen, was the one that was supposed to have been stolen. And though he had had nothing to do with the matter, other than delivering the box to the man in the wood, Talbot had remained silent for the sake of the unknown person for whom he had delivered the box to the mysterious individual. He had sacrificed himself, rather than let suspicion fall on someone else. That other person had been perfectly innocent; but Talbot had not known whether or not that unknown person would be able to prove his or her innocence!

Tom Merry understood it all as he stood staring with unseeing eyes at the remains of Baggy Trimble's gigantic midnight feast.

"And I'll swear, too, that Talbot's story about Marie's glove was true, too! He's innocent of everything; and unless something's done at once it may be too late to find him before he goes away!"

Tom started blindly for the door, scarcely knowing what he meant to do, but feeling that it was utterly imperative that something must be done at once to find Talbot before he left Wayland—as, without doubt, he would be doing in the morning.

There was no time to be lost. It flashed through Tom's mind that he would arouse Mr. Railton; then he thought of Eric Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's.

"I'll tell Kildare—"

"And what will you tell me, Merry?" came a stern voice from the doorway; and Tom gave a gasp as he found himself standing face to face with Kildare himself. In his preoccupation, he had not heard the captain approaching along the passage.

"What does this mean?" exclaimed Kildare, frowning darkly. His eyes ran over the remains of Trimble's feast. "Surely you haven't got up in the middle of the night to feed, Merry—and in somebody else's study, too?"

"No, no!" Tom shook his head impatiently, and laid an excited hand on the captain's arm. "Kildare, Talbot—Talbot's innocent! I've found the missing brooch. It wasn't stolen at all—and poor old Talbot will be going away in the morning! He's off to get a job on a ship—he must be stopped before it's too late! He—he—"

"Steady on!" cut in Kildare, stepping into the study with a curious look on his handsome face. He was wearing a long dressing-gown. "What are you yarning about? Let's have it a bit clearer."

It was obvious from Kildare's expression that he realised that Tom's excitement was not unfounded.

"You say you've found the brooch that Talbot was supposed to have stolen—or, at any rate, in the stealing of which he was supposed to have been mixed up? And you say he is still in Wayland? He was supposed to have gone to his uncle, Colonel Lyndon."

# "THE TITAN THREE"

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Tom shook his head.  
"He didn't. The poor chap felt he couldn't face his uncle with the charge of theft and expulsion hanging over him."

And as swiftly as he could Tom Merry explained everything. He thought it best to keep nothing back. He told how he had found Talbot at the safe, and of the glove that Talbot had shown him. When he had finished Kildare was frowning thoughtfully.

"It's clear that Talbot was innocent of any dishonesty over D'Arcy's brooch," he said slowly.

"But there's no time to lose!" persisted Tom. "He may go first thing in the morning, and if once he gets on a ship—"

"He won't leave his lodgings in Wayland before breakfast, anyway," smiled Kildare. "Talbot has plenty of common sense, and a fellow with common sense does not go off on a journey without having his breakfast. I'll cycle over to Wayland early this morning, myself, before breakfast, and bring him back with me to St. Jim's. Then there will be no chance of missing him."

"Can I go with you?" cried Tom eagerly.  
"If you like," nodded Kildare. "I've got an alarm-clock, and I'll set it for half-past six. I'll look in and wake you up, kid. And now you had better get up to bed again."

## CHAPTER 18.

### Back at St. Jim's.

REGINALD TALBOT was starting a seven o'clock breakfast next morning when a shadow fell across the dim window, and, looking up, he saw the head and shoulders of Eric Kildare pass by. The next moment there was a sharp knock on the outer door, and he heard his landlady going to answer it. With startled face, Talbot jumped to his feet.

When the captain of St. Jim's, followed by Tom Merry, entered the room, Talbot's face was white but composed.

"Well," he said doggedly, "what is it now?"  
Kildare dropped a kindly hand on his shoulder.  
"I want you to come back to St. Jim's with us, Talbot," he said. "D'Arcy's brooch has been found. It was never

stolen. Of course, as soon as Dr. Holmes knows this, your expulsion will be revoked."

He paused, then went on quietly:  
"Tom Merry here has told me rather a peculiar story about you and the Head's safe. I understand that you had an explanation of your action in breaking into the safe—"

Talbot broke in with a startled exclamation, and shot an accusing look at Tom.

"You promised to say nothing of that affair!" he breathed.

"It's all right, old chap!" said Tom quickly. "I said I wouldn't speak of it, when I was rotter enough to believe that you had broken into the safe for a dishonest purpose. But when I felt that your story was true I thought it best to explain everything to Kildare. I know your story was true; and so I knew it would be all right, telling about it, since I know you will be able to explain it all satisfactorily, old chap. I'm sure you can!"

Talbot's face softened. He gripped Tom's hand.  
"You did right, I expect, Tom, old man!" he muttered huskily. "I—I scarcely know what to say. It all seems like a dream, to think that I can go back to St. Jim's!"

Tom Merry gave a shaking laugh.  
"It's true enough, though. But—but can you ever forgive me for having doubted you?"

"Of course you doubted me!" cried Talbot; but his face was very happy now. "How could you do anything else, when you found me there at the Head's safe in the dead of night? And now that Gussy's brooch is found I can explain it all—how it was that Marie's glove came to be in the hands of the real cracksmen."

And there and then he told Kildare and Tom Merry the whole story of Smeaton and of the man's villainy.

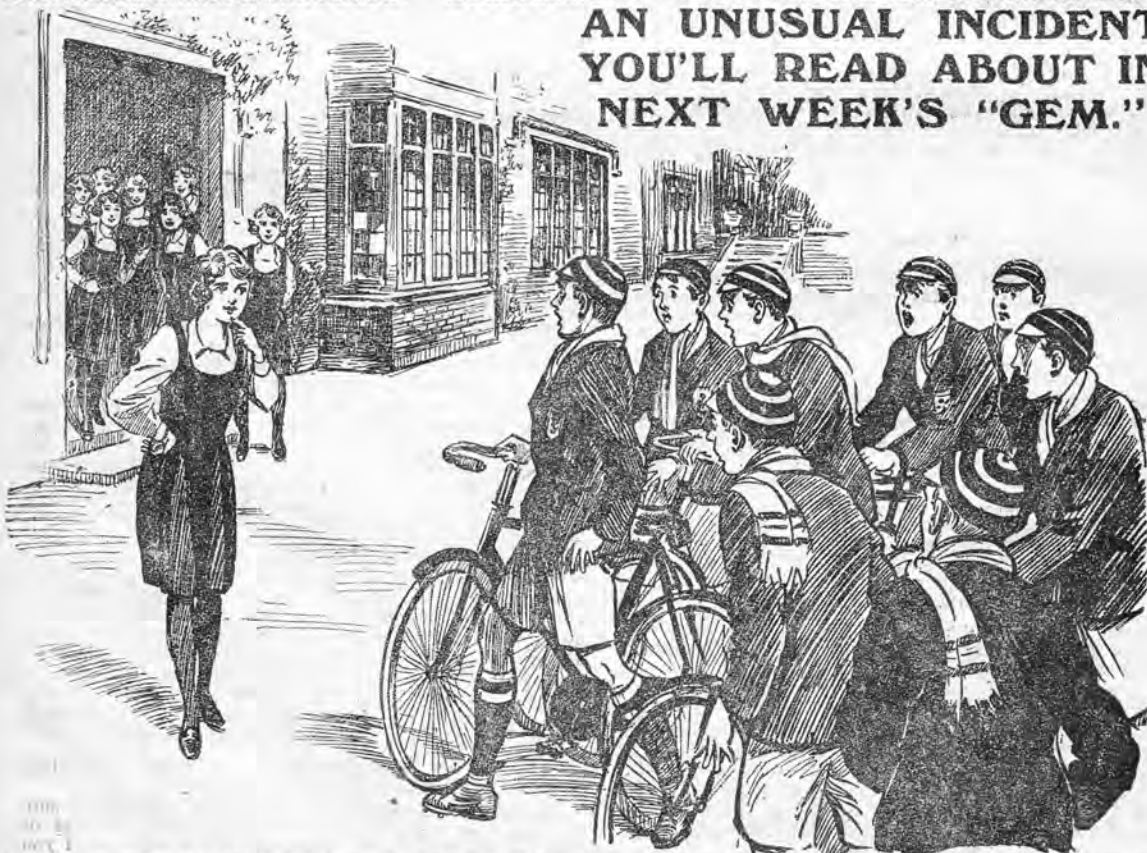
When Talbot had finished Kildare impulsively gripped his hand.

"I see," he said quietly; and there was something in his voice that was better to Talbot than any fulsome praise.  
"You played up like a Briton, kid."

And when Talbot returned to St. Jim's that morning it was not long before the whole school had heard from the Head's own lips that Talbot of the Shell was back for good. Dr. Holmes' voice quivered a little as he made that announcement. And, with scarcely an exception, the

(Continued on page 27.)

## AN UNUSUAL INCIDENT YOU'LL READ ABOUT IN NEXT WEEK'S "GEM."



"We've come to play the junior eleven at football," said Raake. "Really?" gasped the girl who confronted the crowd of footballers. "Then you've certainly had a trick played on you! Spalding Hall is a school for girls. I'm Norah Grant, the captain!"

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## The Mystery Solved!

**T**HE sun dipped with a green flash, and in a few minutes the violet tropic dusk had fallen.

Lionel Love shivered in the dewfall, which covered the cabin top with moisture.

"Ere you are, Lionel!" said Mr. Pugsley. "Put Cecil's shawl over your shoulders. That'll keep the dew off you!"

And he threw Mr. Love a dry gunny sack, which was Cecil's favourite evening wrap.

"Now that it's dark Skeleton can make a jug of cocoa," said Mr. Pugsley. "But mind you don't show a light, Skeleton, or we may get one from the pirates yet!"

Skeleton slid down below and swiftly got a sort of high tea ready, cutting huge sandwiches of boiled beef and filling them up with thick layers of mustard.

Cecil, the ape, handed these round, presenting each recipient with a little polite grunt, as much as to say: "I hope you'll enjoy your supper!"

"Never does to let pirates interfere with regular meals," said Mr. Pugsley, eating his sandwich with one hand and steering with the other. "It is now seven o'clock, and I 'ope that by eight p.m. I shall 'ave introduced Mr. Ah Sin, the pirate king, to one of those natural phenomena, a sunken mountain, otherwise known as Crippen's Corner, or Crippen's Reef, and not marked on the Admiralty charts!"

"And pray, who was Crippen?" asked Lionel Love, who was eating one of Skeleton's beef-sandwiches in a style that showed that, for a moment, he was forgetting that he was one of the movie stars of the world. "Coo, lummy!" exclaimed Mr. Pugsley impatiently. "Ain't you ever played 'Crippen's a-ang' when you was a youngster?"

"When I was a youngster," said Mr. Lionel Love, sticking his eyeglass into his eye and surveying Mr. Pugsley severely. "I never played with mud-pies in the—aw—guttah!"

"Then you missed one of the natural treats of life!" replied Mr. Pugsley. "Go on—give 'im another sang-wich, Cecil! And don't be scared of 'im! 'E's only one of these actors!"

Whilst engaged in this light badinage, Mr. Pugsley

did not fail to keep a close eye on the pursuing pirate liner.

Mr. Pugsley, as an old naval man, had nothing to learn in the matter of keeping station.

The launch sped along dead ahead of the Star of the East, just beyond the range of rifle shot, so that the boys could eat their beef-sandwiches comfortably without the fear of a dropping bullet.

Mr. Lionel Love regarded Mr. Pugsley as a vulgar fellow. He did not know that

the care of his life and those of the boys was foremost in Mr. Pugsley's actions, and that this chipping was really a screen to hide an urgent anxiety.

Mr. Pugsley was aware of a funny little knock in the engine of the D.S.B. If the engine broke down, all was up with the boys of the Bombay Castle.

He knew enough of the people with whom he was playing to know that the next time that Mr. Lionel Love was turned adrift by the pirates they would turn him adrift without his barrel.

Mr. Pugsley's memory was long and complete, and a perfect "Who's Who" of the seven seas. He had been recalling the name of Ah Sin since he had heard it. He remembered it perfectly now as that of a well-known Canton River pirate, a Chicago gunman, and of a desperado who had made the famous Barbary Coast of San Francisco too hot to hold him.

If he got hold of them, it was Mr. Pugsley's opinion that there would be a very short shrift for the lot, and that the time-honoured custom of walking the plank would again be brought into fashion.

It was, therefore, with natural anxiety that Mr. Pugsley listened to that ominous little knocking in his engine.

"Oh, Mr. Engine," he muttered under his breath, "for goodness' sake do be'ave yourself for just three-quarters of an 'our! Don't let us down, or you will let down the nicest lot of boys that ever found their way to sea!"

It was almost a prayer!

The boys, blissfully unconscious of their danger, laughed at the loom of the pirate ship, which was following them without showing her lights.

They could see her shape plainly in the light of the stars and the first dawn of the moonrise.

They had infinite faith in Mr. Pugsley, who had stood by them in so many tight places, and they knew that he would never let them down till the very limits of resource were exhausted.

The boys were not worrying. In fact, they were arguing with Conkey Ikestein, who wanted to invest the funds of the Glory Hole Gang in a silkworm farm. Conkey said that there was a lot of money to be made by posting silkworms' eggs on cards to kids in the British preparatory schools at home.

Pongo Walker was hotly contesting this proposition. "What you going to feed your silkworms on, Conk?" he demanded.

"Lettuce leaves left over from the saloon," said Conk. "I see millions of lettuce leaves go overboard every

do. And when we get the moths, they don't want feeding. All you gotta do is to shut the moth up in a box with bits of square card that fits in an envelope and the moth fills the card up with eggs like insurance stamps. Then we sell 'em to the posh waffs in the Eastbourne and South Coast kids' schools at sixpence a card, post free. If you object to the silkworms we can cut them out. We can buy the cocoons from the Japs 'with the live moth in 'em, before they kill him with boiling water."

"Huh!" disagreed Pongo.

The boys were thus arguing as the moon rose, flooding the sea with a golden light.

Only Dick Dorrington realised that there was something wonky with the engine. He lay by Mr. Pugsley.

"How's she going, Puggo?" he whispered.

"Moderate, Master Dick!" said Mr. Pugsley, looking back at the grim, unlighted steamer that was forging through the sea behind them with relentless persistence. "I expect that chap is waiting for something to go fut in our engine. He knows what motor-launches and motor-cars are like—they are not as dependable as steam!"

"How far are we from Crippen's Corner?" asked Dick.

"About four and a half miles as near as I can make it," replied Mr. Pugsley in a low voice. "And I wish it was four and a 'arf minutes. You see those two little islands in the moonlight yonder, Master Dick?"

"Yes, I can see them," answered Dick.

"Well, the starboard island is Charley Peace Island, and the other we called Sweeny Todd Island. And the passage between is Harriet Lane. Well, Crippen's Corner is exactly four hundred and fifty-six yards from the point yonder which we call Charley Peace's Nose."

"You are going to lead 'em through there?" asked Dick.

"If the engine holds up," said Mr. Pugsley. "I don't like the way it's coughing now. We are beginning to lose speed, too!"

A sudden silence fell upon the party.

By now the boys had sensed that there was something wrong.

"Anything up, Puggo?" asked Pongo Walker.

"Not so bad," replied Mr. Pugsley, with ill-assumed cheerfulness. "Engine's peterin' out, I think. Get up the arms and mount the machine-gun. We've likely got a bit of fighting. Get 'ole Gus up on deck and loose his cricket-bag. That'll give him a chance. An' get ole Horace up. If anything happens he may swim to Charley Peace's Island and live like Robinson Crusoe."

The orders were swiftly obeyed.

"This is a very fearsome and awkward position we are in, Mr. Pugsley," said Mr. Lal Tata.

"Of course it is!" said Mr. Pugsley briefly. "I wasn't representin' it as a trip on the Margate boat."

"Would it not be better to surrender to these pirates and to chance making reasonable propositions?" asked Mr. Lal Tata. "How can we fight great steamers?"

"Well, if you want a taste o' walking the plank, surrender!" replied Mr. Pugsley. "That chap in charge of the Star of the East is one of the Bias Bay elick. 'E'd think no more of doing in a Hindu than of eating 'is breakfast!"

Mr. Lal Tata was silent.

The boys got Gus up on deck in his cricket-bag and loosened the straps. Gus just shoved his nose out to take the evening air. But he seemed to feel pretty snug and did not want to come out of his bunk.

Horace was hoisted up from below, and the canvas bag which was tied about his neck in the style in which live turkeys are sent by rail, was rolled back.

Horace did not try to play the goat. He seemed to know that there was something in the air, and sat down by Cecil, glaring through the moonlight at their pursuers, his eyes gleaming green like a couple of starboard lights.

They could hear the thump of the propeller of the Star of the East coming plainly over the still water.

Plomp, plomp, plomp, plomp!

"E's piling in the coals," muttered Mr. Pugsley.

"Put on ten revolutions in the last ten minutes—and

we've taken them off. But there's a strong tide under us now going through 'Arriet Lane Passage."

The longed-for islands were well in sight now, and Mr. Pugsley steered direct for the desired spot off Charley Peace's Nose.

But their enemy was closing on them. The great roll of white water under his bluff bows was coming nearer and nearer.

The pirates were soon aware that they were closing for, over the water, a toneless Chinese voice shouted in good English:

"Hi, there! Heave-to, or we'll sink you!"

\* But Mr. Pugsley, with his lame duck engine coughing and spitting as if it had bronchitis, held gamely on his course.

They could see men lining up on the fo'c'sle head of the enemy craft.

"All down below but the gun crew!" ordered Mr. Pugsley.

The boys obeyed, and Horace followed them. Horace knew enough to come in when it rained.

Time enough, too! Mr. Pugsley crouched in the steering-well as a fusillade of shots cut up the water about the flying D.S.B.

"Let 'em have it, Master Dick," called Mr. Pugsley.

Dick answered with a volley from the machine-gun, which spattered on the bows of the Star of the East with a clanging like a riveting shop.

In a second the fo'c'sle of the enemy was clear of men.

"I thought that'd stop 'em," said Mr. Pugsley contentedly. "And they can't fire that ole gun of theirs. All we can do is to keep going. Good for us that the moon is right down and the tide is runnin' like a mill race down on Crippen's Corner. If the ole engine'll only hold up—only for ten blessed minutes more—only ten minutes!"

The engine was running slower and slower, but the islands were looming up large in the moonlight. Soon they were nearly abreast, but that roaring bow wave of the Star of the East was coming nearer and nearer behind them.

"The dirty dorgs means to run us down!" muttered Mr. Pugsley. "Means to stamp us under. Go on, good engine—go on! Just three minutes more!"

"Pup-pup—futt-futt—t'ss-t'ss!" answered the engine in answer to his appeal.

"Heave-to, or I'll run you down!" shouted that queer, flat Chinese voice through the megaphone.

Mr. Pugsley gave a gasp of relief.

The bows of the Star of the East were towering over him, and the great white waves she was rolling back roared close behind like a ravening beast.

But close ahead he saw a queer little tide rip on the water of the Harriet Lane Passage. He had looked for it many a time, years ago, when he was out fishing.

For down below here was the top of a submerged mountain—good, solid granite sticking up in a series of water-worn ridges and needle formations amongst which the fish liked to play.

It was a grand place for fishing, and a grand place for wrecking a pirate.

The boys had popped up from the cabin to see what was doing. They gasped as they saw the bows of the Star of the East towering almost over them.

"Now," said Mr. Lal Tata, "we can prepare ourselves for the worst!"

"Don't worry!" answered Mr. Pugsley. "I've got 'im fixed! 'Ere's ole Crippen—good ole Crippen!"

The D.S.B. shot over the oily eddy on the water, which betrayed the lurking reef.

The Star of the East thundered after her. A yell of exultation went up from the pirate's decks. They thought they had got the little craft. But the yell turned to a yell of consternation, for the Star of the East suddenly checked and shot her bows in the air. Then she grounded and crashed and clanged as she tore over the points of the reef, and took a heavy list to starboard.

No ship ever built could have stood the impact. The Star of the East was ripped up like a sardine-tin.

And at the same moment Mr. Pugsley's engine gave a final cough and stopped as it drifted along through the passage on the tide.

They could see the crowd on the stranded steamer brother. But look out! Here comes a pirate down on rushing in a panic for the boats.

"Drop the hook over, boys!" said Mr. Pugsley, when they had drifted a quarter-mile. "Drop the hook over, and I'll tend the ole engine!"

Mr. Pugsley then started work, spanner in hand, hardly troubling to look up now and then from his little engine-room to see how the Star of the East was getting on.

As a matter of fact, the pirate ship was not getting on at all. She was getting down.

The current had turned her as the points of rock on which she had struck crumbled and broke under her. Now she was broadside on, and settling fast. There was shouting and screaming aboard as the pirates fought, each to save his own bit of loot. One or two shots cracked.

"That's it!" said Mr. Pugsley, putting his head up to listen. "They are fightin' amongst themselves now. And there's Ah Sin, crackin' on that they are to attack us!"

But there was no heart left in the pirates. They thought only of getting to the shore with their own parcels. Two boats pushed off from the sinking ship and made for Charley Peace's Island.

A third boat, with Ah Sin yelling like a madman in the stern-sheets, came down the Channel towards the D.S.B.

"Just give 'em a few rounds from the machine-gun. Don't 'it 'em, but let 'em know what to expect!" ordered Mr. Pugsley.

Dick let fly, and the bullets tore up the water just ahead of the oncoming boat. The hint was enough for the rowers. They turned and made off after the other vessels.

"Pull for the shore, brothers! Pull for the shore!" shouted Mr. Pugsley after them. Then the engine of the D.S.B. started to run again.

"There we are. I knew what it was all the time!" said Mr. Pugsley. "Get up the hook, boys, and we'll be off to Three Palms Island to save Claude Fair-

brother. But look out! Here comes a pirate down on the current. Chuck 'im a rope!"

"Help!" spluttered a voice. "I'm drowning!"

A head was bobbing in the water. The boys threw a rope and the man clutched it, and was brought alongside.

Mr. Pugsley leaned over the gunnel and looked down on the turbaned head in the water.

"Who are you that talk English so well through your nose?" he asked.

"I am Mr. Goldberg," spluttered the man, "the cinema king."

"Then what are you doing on that ship?" demanded Mr. Pugsley sternly. "What was you doing with the Sultan of Bungalow that night when he grabbed us and took us to his palace? You are the chap that was whispering to him. What are you doing in that turban?"

"Take me aboard!" pleaded the man. "Those pirates have chucked me overboard! They will murder me if I swim ashore. And I'll drown out here! I can't swim ashore!"

"You are not coming aboard this craft till you tell the whole story," said Mr. Pugsley—"the truth, and nothing but the truth! Who wangled it so that there should be a mutiny aboard the Star of the East? Who wangled it in conjunction with that villain, the sultan, that the big pirate film, worth thousands and thousands, should be pinched as soon as it was done, and that Claude Fairbrother and his party of screen-shifters should be marooned on Three Palms Island?"

"I did!" said Ike Goldberg feebly. "I was in a tight place. My interests in America—"

"Thought as much!" said Mr. Pugsley. "Where's the reels of the film?"

"I've got them!" panted the man. "They are in the steel box you looted that night from the sultan. That's what we were after!"

"Well, I never!" exclaimed Mr. Pugsley. "That's the box in Gus' kip—the box we can't open! Pull him aboard, boys!"

Mr. Goldberg, a picture of drenched rascality, was hoisted aboard. As soon as he found himself safe, he started to talk of law proceedings. But Mr. Pugsley cut him short.

"Cut that out, cousin," said he. "There's a dozen boys 'ere, a goat, and a rangatau all ready to swear that you was picked up out of a pirate ship. And there she goes!"

The Star of the East was sliding back from the reef. Down she went in a rattling and a clanging and a boiling of water. A patch of white foam showed for a few minutes in the moonlight.

"She's gone!" exclaimed Dick.

"And we'll be going, too!" said Mr. Pugsley.

"We'll reach Three Palms Island by sun-up!"

"I don't want to go to Three Palms Island!" protested Mr. Goldberg. "I want to go to Bulu!"

"I don't suppose you do!" answered Mr. Pugsley. "But to Three Palms Island you are going, to meet Claude Fairbrother. Now get down below, forrard—sit down there with the goat. We don't want the likes of you in the cabin!"

In the dawn a haggard little group of ragged actors watched the D.S.B. creeping cautiously into the lagoon of Three Palms Island.

"Ere y'are, Mr. Fairbrother!" called the voice of Mr. Pugsley across the water. "We've brought you back your film-reels, and we've brought you back your thievin' director, Mr. Ike Goldberg. He's in irons down below—along with the goat. Got a bit saucy in the night!"

"But who are you?" demanded Claude Fairbrother, as he waded into the water to meet them.

"Why, the Boys of the Bombay Castle, o' course!" answered Mr. Pugsley, pulling the steel box out of Gus' cricket-bag. "Here they are, all safe in the steel box! And, what d'ye think? Ole Cecil, our rangatau, 'ad the key of the box in his pocket all the time!"

THE END.

## GRAND NEW SERIAL STARTS NEXT WEEK!



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**"THE TRAIL OF THE BLACK RUBY!"**

is the title to look out for in next week's issue.

## Between Ourselves.



**I** CANNOT let this number of the GEM go to press without a mention of next week's bumper programme. As a kick-off there is a fine story of Tom Merry & Co., entitled:

### "UP AGAINST IT!"

Long-legged Figgins and Cousin Ethel—old friends of yours—are prominent characters. This is a story containing a big surprise. What that surprise is I'll leave you to discover for yourselves.

Next on the list is the start of a superb adventure story entitled:

### "THE TRAIL OF THE BLACK RUBY!"

Percy A. Clarke, the author, is new to GEM readers, but you'll soon be good pals with him. This latest yarn of his is packed full of thrills and exciting situations. Look out, then, for the opening chapters next week.

In addition to the foregoing there will be an interesting and informative article dealing with the series of Test matches now being played in Australia. Followers of cricket should look out for this!

### "A BIT OF USEFUL INFORMATION!"

Here's a tip for "Gemites" who are looking round for further yarns about Tom Merry & Co., and the rest of the popular crowd at St. Jim's. All GEM readers want more concerning the favourites, and they will be glad enough to know that there is a St. Jim's yarn appearing periodically in the "Schoolboys' Own Library." This is a full book-length story. Another fact it is well to remember is that our bright Companion Paper, the "Popular," gives a Tom Merry complete each week. As the weeks roll by the fame of the St. Jim's chums continues to increase, and they are appreciated more and more, which is quite understandable when you come to think of it, for a finer lot of fellows never existed.

1929!

Come to think of it, we have none of us as yet quite got accustomed to the New Year, though it must be conceded the stranger has acted all right up to now. It takes time for it to settle down. Of course we all have our own special ways of doing a bit of honour to the newcomer. For my part I have planned a host of pleasant surprises for GEM readers during the twelve months, and I hope all chums will keep the keenest look-out for the new features. The GEM has an immense reputation to keep up, and it will do this—and a bit over in the course of the year.

YOUR EDITOR.

## TALBOT'S SACRIFICE!

(Continued from page 23.)

assembled school made Big Hall echo to three thunderous cheers for Talbot.

Raeke and Crooke were the exceptions. And they were very badly bumped afterwards in the Common-room for having failed to cheer Talbot with the rest, so they probably regretted the fact that they had been the exceptions.

A big spread was given in Study No. 10 that afternoon, in honour of Talbot's return, and the study was filled to overflowing. Those who could not squeeze in had to content themselves with staying in the passage and having their tea passed out to them. Study No. 6 attended in full force, and Arthur Augustus tried to make a speech, but was dragged down by Blake and Herries and Dig. And the guest of honour, after Talbot, was Marie Rivers.

Marie had had a long talk with Talbot, and though her eyes had been a little wet at the finish, once again the two were the staunchest of chums. And at tea the faces of both were very bright and happy.

"If only the police would catch Smeaton, everything in the garden would be lovely!" grinned Talbot to Tom Merry during the festivities. "The man's an utter scoundrel, and the sooner he's brought to justice the better."

It was not many days before Talbot's wish was gratified. Smeaton was caught attempting to burgle a house only five miles from St. Jim's, and was later sentenced to a long term of imprisonment. That was a fact that caused great satisfaction to everyone—except, perhaps, Marie Rivers, who was only sorry that the man's professed reformation had been merely a sham.

She did not let herself worry about the man, however. She wanted to forget him.

But there was one thing that Marie Rivers would never forget—and did not wish to forget. That was the great sacrifice for her sake that had been so willingly made by Talbot of the Shell!

THE END.

(Now look out for next week's GEM and another grand long story of Tom Merry & Co., entitled "UP AGAINST IT!" It's the real goods this yarn, chums, so make sure of reading it by ordering your copy WELL IN ADVANCE!)

## DAVID JACK

on the

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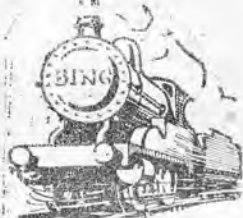
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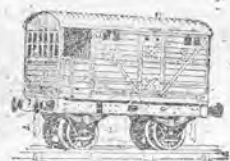
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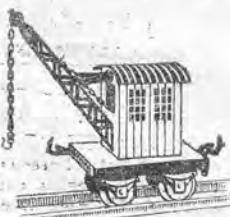
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