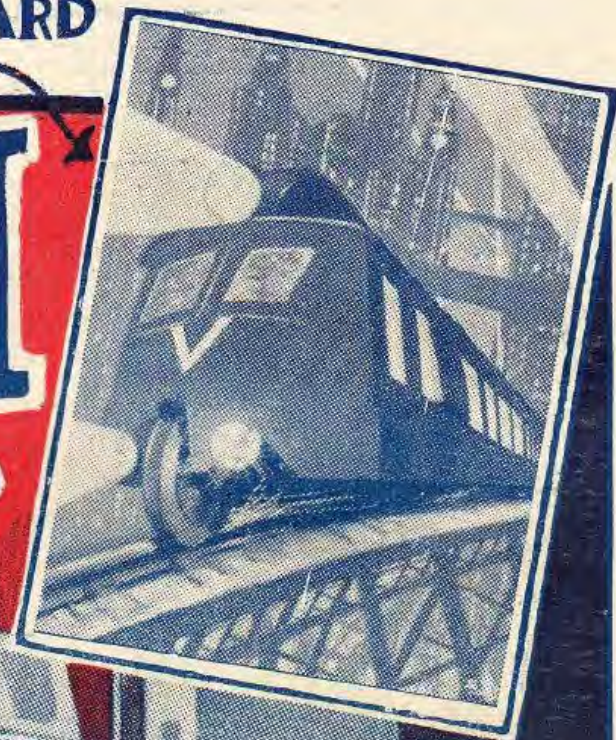


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A THRILLING & DRAMATIC LONG COMPLETE SCHOOL STORY—

The Downfall of



By
**MARTIN
CLIFFORD**

Reginald Talbot, once known as the Toff, prince of cracksmen, but now a junior in the Shell at St. Jim's, is faced with two alternatives. He can remain loyal to the lawbreaker who saved him from prison, or do his duty in the eyes of authority and expose his old associate to the police. Which does he choose?

CHAPTER 1. The Celebration!

"BEASTS!"

Baggy Trimble, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, murmured the exclamation with deep feeling.

The Falstaff of the School House was hovering round the closed door of Study No. 10 in the Shell passage.

From behind the closed door came the rattle of crockery and the sound of cheery voices and laughter.

Prep. was over at St. Jim's, and coming from a junior study at that hour of the evening the sounds were rather unusual.

Fellows were allowed to have supper in their studies if they wished, but they were usually simple affairs—a cup of cocoa, with bread and cheese or biscuits at most. It was evidently not an ordinary supper that was taking place in Study No. 10 now, however.

As a matter of fact, it was a celebration.

Having beaten the New House on the cricket field that afternoon, Tom Merry, the skipper of the Lower School, THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,113.

and his merry men were celebrating the victory in a little supper—the game not having been ended until after the tea interval.

It had been Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's idea to hold the supper, and as he was in a position to supply the greater part of the funds needed the idea had met with remarkable enthusiasm.

Baggy Trimble had also been of the opinion that it was an excellent idea; the only rotten part about it in Baggy's view was that he had not been invited to the supper.

It was not his fault. He had done his very best to remedy the state of affairs the moment he had heard what was in the wind. He had mentioned it to his pal Gussy—not once, but many times and oft. He had also put forward his claims to every other member of the supper party.

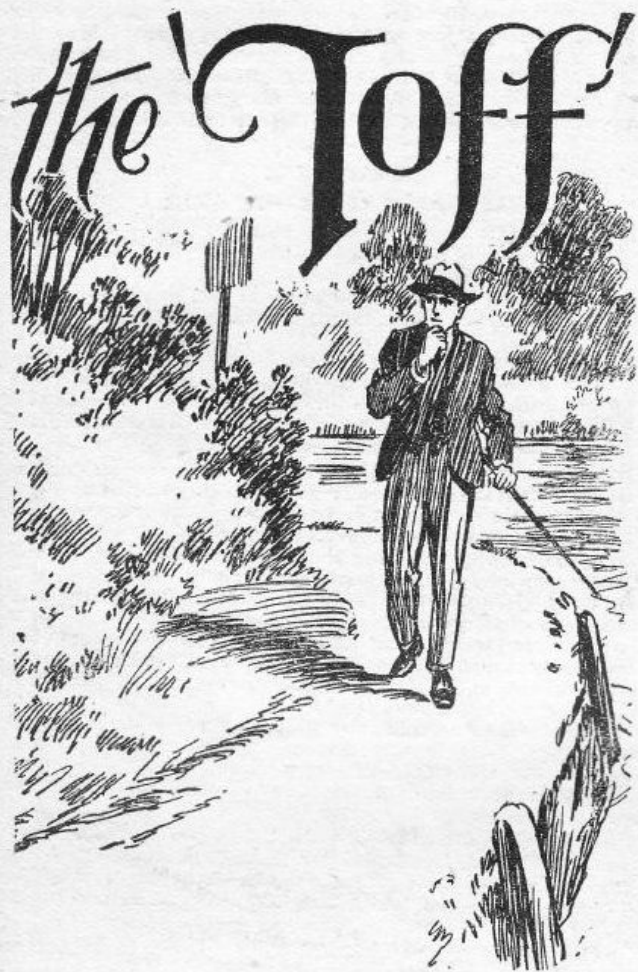
But, so far, though he had collected plenty of kicks and cuffs, he had not succeeded in "bagging" an invite.

Hence his disconsolation.

"Beasts!" he mumbled again. "Mean beasts! Blessed if I don't risk it and slip in! P'raps I shan't be spotted, and can wedge in somewhere!"

It was an extremely forlorn hope. But Baggy was very

—OF TOM MERRY & CO. AND REGINALD TALBOT, OF ST. JIM'S!



hungry, and the delicious odour of frying sausages almost drove him frantic.

He knew also that one of Mrs. Taggles' extra-special rabbit-pies was on the menu, and Baggy was particularly partial to rabbit-pie.

Taking a deep breath he softly opened the door and peeped in. He licked his lips at the sudden waft of mingled odours that greeted him—fried sausages, rabbit-pie, hot buttered toast and coffee.

His eyes fell on the festive board, loaded with good things, and again he licked his lips.

Nobody appeared to have noticed the opening of the door. Baggy pushed it wider. The room was crammed. Those fellows who had been unable to secure a place at the table had made the best of the coal-scuttle, the window-ledge, and anything else that would do duty for a seat.

At the head of the crowded table Tom Merry was standing, his cheery face flushed, his eyes sparkling. In his hand was a glass of ginger-beer, and apparently he was making a speech.

"Gentlemen," he said, "it gives me great—Hallo! Shut that door, someone! Why, if it isn't that fat ass again!"

"Gweat Scott! Weally, Twimble—"

"Outside, Trimble!"

It was a wrathful chorus. Apparently, Trimble's presence was not desired.

"Oh, really, you fellows—" he mumbled.

Herries picked up a loaf from the table.

"Outside, barrel!" he snapped. "You've got three seconds to clear!"

"Oh, really, Herries—"

"One!"

"Look here, you rotter—"

"Two!"

"Herries, you beast—"

"Three!"

Slam!

Whiz!

Only just in time did Baggy Trimble skip through the doorway and slam the door after him. The loaf whizzed from Herries' hand and flew across the spot where the fat Fourth-Former had been standing a split second before.

Amid many chuckles Tom Merry resumed his interrupted speech. Meanwhile, Baggy Trimble rolled away down the Shell passage, snorting with wrath.

Obviously, there was nothing doing in the line of supper for Trimble that evening—not with Tom Merry & Co.'s approval, at all events.

"Beasts!" panted Trimble, limping along the passage. "Beasts! It's jealousy—that's what it is! Oh, the awful beasts!"

Trimble felt quite sick at the injustice of it all. After the splendid manner in which Tom Merry and his merry men had beaten the New House, the least the victorious team could have done would have been to allow him to join in the celebrations.

At the end of the passage Trimble came to a halt and blinked dismally through the landing window. He felt quite tired after that exciting few seconds, and, moreover, even yet he could not tear himself away from the vicinity. The smell of the sausages and that ripping big rabbit-pie still lingered.

"It was one of Mrs. Taggles', too," groaned Trimble. "They're simply ripping! Oh dear! If only I could think of a wheeze that would— Oh!"

Trimble suddenly started. As he blinked dismally out at the quad in the dusk Baggy caught a glimpse of something waving, spidery-like, past the window. The fat Fourth-Former wondered what it was for the moment. Then he grunted as he realised it was a rope—the rope that hung from the school bell. Looking upwards, Baggy could just glimpse the little gabled roof under which the bell hung.

Evidently the rope, which normally was hitched to a hook a few feet above the stone steps in the quad, had become unfastened by the wind.

On those time-worn stone steps old Taggles, the school porter, stood when ringing the rising-bell, and the bell for chapel, meals, and classes. The same steps, rope and bell were used when a fire-alarm was raised.

It was this last thought that came to Baggy now—and with it came a sudden, startling idea.

The very daring, the enormity of it, almost took his breath away. He blinked out at the waving rope, and mentally pictured to himself what would happen if he reached out through the landing window and pulled the rope.

The whole school would be aroused, of course, to instant action. The members of the senior and junior fire brigades would rush to their posts, and the rest of the school, whatever they happened to be doing at the moment, would leave the House in hasty order, and line up in quad for the roll-call.

That was what had happened at the last practice fire-alarm, at all events. Fire-practice was a regular drill at St. Jim's, and every fellow, from the highest to the lowest, knew exactly what to do.

In a few minutes after the alarm was given the two Houses would be empty—or should be empty.

Even the supper-party in Study No. 10 would have to obey the call and instantly make for the quadrangle.

"M-my hat!" breathed Baggy.

There the rope was, swaying outside the window, which was open a foot or more at the bottom and top. He had only to reach out and pull it, and then to dart into hiding. Nobody would know who had done it; nobody would dream that the bell could have been rung by anyone within the House!

"It—it would be an awful lark," murmured Baggy. "But—"

He moved away from the window hurriedly, terrified at the thought of being overcome by the temptation.

But he moved back again—the smell of frying sausages and hot rabbit-pie still lingered tantalisingly in his nostrils. Somehow that waving rope seemed to have an irresistible attraction for him also.

He stepped back to the window and blinked again at the rope, idly waving in the breeze. Then he looked quickly up and down, like Moses of old.

Not a soul was about. From Study No. 10 came faint sounds of voices and laughter.

With desperate resolution Baggy Trimble shoved an arm through the window and grasped the rope.

Then he took a deep, deep breath and pulled—once, twice! Clang, clang!

On the still evening air the bell rang out with terrific clearness; indeed, the sudden clanging almost made the fat junior jump out of his skin.

Clang, clang!

"Oh, dear!" he gasped.

He had done it—Baggy almost fainted as he realised it. For a single instant he stood in stupefied inaction, and then, while the clanging of the bell still echoed round the moonlit quadrangle, he regained his wits and looked about wildly for a hiding-place.

Save for the fellows in Study No. 10 most of the juniors

would be in the Common-room downstairs. Yet it was risky to rush into any of the studies in case they were occupied.

Sheer terror made Baggy's brain work quickly, however, and the next moment he was running on tip-toe along a narrow, dark passage at the end of the Shell corridor.

It led to a single door, and, tearing this open, Baggy dashed in, pulling the door shut after him.

He was now in Nobody's Study—a room used as a punishment room, and thus rarely visited by anyone.

He could scarcely have thought of a better hiding-place. But he was taking no chances; and, having closed the door, he dived under the bed, and lay there trembling, his heart palpitating against his fat ribs as the full realisation of what he had done came to him.

If he were caught—if it were proved that he had given the false alarm, then Nobody's Study was likely to be his sleeping-place for that night, before being expelled from St. Jim's on the morrow.

"Oh dear!" groaned Baggy. "I—I wish I hadn't done it."

He wondered how he could ever have had the nerve to do such an utterly reckless and daring thing.

But he had done it.

Trembling with terror, Baggy Trimble lay under the bed, listening to the vague, confused sounds from outside.

Doors were opening, voices were shouting, and the thump and clatter of distant feet along the Shell passage seemed never-ending. Above the clamour he could hear Kildare bellowing orders, and he also heard Tom Merry's voice once or twice, Tom being captain of the junior fire-brigade.

But the sounds ceased at last. They grew fainter, and at last silence reigned. Actually the clamour had not lasted many minutes, but it seemed like an eternity to the terrified schemer.

When all was silent, Baggy Trimble crept from under the bed, and, stepping to the door, he opened it and listened, his fat face quite white with fear.

Not a soul was to be seen. But from the direction of the quad he could hear the sound of rushing wheels on gravel and a distant sound of shouting.

He was alone in the House!

The very thought gave the fat junior courage, and he began to breathe more easily.

After all, he was safe enough. Who would dream that he had dared to do it, anyway? He had only got to rush to Study No. 10, fill a cushion cover or something with grub, and then hide it in his own study, to devour the spoils at his leisure.

Really, it was quite simple and safe.

None the less, it took all Baggy's courage to leave his hiding-place, and he was still trembling as he scuttled along to Study No. 10.

But the sight of the good things on the table there soon made him forget his fears.

"He, he, he!" he sniggered. "Thought they'd got rid of me, did they, the mean beasts. I'll show 'em!"

And, tearing a cover off one of the cushions, he got busy.

It was hardly feasible to take any of the rabbit-pie, and regretfully Baggy let it alone, and gave his attention to things easy to handle. Two out of four large meat-pies went into the cover, and half a dozen sausage-rolls joined them. A dish of chocolate biscuits then were shovelled into the cover, followed by a handful of cheese biscuits and a couple of bottles of ginger-beer. Finally, Baggy wrapped some hot sausages in exercise-paper and added these to the conglomeration in the cushion cover.

Baggy thought it time to go then, and he went, listening cautiously at the door before venturing forth.

But, though the uproar outside seemed to be increasing, no sound from within the House reached his ears.

"Oh, good!" grinned Baggy. "Easy as falling off a form. Here goes!"

And Baggy flew along to his own study in the Fourth Form passage, and shoved his bundle of raided grub under the couch, well out of sight. Then he left the room. Baggy was a very crafty youth, and he realised only too well that if he was missing from the Fourth roll-call it might look suspicious. In any case, it would only bring alarmed masters, or members of the fire brigade, searching for him.

So Baggy hastily closed the door of Study No. 2 and scudded towards the stairs.

Near the top he almost collided with Eric Kildare, who was just rushing up three stairs at a time.

"Oh, here you are, you fat little idiot!" bellowed Kildare, looking angry as well as bewildered. "Get out into the quad. Look lively, you young fool! Didn't you hear the fire-bell?"

"I say, Kildare—"

"Get outside, and don't stop to gas!" roared the captain of St. Jim's wrathfully. "Here, perhaps this'll help you!"

And he grasped Baggy by the collar, ran him along a yard or so, and then he planted a hefty boot behind him.

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"Yooooooo!" roared Baggy.

Baggy lost no time in hastening his going then; he fairly flew down the stairs. He did not want any more help from Kildare. And a few seconds later Baggy was taking his place in the ranks of the Fourth Form in the quadrangle. But there was a fat grin on his features now. He was safe enough, and in Study No. 2 was his supper, awaiting the time when he should be able to devour it at his leisure.

CHAPTER 2.

The Mystery of the Fire Alarm!

"HALLO! Here's Trimble now!"

"Here's the fat ass!"

"Oh, good!"

Many of the fellows out in the darkening quad were quite relieved when Baggy Trimble made his appearance.

At first, as the fellows swarmed out into the quad in response to the clang of the fire-bell, there had been a great deal of confusion. But gradually order was restored, and the Forms excepting members of the Senior and Junior Fire-brigades—lined up for the roll-call.

By that time quite a lot of the excitement and alarm had subsided, especially as nobody had seen any smoke or signs of the fire. So it couldn't be very serious, as yet.

Really, it was a very surprising state of affairs altogether. Nobody knew who had rung the alarm, and nobody seemed to have seen any fire, or knew anyone who had.

In such circumstances, a great deal of the alarm and excitement died down. None the less, the authorities were obviously not taking any chances. Lights flashed at the school fire-stations, and both the Senior and Junior Brigades were working at lightning speed, getting all in readiness for the fire—when it was found.

It was during the confusion that someone had called out that Baggy Trimble was missing, and Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth, became very alarmed.

But now, here he was, as large as life and twice as cheerful, apparently.

"Ah! I am very relieved indeed that you have arrived, Trimble," said Mr. Lathom. "Why did you not answer the alarm? You are well aware what is expected of you?"

"I—I— The fact is, sir, I didn't hear the bell. Did it ring, sir?"

"Then you must certainly be deaf, my boy," said Mr. Lathom tartly. "Every other boy heard it."

"I was too engrossed in my studies, sir," said Trimble. "I just happened to be stuck with a rather stiff passage with my construe, and for the moment I suppose I must have been oblivious to everything else."

"Oh, my hat!"

"What a whopper, even for Trimble!"

There was a chorus of chuckles in the dusky quad.

But before Mr. Lathom could reply to Baggy's statement, Mr. Railton came rustling up. The Housemaster was breathing hard, and he looked very perplexed and grim.

"Are all your boys here, Mr. Lathom?" he asked.

"Yes—with the exception of the members of the brigade, of course."

"Very good. You have asked your Form if they have any knowledge as to who rang the bell and gave the alarm?"

"I have already done that!" assented Mr. Lathom, overlooking the fact that he had not yet asked Baggy Trimble the question. "No boy in my Form appears to have any knowledge of it."

"It is most mysterious!" said Mr. Railton. "The whole House has now been searched thoroughly, and I understand the New House has also—with no result; there is no sign of smoke or fire. It would almost seem as if it is a hoax—a rascally and wicked false alarm!"

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Mr. Lathom.

"We must take no chances, however," resumed Mr. Railton grimly. "And Dr. Holmes orders every junior boy to remain in the quadrangle until another search has been made and all doubts set at rest."

With that Mr. Railton hurried away to deliver the same message to other Forms.

Meanwhile, the two fire brigades were all in readiness—the Junior Brigade, under Tom Merry, being but a few seconds behind the seniors.

The juniors discussed the amazing affair while they stood by for orders. It seemed very strange indeed that no signs of the fire were forthcoming. Lights had been left burning all over the School House and New House, but in other unoccupied rooms and in the servants' quarters they could see lights flashing about as the searchers hunted for the fire.

With every moment that went by their excitement grew less.

"Looks to me like a giddy hoax!" said Tom Merry, at last. "Well, did you ever? I didn't think there was a

fellow in the school with nerve enough to play such a trick. But—Hullo, here's somebody!"

It proved to be Kildare; and Kildare's face was grim indeed.

"You can house your manual and put your stuff away, kids!" he snapped. "You'd better hold yourselves in readiness if another alarm is raised; but for the present you can clear up and get indoors."

"Then it's a hoax."

"There's no sign of a fire about the place," said Kildare. "It looks like a false alarm, and the giddy joker's booked for trouble if he's caught, I might tell you. But never mind that now. Just shove your traps away and get indoors—sharp!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

"Right-ho, Kildare!"

With exclamations of disgust and wrath, the Junior Fire Brigade housed the old manual and put their tackle away.

whose face was red with wrath. "I spotted it the moment I got in. Looks to me as if those New House worms—"

"Phew!" said Lowther, with a whistle. "Well, there's something in that. Somebody rang the fire bell. Well, supposing it was a dodge of those New House fellows to get us out of here so—"

"Rubbish!" said Tom Merry. "Why, Figgy and Kerr and Reddy were among the first at the fire station, and they were under my eyes all the time. It couldn't have been them."

"Wathah not!"

"What about Trimble?" asked Manners.

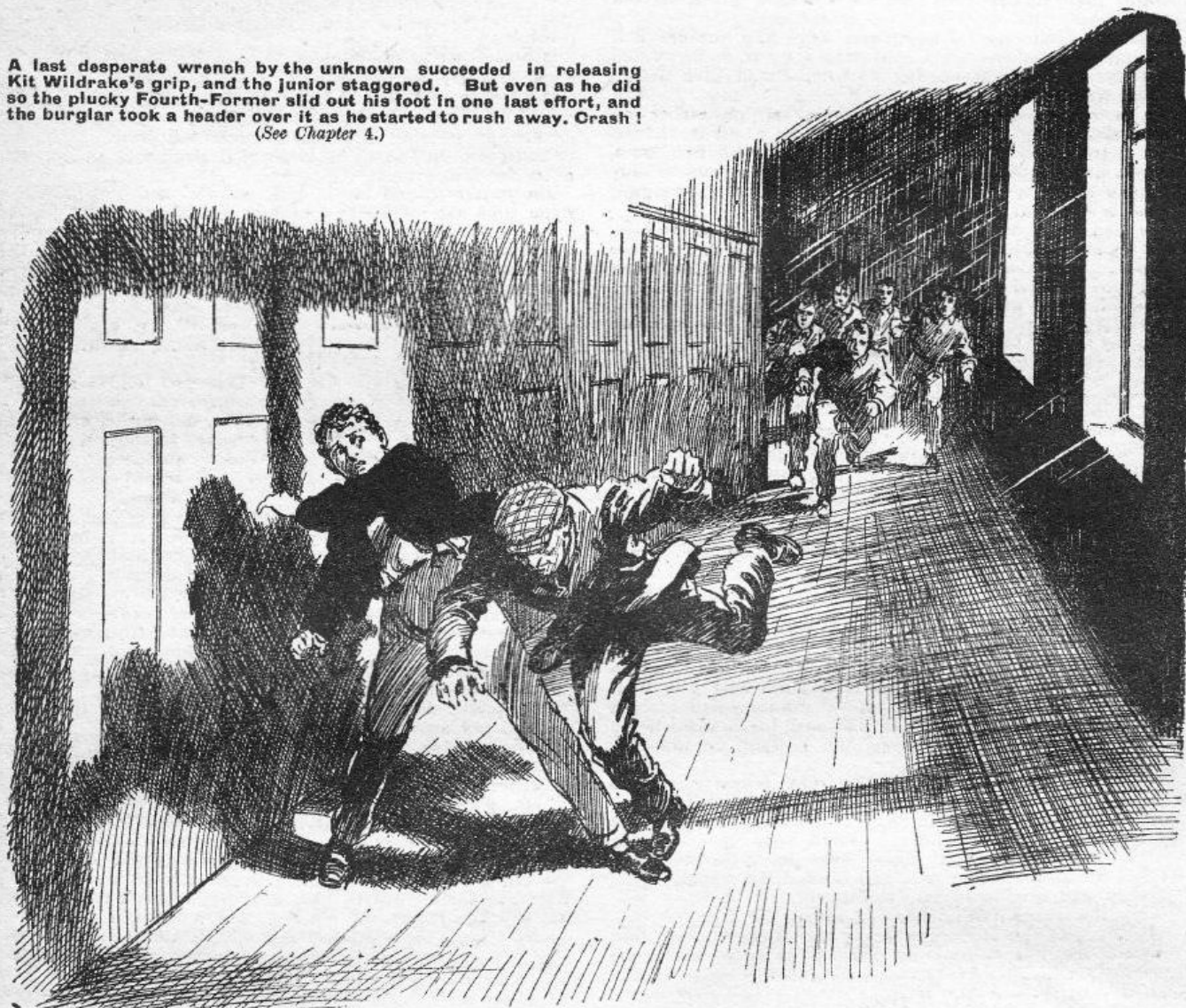
"Oh!"

There was a buzz at that.

"That's the most likely chap," said Kangaroo excitedly. "My hat! The fat little rotter was missing, and didn't turn up until some minutes after the alarm. Kildare had to go after him, I believe."

A last desperate wrench by the unknown succeeded in releasing Kit Wildrake's grip, and the junior staggered. But even as he did so the plucky Fourth-Former slid out his foot in one last effort, and the burglar took a header over it as he started to rush away. Crash!

(See Chapter 4.)



Then they streamed indoors, being the last of the juniors to do so.

"Well, my hat!" gasped Tom Merry. "What a sell! I'd like to get my hands on the funny merchant who rang the bell, anyway."

"Yaas, wathah. It is weally most mystewious, deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head. "How-evah, we had bettah weturn to the feed—though I weally must wash my hands first."

Most of the juniors required a wash, and after a visit to the bath-rooms, Tom Merry and his fellow fire-fighters, who were also members of the supper-party, hurried along to Study No. 10. They found some of the cricketers already there.

"Oh, here you are!" said Noble, as they hurried in. "I say, have any of you chaps been at the grub since we rushed out?"

"Eh? Of course not," said Tom, staring. "Why—"

"Only some of the grub's disappeared," grinned Noble. "Look at the table! Herries says he's cooked at least twenty sosses, and I know there were four big meat pies."

"Somebody's raided the table right enough," said Herries,

"Bai Jove!"

"But that fat ass wouldn't have the nerve to do such a thing!" exclaimed Tom Merry incredulously. "Besides, if he was the last to go into the quad it rather proves it wasn't him. I don't see how he could have rung the bell and slipped indoors again. In any case, I'm blessed if I can imagine any fellow taking such a terrific risk just for a bit of grub."

"Excepting Trimble!" chuckled Lowther. "Trimble would sell his giddy soul for grub if he was hungry."

"Well, it's queer!" said Tom. "Still, it's too late now if it was Trimble—the fat rotter must have wolfed the stuff long ago."

"We'd never get the truth out of him, anyway!" snorted Herries. "And these sosses are getting cold, and so's the rabbit-pie. I've already warmed up the coffee again, and I'm going to pile in, and blow Trimble."

"Yaas, wathah! Let Twimble wip, deah boys! After all, there is plenty of gwub left to go wound, and the sosses are gettin' cold. Pile in, deah boys!"

And the dear boys piled in, dismissing Baggy Trimble

from their minds. Trimble could wait, in any case; but the sausages and rabbit-pie couldn't. So the feast of celebration proceeded, nor was it interrupted again that evening by the ringing of the fire-bell. With appetites sharpened anew by the fresh air of the quad and excitement, the cricketers commenced their attack in a style that could hardly have been improved upon by Baggy Trimble himself.

CHAPTER 3.

Wildrake is Curious!

"WILDRAKE, old fellow!"

"At it again?" said Wildrake. "If you interrupt me again, you fat mugwump, I'll buzz this cushion at you."

"Oh, dear!"

Baggy Trimble lapsed into silence.

Percy Mellish, the third member of Study No. 2, gave a deep chuckle, and eyed Baggy Trimble curiously.

Fully half an hour had passed since the juniors had been ordered indoors again. During that time it seemed to Percy Mellish that his fat study-mate had been acting rather strangely.

As a matter of fact, Trimble had struck rather an unexpected snag in his scheme. Up to a point it had been a tremendous success. His daring wheeze had come off; all had happened just as he had expected, and nobody dreamed of suspecting him in connection with the ringing of the bell—so far as he knew, at all events.

He had been one of the first to rush indoors, and he had made straight for Study No. 2, eager to get to his plunder. Like the cricketers, Baggy's appetite had been sharpened by excitement and the open air of the quad.

Indeed, he was almost famished—fairly fainting from the lack of food, in fact. He had rushed indoors, eager to get to work on the good things reposing in the cushion-cover under the couch in the study.

It was then that Baggy struck the snag.

As in the case of the unfortunate Mother Hubbard, somebody had got there first. And that somebody was Kit Wildrake.

When the alarm had been raised Kit Wildrake had been in the middle of an exciting book, and the Canadian junior had been deeply exasperated at having to leave it. So he had been nearly as anxious to reach Study No. 2 as was his study-mate, Baggy Trimble. And he had arrived there first—Baggy having been detained for a moment or two to listen to a lecture from Mr. Lathom on ignoring the fire-alarm.

When Baggy arrived, Wildrake was reposing on the study couch with his nose glued to the pages of his book.

It was quite a shock to Baggy. To have dragged out the grub in front of Wildrake would have been inviting trouble and disaster. It might even lead to his being bowled out as the fellow who had hoaxed the school.

Baggy had shuddered at the thought.

None the less, Kit Wildrake had to be shifted somehow.

Having got his fat wits to work, Baggy then told Wildrake he was wanted by Blake. Wildrake had gone innocently enough. As he went out of the study, Percy Mellish had walked in.

Baggy was stumped again. And when Wildrake came in a minute later, seething with wrath, Baggy got a stumping of another kind.

But Baggy had made several attempts to get both Wildrake and Mellish out since then—all to no purpose.

Naturally, both Wildrake and Mellish were very suspicious, and Trimble, desperate as he was, realised that he would have to wait until bedtime, which, fortunately, was not far off now.

The temptation to let his eyes stray to the couch was almost irresistible; but Mellish kept a close watch on him, very curious indeed now.

At last there sounded the tramp of feet in the passage, and Kildare put his head inside the study.

"Bed-time, kids—get a move on!"

He vanished, and Mellish lounged out, grinning at Baggy.

"I—I say, Kit, old fellow," said Baggy, "it's bed-time. Hadn't you better go, old man?"

"Shurrup!" snapped Wildrake. "I've nearly finished."

He read on. Evidently the book was an exciting one. But he closed it at last with a slam and a sigh.

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"Jolly good!" he said. "Now to bye-byes, Baggy!"

"Y-yes, old fellow! I—I'll be along in a minute, old chap!"

"You're coming now!" said Wildrake, with a chuckle. "I'm supposed to be head of this study, and I shall get jawed by Kildare if you lag behind, old bean. I guess you'll go, Baggy."

"Oh, I say—Yarooogh! All right; I'll come. Oh, you beast!"

Wildrake rushed him out of the study, a strong grasp on his collar. Baggy protested wrathfully; but in vain. He was only released when the dormitory was reached. Even then he tried to slip out again, but Wildrake hauled him back.

"What is the fat ass up to?" demanded Blake.

"Goodness knows!" grinned Wildrake. "But the galoot's been trying to get Mellish and me out of the giddy study all evening. Now he wants to toddle back."

"It's my belief it was Baggy who rang the fire-bell," said Digby. "P'r'aps he wants to ring it again."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The thought of the biggest funk in the Fourth daring to play such a risky prank made the fellows roar.

But Baggy did not join in the laugh. He saw that he would have to wait until the fellows were asleep before a chance of slipping downstairs presented itself. In his present famished state he knew that sleep was an impossibility for him.

He undressed and lay in bed, wakeful and hopeful. For some time after Kildare had seen lights out he lay there, listening, with almost feverish impatience, to the dormitory discussion of the events of the evening. It seemed to the fat Fourth-Former that the fellows would never go to sleep. But silence reigned at last, save for soft breathing from various beds.

Then Baggy sat up, and blinked round the dark dormitory.

"You—you fellows asleep?" he whispered.

"Yes, old nut—I am," said Wildrake, sitting up in bed.

"Want anything, Baggy? I've got a slipper here!"

"Yah! Beast!"

Wildrake chuckled and lay down again. As a matter of fact, the Canadian junior was finding it difficult to get to sleep after the exciting book he had read, and Baggy's call had rather startled him. But now it brought his suspicions up afresh. What was Baggy's game? He decided not to answer if his fat study-mate asked again.

Baggy did ask again ten minutes later, and this time Kit did not answer.

"You fellows asleep?" asked Trimble again. "You asleep, Wildrake?"

Silence!

"Oh, good!" murmured Baggy Trimble. "Thank goodness the beast is asleep at last! Here goes!"

And, rolling out of bed, Baggy pulled on his trousers over his pyjamas. Then he donned a jacket, and stole from the room. And as the door closed softly behind him Kit Wildrake leaped out of bed, hurriedly shoved on his own trousers and jacket and slippers, and went after him.

"Now we'll see what the galoot is up to," he murmured.

CHAPTER 4.

Another Alarm!

"BEAST!"

Trimble was referring to Kit Wildrake.

But for the Canadian youth such a nocturnal prow would never have been necessary. But for Wildrake, Trimble would not have suffered such agonies of hunger as he had done that evening.

Trimble was not a brave youth, and the thought of roaming the House at that hour was not a pleasant one at all. Moreover, having to leave his warm bed had not appealed to him in the slightest.

"The awful beast!" mumbled Baggy, making his way cautiously along the passage. "Oh dear! This is rotten!"

More than once Baggy stopped, and half made up his mind to turn back and go to bed. The deep silence and the ghostly moonlight from the landing windows filled him with dread.

"Oh dear!" gasped Baggy. "Wha-what was that?"

He had heard a faint sound from the regions below—cr he fancied he had.

At the head of the stairs he stood, his heart palpitating.

The stairs themselves were in deep darkness save for the

landing half way down. Here a shaft of moonlight from the window made a dim, vague patch. Below that was deep blackness—and silence now.

But he heard nothing more, and, after halting a moment or two began to ascend the stairs. His hunger urged him on—the cushion-cover of good things beneath the couch in Study No. 2 acted like an irresistible magnet.

He reached the next floor at last—the floor on which were the junior studies, silent and empty now. Baggy could not help a faint grin as he thought of Wildrake. Well, he had done that interfering little beast, after all.

Little dreaming that the "beast" in question was not so very far behind him, Baggy rolled on, feeling his way where the dark was more intense.

He halted suddenly, a startled, half-stifled gasp escaping him.

Something—a vaguely-seen form—had moved ahead of him at the end of the passage.

A faint sound reached his ears. There was no doubt about it! Someone or something was moving about in the darkness ahead of him—cautiously and stealthily.

Baggy's heart beat fast against his fat ribs.

Then suddenly, abruptly, a light flashed ahead—the brief flash of an electric torch instantly switched off again.

Silence and darkness followed—a stillness that made the terrified junior feel like shrieking aloud.

Though he could see nothing he had a horrible feeling that someone was creeping towards him; he heard another creak, alarmingly near this time.

Baggy's hair began to rise, his tongue and mouth were dry and stiff. And then—

"Yarooooogh!"

Baggy did shriek aloud—a shriek that fairly rang through the silent school.

For suddenly two forms loomed before him—vaguely-seen figures. They stumbled into him, and then the fat junior felt himself grasped in a fierce, strong grip.

Next moment he was struggling desperately, and a heavy hand was clapped over his mouth, stifling his frantic yells to a gurgle.

"Only a kid!" he heard a man's low growl. "By hokey, we're done, Jim! Thunder! Stop 'is—"

That was all Baggy heard, for just then another startling thing happened: but this time it came as a pleasant shock to Trimble.

There was the rush of feet along the dark passage, and then he heard Wildrake's welcome voice.

"Hold on, Trimble! I'm coming! Help, help!"

With a wild yell for aid, Kit Wildrake flung himself forward, and grappled with the dark figure holding Baggy.

"Thunder!"

A startled exclamation rang out, followed by low-muttered oaths, and one of the men turned to deal with the newcomer.

But he found the strong young Canadian a much stiffer proposition than Baggy Trimble, and, releasing Trimble, the second scoundrel went to his aid.

Trimble instantly bolted for his life, yelling at the top of his voice:

"Help! Police! Fire! Burglars! Help!"

What followed, Kit Wildrake, least of all, had any clear idea.

For several frantic minutes he fought on desperately, clinging on with might and main to the man he had attacked, despite a constant rain of furious blows from both men. But the darkness hampered the men more than it did him, and soon Trimble's wild yells gained their object.

Lights flashed up the stairs, doors were heard opening and closing, and a medley of questioning voices sounded. As footsteps sounded on the stairs one of the men gave vent to a furious oath, and vanished into the darkness. The other man redoubled his effort to tear himself free from the plucky Wildrake.

But Kit set his teeth and held on, though his brain reeled and he was almost fainting.

"Hold on! Coming!"

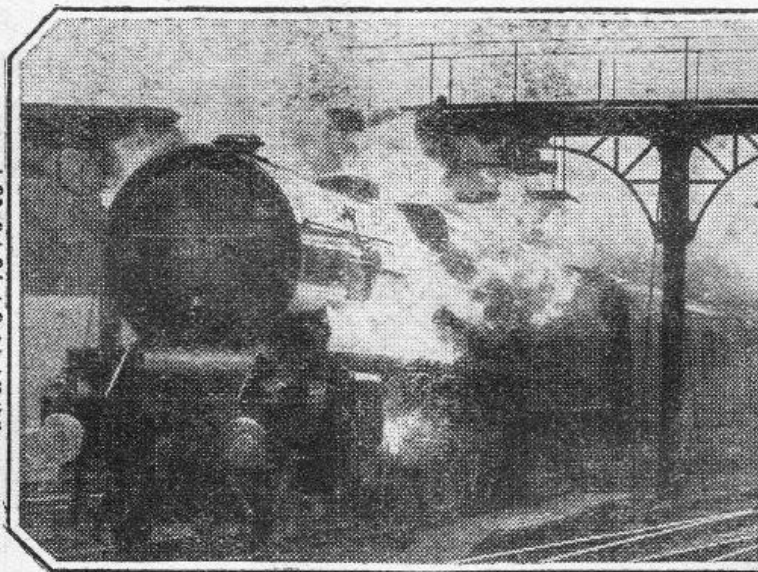
It was Tom Merry's voice, and then there was a shout from Kildare:

"Where are you? Coming?"

(Continued on next page.)

HERE'S THE NEXT OF OUR POPULAR RAILWAY ARTICLES!

Express engines of the "Royal Scot" class, on the L.M.S. Railway, are named after famous regiments of the British Army. The history of Locomotive No. 6108 is the subject of this week's article.



Regimental
**ROYAL
SCOTS**

THIS week we will deal with Locomotive 6108 of the "Royal Scot" class. As you will see from her name plate and crest, she bears the sobriquet of "Seaforth Highlander," after the famous British regiment, otherwise known as the Duke of Albany's Ross-shire Buffs.

The Buffs belong to the 72nd and 78th Foot. The former were raised in 1778, and fought first in India at Seringapatam and Pondicherry, then in South Africa and the Crimea, before returning to India under Lord Roberts.

The 2nd Battalion was raised in 1793, served in India and Persia, and was with Havelock on his march to relieve Cawnpore and Lucknow.

The Seaforth Highlander regiment has three mottoes, all of which are directly and indirectly applicable to the monster locomotive which covers the 400 miles

from London to Edinburgh, without intermediate stops, in a matter of eight hours. These mottoes are as follows:

Firstly—"Cuidich'n Righ"—meaning "Help to the King."

Secondly—"Caber Feidh"—meaning "Antlers of the Deer."

Thirdly—"Tulloch Ard"—meaning "The High Hill," the slogan of the Kintail.

Locomotive 6108 of the "Royal Scot" class is a real "Help to the King," on those occasions when she draws the Royal train.

Look at the second motto!

Antlers make us think of something high, and deer is the symbol of speed. Thus we get, "High Speed," and few locomotives are more powerful or more capable of upholding such a motto than the "Seaforth Highlander."

And now for the last motto!

There is more than one high hill on the

route between London and Edinburgh, including the ten-mile climb from Beattock to Beattock Summit. Before the advent of the "Royal Scot" class of locomotive, it was customary for all heavy express trains to have an assisting engine for this long gradient. The high power of the new type of locomotive, however, has made this unnecessary. And what engine but one of the "Royal Scot" class could daily pull her 400 tons up the steep pass of Shap Fell, without faltering?

Don't you reckon Locomotive 6108, called "Seaforth Highlander," is just the engine to be named after this famous British regiment?

Readers' voices in unison: "Hear, hear! (There will be another interesting railway article in next week's GEM.)"

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A sudden desperate wrench by the unknown succeeded in releasing Kit Wildrake's grip, and the man gasped and sent the boy staggering. But even as he did so the plucky Fourth-Former slid out his foot in one last effort, and the burglar took a header over it as he started to rush away. Crash!

What happened next Kit did not see, but he could guess from the confused sounds that followed. Then sounded two more crashes as other forms came rushing up and stumbled over the prostrate man.

It was Tom Merry and Talbot.

They were followed instantly by Kildare and a little crowd of seniors and juniors, and the result was confusion and chaos.

In the dark passage nobody could see what was happening. Both Tom and Talbot had grasped the man instantly, but they obstructed each other, and soon lost their grasp in the mad struggle that followed.

It was a case of too many cooks spoiling the broth.

But a light flashed on the scene at last. It showed Mr. Railton, in a dressing-gown and with an alarmed look on his face standing at the electric-light switch. Leaning against the wall, half fainting, was Wildrake. On the floor, looking dishevelled and dazed, were Tom Merry and Talbot, surrounded by Kildare and the bewildered crowd in various attitudes.

No stranger was to be seen, however—the unknown had vanished.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Tom Merry. "Gone!"

"Bless my soul. Boys—What—"

"Quick!" panted Wildrake urgently. "After them—through the window there."

Half fainting as he was, Kit Wildrake had spotted the open window at the end of the passage.

"What—Who—" began the Housemaster.

But Kildare did not stay to ask questions. He was through the window in a flash, with Darrell of the Sixth a good second.

Tom Merry, Talbot, Blake, and Lowther followed with a rush.

"Stop! Merry—boys, come back!" shouted Mr. Railton, in alarm. "Come back!"

But for once Tom Merry and his chums did not obey.

The excitement of the chase was upon them, and the Housemaster's commands fell on deaf ears.

The burglars—if burglars they were—had gone that way, and what others could do they could.

The juniors guessed that the unknown had climbed up by the ivy, and, though it was a dangerous climb, neither they nor the seniors hesitated.

Kildare and Darrell were already in the quad, and without hesitation Tom Merry and his chums followed, getting grip of the old ivy-roots where they could, and dropping down hand over hand.

"There he goes."

Kildare was calling at the top of his voice—evidently he had spotted one of the men.

In the quad Tom and his chums halted, breathless. The moon was obscured by a cloud, and it was pitch dark at the moment. Kildare and Darrell had vanished, and after that shout no other sound came.

"Stumped!" gasped Tom Merry. "Oh, blow! Better make a dive for the school wall, I think. Come, hold on!"

There was sudden excitement in Tom's voice.

From somewhere came the sound of a window cautiously raised, and as Tom looked round swiftly he caught his breath.

A figure was climbing out from a window—the dark form of a man. It was the window of a junior study, and even as Tom Merry and his chums stared upwards, they saw the figure come swishing and rustling down the ivy, hand over hand.

In a second or two he had landed on the flower-beds beneath the window.

Only then did the juniors become galvanised into action.

"After him!" gasped Tom.

Obviously it was one of the burglars, and obviously he had not gone by the landing window as had his companion. He had taken refuge in one of the studies, and now he was making a desperate bid to get clear.

He had not seen the little group of juniors, and after a moment's hesitation darted towards them, and almost ran into their arms.

In a flash Tom Merry, backed up instantly by Talbot, Blake, and Lowther, had hurled himself upon the fellow.

He gave a startled oath, and next moment went crashing down in their grasp.

Over and over they rolled, the man fighting furiously.

He was slippery as an eel, and once again the juniors hampered each other. Almost before they realised it the man was on his feet again. He sent Talbot reeling away

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with a vicious blow, and then he was off, fleeing like the wind.

Without a word the juniors went after him. They were doggedly determined not to let him escape again. He vanished round the corner into the Close, and the juniors pelted after him.

Then they lost him, but as they stood in disgusted indecision, the moon suddenly came from behind the cloud, and by its light Tom glimpsed a figure just vanishing round by the chapel.

"Got him!" he gasped. "He's gone behind the chapel! We've got him! Quick!"

"Yes, rather!"

The juniors raced across the Close, and round behind the chapel. If the man had gone that way he was trapped—if they were quick. It was a blind alley—a narrow opening, with the wall of the chapel on one side and a high wall at the other side and the end.

Evidently the man had soon discovered his error, for as the pursuers dashed into the alley they blundered full into him.

"On him, you chaps!"

A savage cry, and the next moment the four juniors were mixed up in a whirling struggle. But they could see better now, and this time numbers told. There was a brief, furious struggle, and then they pinned the man down and held him fast.

"No escape this time, my friend!" panted Tom Merry. "Here, don't let go yet, Talbot, you ass!"

Talbot did not reply; for some reason or other he had given a low gasp and released his grip of the man. But as Tom spoke he grasped him again.

"Got you!" said Tom Merry. "Hallo! There's Kildare shouting again. Oh, good!"

From somewhere in the distance Kildare was shouting—shouting for aid. And Tom gave a sudden, swift decision.

"Into the woodshed with him, chaps!" he snapped. "He'll be safe enough in there with the bar across."

"Good wheeze!"

The juniors dragged the still struggling man to his feet and hustled him towards the woodshed which stood at the end of the narrow passage against the wall. They had little difficulty, however, for the man seemed to have lost his energy and fury now. Tom dragged the bar from across the double doors, and the man scarcely resisted as they flung him inside and slammed the doors.

Tom dropped the bar into position and made it secure.

"Safe enough now!" he snapped. "Now for Kildare!"

"Hold on, Tom Merry!"

It was Talbot who called him back; his voice sounded curiously strained and hoarse.

"Hold on! We'd better leave someone on guard, Tom! Shall I stay?"

"What rot! The fellow could never get out. Come on!" called Tom impatiently.

"Yes, come on, Talbot!"

Tom Merry dashed away full-tilt, and after him went Blake and Lowther.

Talbot followed for some yards; but his eyes were gleaming curiously, and he gradually dropped behind. Suddenly he stopped.

For an instant he stood and watched his chums pelting away into the darkness, and then he turned on his heels and raced back into the woodshed in the shadow of the chapel. His face was white as a sheet, and he approached the double doors.

He listened a moment, and then he called out, his voice husky and trembling.

"That you, Jim Crow?"

From within came a sudden, startled gasp.

"Thunder! I was right, then—I knowed I was! It's the Toff! I spotted you at once, and couldn't believe my eyes—the Toff! Thunder!"

"Listen!" called Talbot. "I'm going to open the doors, Jim Crow. But don't rush out; you'll run into someone if you do. I'll see you clear. Understand?"

"Yes. By hokey. The Toff here! Thunder!"

Evidently the man could not get over the shock of recognising Reginald Talbot.

Talbot lifted out the bar quietly, almost calmly, though his heart was beating near to suffocation. And then the man came out as the doors swung open.

CHAPTER 5.

An Echo from the Past!

JIM CROW stepped out stealthily, keeping well in the shadows of the shed, his sharp eyes glittering in the darkness. But, dark as it was, his features were visible and clear to Reginald Talbot.

It was a sharp, thin face, keen and crafty. The eyes were hard and bright. But there was a humorous twist about the

thin lips that redeemed its hardness, and on the whole the face was not an evil one.

He gave the junior one swift glance up and down, and grinned.

Talbot was shaking.

"You here, Jim Crow?" he panted. "I knew your face; I'm not likely to forget it. What—"

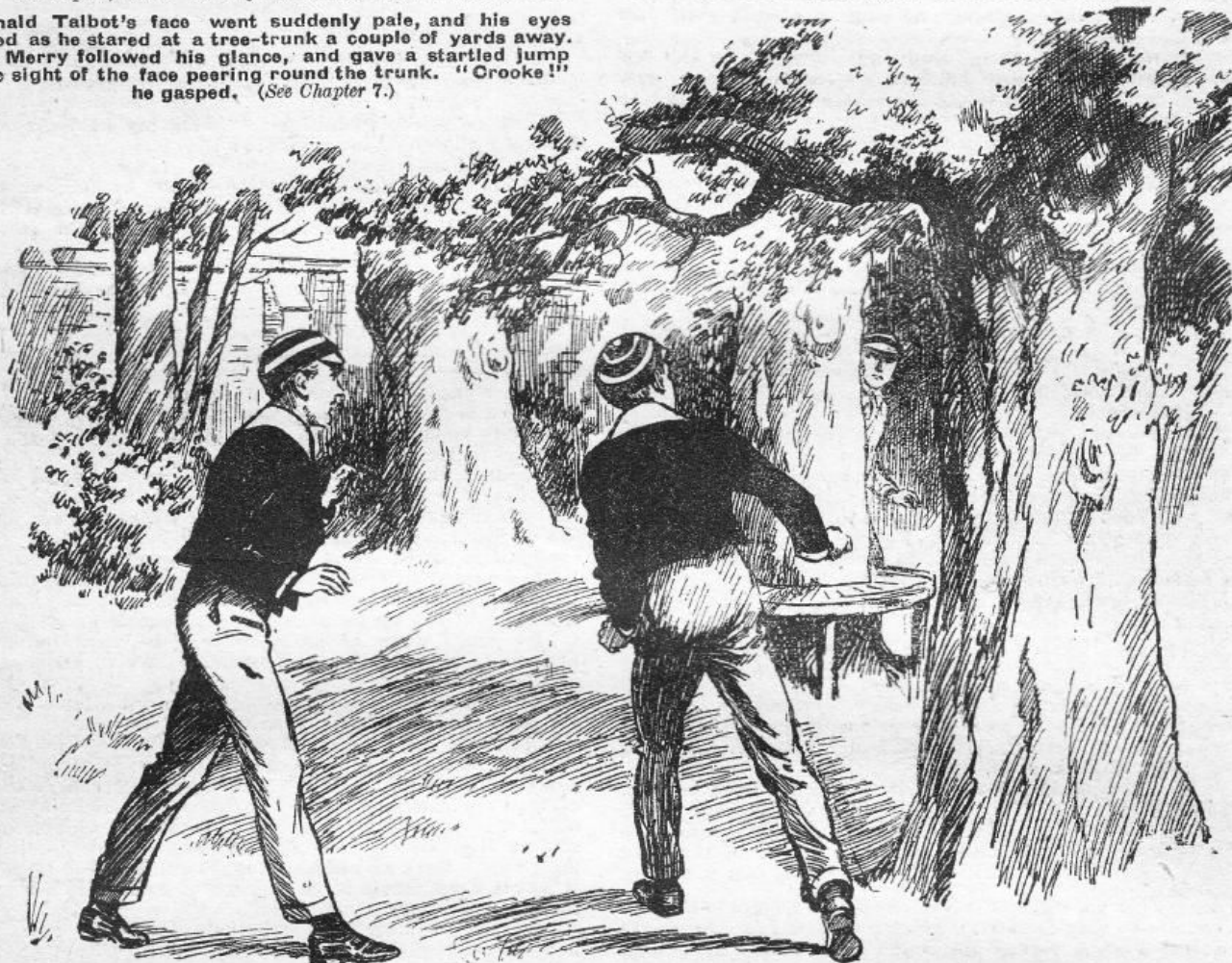
"I reckon you ain't so surprised as I was at seeing you, Toff," returned the man coolly, though his eyes were shooting to right and left as he spoke. "I reckon I got the shock of my durned life! I knew as you'd—"

"Never mind that now, Jim!" snapped Talbot, gripping his arm fiercely. "This way—quick! At any moment my friends may return, and I cannot help you then. Quick!"

Keeping in the shadows, they hurried round by the chapel, and Talbot led him on silently. Not until they were standing in the shelter of the ruined tower did Talbot call a halt.

"Safe enough now, I think!" he muttered. "But keep your ears open, Jim. If anyone comes I can't do anything

Reginald Talbot's face went suddenly pale, and his eyes glinted as he stared at a tree-trunk a couple of yards away. Tom Merry followed his glance, and gave a startled jump at the sight of the face peering round the trunk. "Crooke!" he gasped. (See Chapter 7.)



to save you—I dare not. Now, why are you here, Jim Crow? There is nothing of value in this school—nothing worth your trouble, at all events. In the old days you were above cracking such small cribs—"

The man chuckled softly.

"That would be telling, Toff!" he grinned. "Sure we're safe here?"

"Yes, yes! But keep on the alert. Look here, you must go at once—clear out of this neighbourhood, Jim Crow! There is nothing worth your time and trouble at St. Jim's. You were mad to come—"

"Was I? You ask Bowyer. Thunder! I hope they haven't nabbed him. You never knew Bowyer, Toff—"

"No. Never mind him!" Talbot was glancing about him anxiously. "You had better go. I'll show you the best way. But I wanted to warn you; you're wasting your time at St. Jim's."

The man chuckled again.

"You here on the same lay, Toff?" he grinned. "I thought as only our lot know about it. Come, come, kid! It ain't pally to try to— Thunder, though! You must be a blamed schoolboy here, Toff?"

"Of course I am! I am not the Toff of the old days, Jim," said Talbot earnestly and quietly. "Those days are done with; I'm going straight now."

"By hokey!" The man seemed thunderstruck. "Fancy you a blamed school kid! I heard as you'd chucked up the game, and was going straight, but I never believed it,

Once a thief, always a thief—that's my belief. But I heard as some rich chap had taken you up, and—"

"It was my uncle—Colonel Lyndon," said Talbot quietly. "But there's no time to tell the story now. Every moment you remain means danger for you. And for me! Yet I must warn you—"

Back into his mind came memories of the past in a surging flood—the past he had tried to forget, to erase from his memory; those days, long since dead, when he himself had been a member of a gang of cracksmen, known by them as the Toff.

And vividly there came to him now the memory of a terrible night when capture seemed a certainty—when, but for the thin-faced, lynx-eyed man before him, the police would have captured him, and a long term of imprisonment would have been his portion.

But Jim Crow, his loyal pal, had saved him. He had been fond of Talbot—the boy whose skill as a cracksmen was second to none in those days. And he had sacrificed himself

for the boy by holding the police at bay to allow the Toff to escape.

Jim Crow had been caught, and his self-sacrificing loyalty had cost him three years in prison. But the Toff had escaped. Afterwards, when his true identity was discovered, his uncle—Colonel Lyndon—had rescued him from the life he hated.

Now—known no longer as the Toff, but by his own name of Reginald Talbot—the boy was a schoolboy at St. Jim's, respected and popular. To find him there must have been a shock to Jim Crow. To meet Jim Crow at St. Jim's, in such circumstances, was a shock to Talbot—a severe, painful shock. He had never seen Crow since that eventful night—the night when the gangster had sacrificed his liberty that Talbot might escape.

But he had not forgotten.

Indeed, the memory was as vivid to Talbot as if it had only happened yesterday.

A lump came into his throat, and he placed a firm hand on the arm of the man before him.

"You—you know why I released you just now, Jim Crow?" he muttered. "You know why I am helping you to escape?"

"I reckon I do, Toff," grinned Jim Crow. "I ain't forgotten that night; and I knows the Toff too well to think as he'd fail a pal in trouble. You always were a good pal, Toff. Not that I want you to risk anything, kid—"

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"You saved me from the police, you saved me from long imprisonment—and possibly worse," said Talbot thickly. "You sacrificed your liberty for me, Jim Crow. You did what few men would have done. I wasn't likely to forget it. I've never forgotten it! And I've always hoped that some day I should be in a position to repay the debt."

"Well, I fancy I can show you how, Toff," said the man, with a faint chuckle. "Look here," he added, glancing about him and speaking in a low tone, tense with excitement, "we're on to a big thing here, Toff. And you're just the chap we want—a chap who knows his way about the school, I mean, as well as a good craftsman. Listen!"

"Jim, it's no good thinking, dreaming—" began Talbot, aghast.

"Hold on! Listen a minute! There's something in the headmaster's safe here, kid," went on Jim Crow, lowering his voice still more, "that's worth a king's ransom."

"Rubbish!" said Talbot quickly, with almost a laugh. "A few pounds at most; the salary of the staff, perhaps; but nothing more—certainly nothing to attract you, Jim Crow!"

"You don't know, then," said Jim Crow, eyeing the boy as if wondering whether he dare say more. "Look here, I'll tell you, Toff. You've got a lad here named Koumi Rao—an Indian prince he is."

Talbot started.

"That's true," he answered. "But—"

"Well," resumed Jim Crow, his voice tense, his eyes glinting with greed and excitement, "that kid's just had something sent to him from India—something that would put us on velvet for life if we could get it, kid. It's a diamond, kid—the Star of the East it's known as. And—"

"You say it's been sent here to St. Jim's?" asked Talbot incredulously.

"Yes." The man grinned in the darkness. "When I came out of the jug, after the old gang was broken up, Toff," he said, "I joined another gang—one as 'as agents all over the world, kid."

"An international gang—"

"You've said it, Toff. Don't ask me how they got to know as the sparkler was being sent to the kid here; I don't know and don't care. But they has ways of getting to know things, and you can bank as it's correct. Well, Bowyer and me's been put on the job. We've failed to-night through running into that blamed kid. But we shan't fail next time—especially as we'll have you to lend a hand now, Toff!" he added, with a chuckle.

Talbot's heart sank. He eyed his old associate, aghast, feeling suddenly sick. Instinctively he knew that Jim Crow was speaking the truth. The junior had heard nothing of a valuable jewel being sent to Koumi Rao. But it was more than possible that one had been sent.

Koumi Rao was an Indian prince, enormously wealthy, and on more than one occasion precious things had been sent to him—things that Dr. Holmes had refused to allow the Indian boy to keep at St. Jim's.

If such a thing had been sent it would, doubtless enough, be in the Head's safe. Koumi Rao was a very quiet, reserved boy, and it was unlikely that he would mention the matter even to Figgins and his other friends of the New House. And the authorities were certainly not likely to noise it abroad.

Talbot set his lips.

"Jim," he said almost pleadingly, "don't you understand that I'm not the Toff of old—I've put all that sort of thing behind me. I'm going straight, and I can't help you. Not all the gold and precious stones in India would tempt me. Nor can I stand by and see Koumi Rao robbed. Jim, you've got to throw up this lay—for your own sake get away from here!"

The man almost staggered in his astonishment.

He eyed Talbot's earnest, pleading face blankly, and then a glitter came into his hard eyes.

"You mean that, Toff?" he said, his voice hard.

"Yes, every word of it!"

"Thunder! And you expect me to chuck up chances of a fortune when it's almost within my grasp, Toff?" He laughed harshly. "I don't expect you to risk anything now, Toff—you're on a good lay now, and don't need to take none. Bowyer and me'll manage on our own! And if you interferes, Toff," he added slowly, with menace in his tone, "it'll be so much the worse for you! Look here now, Toff, why not be sensible and come in—"

He halted as the junior suddenly gave a warning hiss and gripped his arm in a vice-like grip.

"Quiet! Someone coming! I saw a flash—there it goes again!"

There was no doubt about it—someone was coming round by the Chapel with a torch. Evidently Kildare and his men were searching still—or was it Tom Merry, Blake, and Lowther?

Talbot suddenly realised that he was standing out of the

shadow cast by the old tower—that in the moonlight, dim as it was, his form would be visible. He stepped back—too late.

A sudden distant shout was heard—he recognised Tom Merry's excited tones. Talbot gasped.

"Quick—run for it, Jim—run for it! No, the other way. Keep to the wall until you reach the woods! Mind—"

Talbot paused, suddenly realising that he was alone.

Jim Crow had melted silently into the black shadows behind the ancient tower. Talbot stepped out into the moonlight.

The next moment vaguely-seen forms came pelting up, and as a light flooded over him he heard Tom Merry's astounded voice:

"Talbot! It's Talbot!"

CHAPTER 6.

Gone!

"TALBOT!"

Only just in time did Tom Merry call out—just in time to prevent his chums from rushing upon Talbot.

"Talbot!" ejaculated Blake. "Well, my hat! What on earth are you doing here, Talbot?"

Talbot bit his lip.

He was in an awkward position—unless he lied, which he was unlikely to do. And he knew that suspicion would fall upon him as being the fellow who had let the prisoner escape.

Moreover, he could see that Tom Merry, at all events, believed that he had not been alone, and the next moment he knew that was so.

"Who was that with you, Talbot?" demanded Tom, peering round him in the gloom. "I'd swear I saw another figure here—"

"I'm alone," said Talbot, in an agony of fear. "I—I wondered if the other fellow had come this way," he added, truthfully enough. "What about Kildare? Have you had any luck? He was shouting—"

"Kildare and Darrell collared the beggar by the school wall near the gates," said Blake, not a little surprised at Talbot's strange manner. "But he gave them the slip again. We're just having a hunt round here before giving it up, though I'm afraid the merchant's a mile away by this."

"It's pretty hopeless now," said Talbot, pulling himself together. "Might as well give it up and get in. I expect Railton will cut up rough about our coming at all!"

"He won't when he hears we've done what the giddy prefects failed to do," said Lowther. "We've collared one of them, anyway!"

"No end of glory for little us!" grinned Blake. "Let's get back, and spread the glad tidings."

"Hold on!" said Tom Merry.

Tom's tone was grim, and his eyes were scanning the ruins around them. All around the old tower were masses of masonry, moss-grown and shattered, the remains of the old monastery of St. James'. The moonlight glimmered on stone and grass, but deep shadow covered the ruins for the most part. Dark and mysterious the ruins looked then, and it was obvious that a score or more of men could find cover there.

"We were coming to search the ruins," said Tom. "No need to give up the idea!"

"I've seen nothing of the other man!" said Talbot.

"We'll search, anyway!" snapped Tom.

"Very well!"

Talbot did not object. He had every hope that Jim Crow, being a very slippery customer indeed, would be well away across the playing-fields by this time.

He accompanied Tom and the others as they started to search the ruins with the aid of torches.

It proved a useless search, and they gave it up after a few minutes had been spent on the task.

"Might as well search for a needle in a haystack!" said Blake. "In any case, the merchant will be miles away by now—he wouldn't hang round here, anyway."

"I suppose so!"

Tom Merry assented, and they hurried back to the quad. The captain of the Shell was feeling very disturbed, and he glanced at Talbot more than once as they hurried back.

Tom felt certain he had not made a mistake—that he had seen Talbot standing with someone by the shadow of the old tower.

Who was it, then? And why had Talbot evaded the question? And why had Talbot given them the slip when they had raced off to help Kildare?

Tom Merry's mind was filled with doubt and curiosity as the juniors entered the quad. A group of fellows were standing there by the light of a lantern, and Tom saw that Mr. Railton was with them also.

(Continued on page 12.)

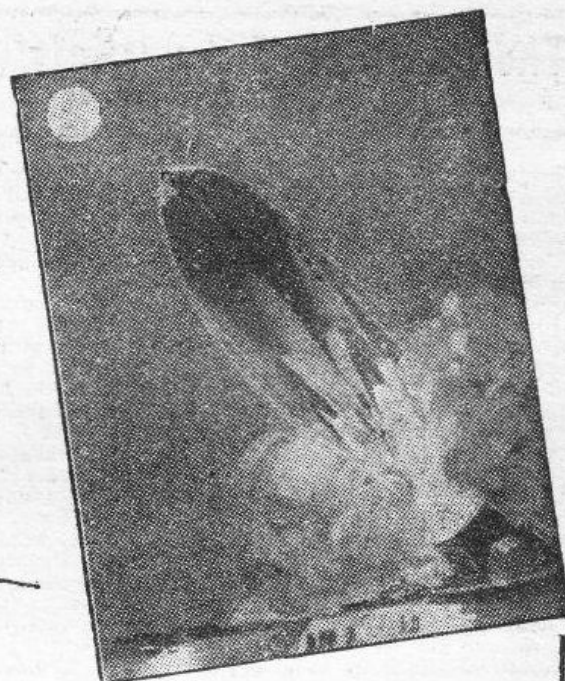
AND ANOTHER ONE!

Here's a black and white reproduction of NEXT WEDNESDAY'S HANDSOME FREE PICTURE CARD, IN FULL COLOURS!

Be sure you add it to your collection.



MARVELS of the FUTURE!



No. 10.—By Rocket to the Moon!

FLUNG at an appalling velocity—round about seven miles a second!—from a gigantic gun goes a weirdly shaped rocket, in weight something like 400 tons! Straight into the air it goes—its target the moon! Will it get there?

It has a long way to go—240,000 miles, through trackless space—but at seven miles a second, for a start-off, something should happen very soon. What will that "something" be? Will the enormous rocket get caught up en route by the gravitational pull of some star or planet and simply wander about in illimitable space till the crack o' doom?

That's the sort of examination paper that scientists have actually set themselves. And naturally the most interested of them all is the fellow who intends, as soon as arrangements are completed, actually to take the trip and risk the consequences!

For that rocket is hollow, and is being built to carry not only the inventor but a companion—if one can be found who holds his life so cheaply that he will smilingly allow himself to go hurtling out into the Infinite knowing not how or when or where the moon-bus will stop—if ever it does!

This passenger-carrying, armour-plated rocket is estimated to cost some £100,000, and the gun that is to fire it off the earth will cost—well, that figure hasn't been quite worked out yet. Externally, this amazing rocket will be shaped like a monstrous cigar, with wings on either side to steady it.

Internally, it will be the last word in comfort.

And the passengers will want all the comfort they can get, too, seeing that they hope to complete that hair-raising journey in fifteen hours or thereabouts.

Gravity being practically non-existent, owing to the tremendous speed, the passengers will have to tie themselves firmly to

their seats, for one thing, to avoid the predicament of finding themselves floating in the rocket's interior. And the seats will be padded, to take the sting out of mighty bumps.

Of course the seven-miles-a-second impetus given to the moon-rocket by that gun is not expected to last long. The rocket will therefore have to carry some power that will propel it. A most ingenious scheme has been worked out, whereby the big rocket, with its passengers aboard, will carry in its tail a number of lesser rockets.

These will be fired off mechanically at the requisite intervals, each giving the passenger-rocket a tremendous kick forward. So the whole concern will travel through space in a series of violent bounds.

Then, when they are actually approaching the moon—accidents excepted—the man at the wheel, so to speak, will have to make swift arrangements for landing. It's all worked out to the minutest detail! Whilst about 150 miles away from the frozen planet, the rocket will have to be manoeuvred into a half-loop. Then it will whizz forward backwards—that is, tail first, more rockets being used to slow-up the rate of descent upon—whatever is there!

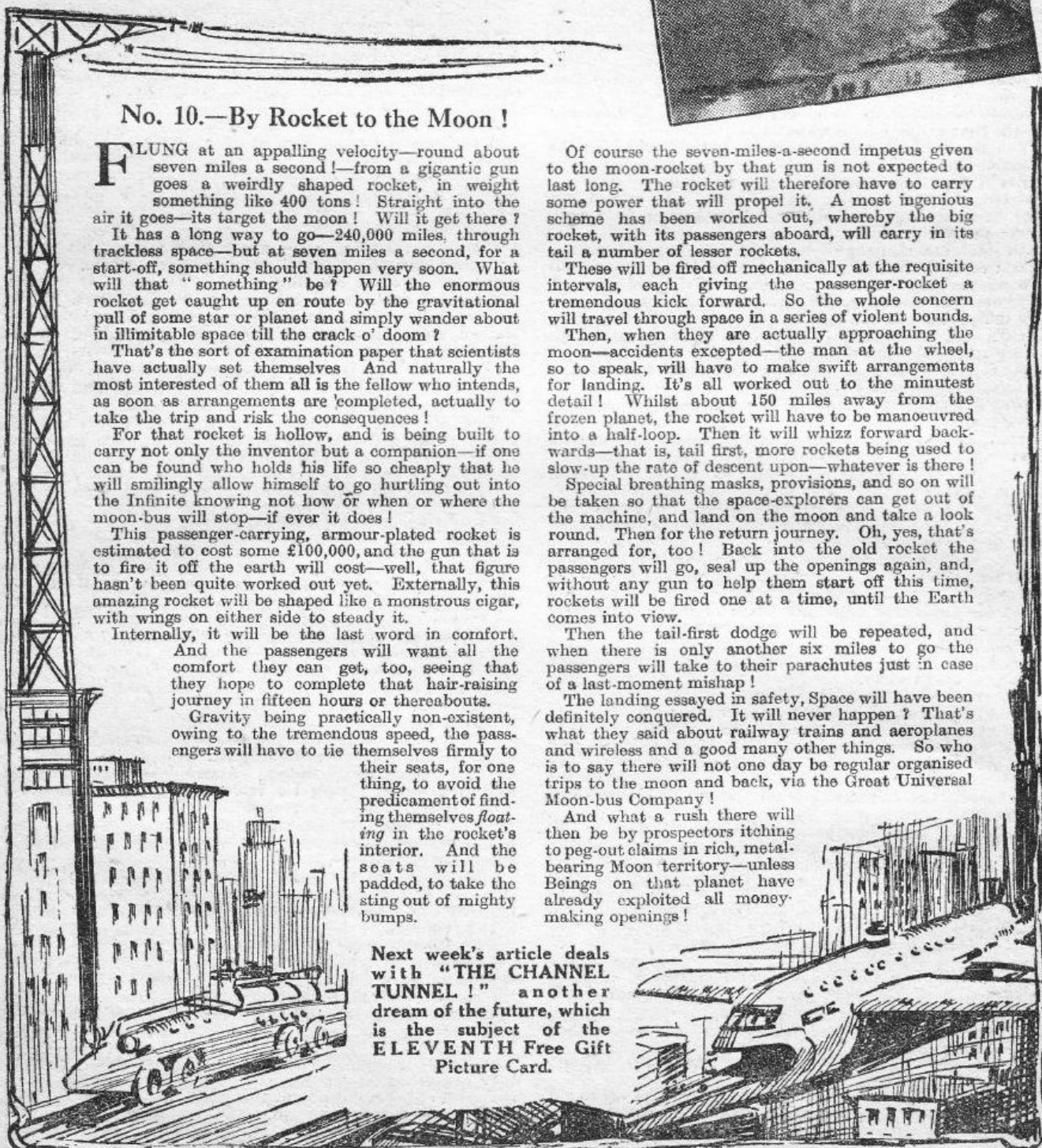
Special breathing masks, provisions, and so on will be taken so that the space-explorers can get out of the machine, and land on the moon and take a look round. Then for the return journey. Oh, yes, that's arranged for, too! Back into the old rocket the passengers will go, seal up the openings again, and, without any gun to help them start off this time, rockets will be fired one at a time, until the Earth comes into view.

Then the tail-first dodge will be repeated, and when there is only another six miles to go the passengers will take to their parachutes just in case of a last-moment mishap!

The landing essayed in safety. Space will have been definitely conquered. It will never happen? That's what they said about railway trains and aeroplanes and wireless and a good many other things. So who is to say there will not one day be regular organised trips to the moon and back, via the Great Universal Moon-bus Company!

And what a rush there will then be by prospectors itching to peg-out claims in rich, metal-bearing Moon territory—unless Beings on that planet have already exploited all money-making openings!

Next week's article deals with "THE CHANNEL TUNNEL!" another dream of the future, which is the subject of the ELEVENTH Free Gift Picture Card.



The Downfall of the "Toff"!

(Continued from page 10.)

The juniors hurried up to them, eager to break the news of their capture. They had not had the chance to tell even Kildare yet, that excited senior having rushed away after ordering them back indoors.

Naturally, they had not obeyed him—they were much too keen to make another capture for that!

Apparently Mr. Railton had only just joined the searchers. "I fear it is hopeless, Kildare," he was saying as the juniors ran up. "The scoundrels will be a mile away by this time. Fortunately, nothing whatever seems to have been disturbed, and we can leave the matter in the hands of the police. Where—Ah, here are those juniors!"

He gave Tom Merry and his chums a grim look.

"You should not have gone out, Merry!" he said sternly. "I called to you to come back. Did you not hear me?"

"Ahem! We thought we'd have the luck to collar the chaps!"

"Nonsense! It is scarcely likely that ruffians would be caught by juniors, Merry," said the Housemaster tartly. "You should have obeyed me and left it to the seniors, my boys."

"Have the seniors captured anyone, sir?" asked Tom demurely.

"No; the scoundrels have escaped, though Kildare and Darrell almost made a capture."

"Well, we have, sir. One of them is fastened up in the woodshed round by the Chapel, sir. If you'll come along now we'll hand him over to Kildare and Darrell, sir!"

"Bless my soul!"

The Housemaster jumped, as did Kildare and Darrell. Blake chuckled, and his chums smiled. Only Talbot did not smile. The thought of his chums' feelings when they found their prisoner gone made him grit his teeth. But there was no help for it.

Tom Merry briefly explained what had happened and how they had captured the man, and then, with the lantern-light casting grotesque shadows about the little party, he led the way cheerfully to the shed.

"Be careful, boys!" said the Housemaster. "Merry and you younger boys stand back!"

"Why not leave the fellow in until the police come, sir!" said North.

"The woodshed is old, and the fellow might easily break out!" said Kildare. "Better make sure of him!"

"Yes, yes, Kildare is right! But be careful, the rascal may be armed!"

Kildare did not seem to care about that. North held the lantern high, and he removed the bar from the door.

The next moment the doors were opened cautiously. But no rushing, charging figure emerged—as was expected. North waited a second, and then he stepped boldly into the shed and held up the lantern.

Save for gardeners' tools and heaps of faggots, the shed was empty. Kildare gave an exclamation and walked round the shed. But it was undoubtedly empty.

Tom Merry, Blake, and Lowther almost fell down in sheer amazement and dismay.

"Oh, great pip!" ejaculated Tom.

"Gone!" gasped Blake. "Oh, my only hat!"

"Merry, you said—" began Mr. Railton.

"He was in here, sir—a short, thin-faced fellow!" said Tom, his voice showing his genuine amazement. "We dragged him here and pushed him inside. Then we barred the door. He couldn't have got out himself, sir! Someone's let him out!"

"That's it," said Lowther, unspeakable disgust in his voice. "That other merchant must have been hanging around. He may have watched us shove his pal in, and after we'd gone he let him out. Oh, what asses we were not to leave a guard!"

"Talbot wanted to remain on guard," said Blake.

Knowing the juniors as they did, Mr. Railton and the prefects were not likely to doubt their story.

"Well, it is most unfortunate, boys," said the Housemaster at last. "But the rascal has undoubtedly escaped, and it is useless to remain here. The police will be here presently, and the matter must be left in their hands. Let us go indoors. In the circumstances, of course, you juniors will not be punished for your disobedience. I am only sorry that your prisoner has escaped. You certainly did well to capture him."

Tom Merry did not reply. He was curiously silent as they went indoors. More than once he glanced at Talbot's pale face. But he said nothing to anyone of what was working in his mind. The burglar-hunters found the

excited crowd of juniors and seniors trooping off to bed. Kit Wildrake was answering questions from Mr. Lathom, and dabbing a cut on his lip. His bruised face showed what he had gone through.

"To bed, boys—sharply!" said Mr. Railton. "You are quite sure you will not go into the sanatorium, Wildrake?"

"Quite sure, sir," grinned Kit Wildrake. "I'm right as rain now, sir."

"Very well! The matter shall be gone into more fully in the morning. Good-night, boys!"

"Good-night, sir!"

The juniors trooped upstairs after the rest of the Shell and Fourth.

"Well, Wildrake," said Blake. "We've had an exciting evening as well as night. First a giddy fire alarm, and then a burglar alarm. But we want to know how you came to be downstairs—especially Trimble?"

"I followed Trimble," grinned Wildrake. "I told you he was up to some game, Blake, didn't I? Well, I remained awake, and as I half-expected the bouncer got up and came downstairs. I was hard on his heels when it happened. The fat night-bird must have blundered right into those burglar merchants. Anyway, I piled in, and you know the rest. And that reminds me. I haven't seen Trimble since."

"Under his bed in the dorm, I bet," grinned Blake.

"I fancy not," said Wildrake, with a chuckle. "I guess I can find the fat wangler. Come along to our study."

They had to pass the door, in any case, and in some mystification they halted outside Study No. 2. Wildrake pushed the door open suddenly.

A startled gasp came from within.

A candle-end was burning in the room; and Trimble was there. He was seated at the table, and on the table was a cushion-cover—empty now. On the table, however, were various scraps and crumbs of foodstuffs. In Baggy's fat hand was half a meat-pie, and his fat jaws were working at a great rate.

Baggy had had a severe shock that night. But it had not prevented him from remembering his errand, or had any adverse effect on his appetite. As a matter of fact, with lights burning all over the House, and with fellows swarming everywhere, all Baggy's fears had fled. He had slipped away unnoticed, and now he was making up for lost time.

"Oh!" he spluttered. "I say, you fellows, you did frighten a fellow! Haven't I had shocks enough? I say, I'll be along presently. Plenty of time yet."

Tom Merry, Jack Blake, Lowther, and Talbot did not answer; they glared. Tom and Lowther, at least, knew that cushion-cover, and Blake and Talbot easily recognised the meat-pie—or what was left of it.

"You—you fat grub-raider!" gasped Tom Merry. "So it was you who raided our grub, after all."

"And I bet it was Trimble who rang the bell!" stuttered Lowther.

"Oh, really, Lowther, what a whopper! I shouldn't be surprised if it wasn't you! Just the sort of thing you would do!"

"What?"

"Or perhaps it was Mellish," said Trimble. "Any fellow could have rung the bell by shoving his arm out through that landing window, you know—easy as falling off a form. I bet Mellish did it so you fellows would rush out, and he could collar the grub."

"Well, my hat!"

"So—so that was how you did it, Trimble," breathed Tom Merry. "You fat idiot!"

"Eh? Of course, I didn't! Aren't I saying I didn't?" gasped Trimble, eyeing his visitors in great alarm. "I—I say—"

"You fat rotter!" snorted Blake. "I see it now. You pulled the rope by shoving your arm through that window. Easy enough, too, by James! Well—"

"Of—of course I didn't! Nothing of the kind! I sus-say, you fellows, did somebody see me? Oh dear! Who told you fellows?" gasped Trimble. "I sus-say, keep it dark! Oh dear, I shall get flogged if it comes out!"

And Trimble gave a hollow groan.

Lowther drew a deep breath.

"Bump him!" he articulated. "Bump him! Roll the fat barrel over and bump him hard! Jever hear of such bare-faced cheek in your life? Rang the fire-bell so that he could raid our grub. Well, of all the—the— Bump him!"

He made a rush at Trimble, and the fat Fourth-Former yelped and ran round the table, making a wild leap for the door. He shot through—right into the arms of Kildare and Darrell, who were just going up to bed.

"What the dickens— Here, no you don't!" gasped Kildare, who was quite startled. "Well, my hat! I thought you kids were in bed. You young—"

"Going now, Kildare," said Tom Merry. "Just helping Trimble to hurry a bit."

"You can leave that to me, then," said Kildare grimly. "I'm going to boot you all the way upstairs, Trimble, and this is a start."

He whirled Trimble round and kicked.

Trimble gasped, and jumped for it—just missing the kick. Then he fairly flew.

"If you kids want a turn, too—"

"No, thanks, Kildare! We're off!"

And Tom Merry, Talbot, Blake, and Lowther followed Trimble hastily. And when Kildare looked in their respective dormitories a few seconds later they were in bed.

It was not long before the fellows in either Shell or Fourth dormitories got to sleep again that night—or, rather, morning. But in the Shell dormitory Tom Merry lay for long hours, sleepless and troubled. Who had released the burglar from the wood-shed? That the fellow's accomplice had done so, Tom Merry did not believe. Talbot's strange manner had not escaped him. Was it Talbot—and why? And who was the man Talbot had been with by the old tower? Tom was quite certain it was a man. What did it all mean?

It was a mystery to Tom Merry—and a very disturbing one.

But if Tom Merry remained awake for hours, Talbot was even less lucky. Dawn was breaking before he closed his eyes at last. And even then Talbot had not solved the problem. What should he do? His duty, as an honourable fellow, was to tell the truth—to tell what he knew, and to hand Jim Crow over to justice. But how could he do it? He knew he could never do it. In any case, the man was at large now. Yet Talbot knew St. Jim's had not seen the last of Jim Crow and his accomplice.

Of one thing Talbot was assured, however. And that was that the two cracksmen should not succeed in their task—if he could help it.

CHAPTER 7.

Talbot's Enemy!

"TALBOT!"

Tom Merry spoke quietly.

It was the following morning, just after breakfast, and Tom came upon Reginald Talbot pacing the path beneath the old elms in the quad.

The school was still buzzing with excitement over the events of the night. Nothing fresh had come to light since the school had been packed off back to bed. The burglars had escaped and vanished. They had taken nothing. It was clear they had encountered Baggy Trimble just as they had broken into the House.

Baggy Trimble himself was inclined to look upon himself as a hero. Certainly he received a great deal of attention that morning. Even lofty seniors took interest in the fat junior. Baggy strutted and puffed with importance. Really, he felt rather glad it had happened now—especially as he had come through the ordeal safely, and had quite satisfied the authorities concerning his presence downstairs at that hour of the night.

When Mr. Bailton had time to question him, Baggy Trimble had quite recovered his fat wits, and he had calmly informed the Housemaster that he had gone down to investigate a strange noise he had heard. Kit Wildrake, being a good-natured youth, had not ventured to contradict his statement. He had just explained that he had gone down after Trimble to see what he was after.

Possibly the Housemaster felt dubious about Trimble's explanation; but if he did he said nothing. He accepted it as it stood, and let it go at that. In the circumstances Baggy felt he had something to congratulate himself about, and to brag about.

That his Form-fellows believed he had been grub-raiding did not trouble Baggy. So long as Tom Merry & Co. did not carry out their threatened bumping he did not mind in the least. His only lurking uneasiness was whether Tom Merry & Co. would "peach" over the question of the ringing of the bell. That matter seemed to have been quite forgotten by the authorities in view of this new excitement. Baggy hoped devoutly that it would remain forgotten.

But it was not of Trimble that Tom Merry was thinking as he came along the path. He was thinking of Talbot. At first he had decided not to mention the matter to Talbot himself. But he had changed his mind now—he would speak to Talbot and have it out at once. He knew that if he did not his doubts and suspicions would form a barrier between them. And Tom was very fond of the quiet, sober-minded Talbot.

"Talbot!" he repeated. "Just a minute!"

(Continued on next page.)



Q. What do "digger" and "cobber" mean?

A. Both terms come from "down under," Wilfred Rose, of Darlington—that is, from Australia and New Zealand. "Digger" originated as a name applied to a man in the old gold-digging days in Australia and was used also among the gum diggers of New Zealand. It has come to mean the same as the formerly much-used word, "cobber," which means comrade or chum.

Q. What is a baker's dozen?

A. 13. In the old days bakers used to be very heavily fined for giving short weight, so they were careful not to offend in this respect. To be quite sure they were on the safe side, they would throw in an extra loaf with every dozen they sold to a customer.

Q. What is a dandy-horse?

A. Be it known to you, Walter Tew, that for many centuries the horse was the fastest means of travel known to man. The speed of flight, as in the case of Napoleon from Waterloo for instance, depended solely on the ability of a horse

to cover ground. But men sought for a quicker way of getting about, and the result was the invention of the dandy-horse in 1818. A weird and wonderful contrivance was this on which the dandy of the period propelled himself along by sitting astride it and kicking his toes alternately on the ground. The dandy-horse consisted of two wooden wheels, iron-rimmed, supports for the saddle, and a bar for steering. As the dandy scuttled along the street, small boys and dogs gave chase and sometimes things were thrown. Yet the old laughable dandy-horse was the forefather of all bicycles, motor-bikes, cars, buses, etc.

Q. What does a penny measure round its rim?

A. Three and seven-eighths inches. With regard to your second question, "Isaac Mac," whether I will lend you ninepence until you can wangle some more pocket-money from the pater, the answer is "Nothing doing!"

Q. What do they call England in France?

A. I presume, George Maybrick, that you want to know the French word for

"England" and not the Frenchman's opinion of our country? This is *Angleterre*. And among many people all over the Continent we are referred to cheerfully as "perfidious Albion," except when they want to be really nasty and can think of a few other choice epithets.

Q. How are tigers tamed?

A. A young reader who signs himself, "Ajax," and encloses his photograph, writes as follows: "My eldest brother is bringing a tiger cub home from Bengal, and I have asked him for it. How do I set about taming and training it?" I rather fancy, Ajax, that if you set about that, it will set about you! The safest place for the tiger cub is the Zoo, and, anyway, I do not hold with teaching tigers a lot of monkey-tricks, if that is your intention. Tigers can be tamed by the power of the human eye, although often that power is aided by a stout whip. However, if you are determined, laddie, try the effect of one of your photographs on it!

Q. What does domum mean?

A. The translation from the Latin is "sweet home," Gerald Calver. It is rather strange that your friend's father, who keeps goats in the back garden, should have chosen this name for his abode.

Q. HAVE ANY FOOTBALL CLUBS EVER WON THE F.A. CUP AND THE LEAGUE CHAMPIONSHIP IN THE SAME SEASON?

A. Yes, "Sporting Dick"—Preston North End in 1889 and Aston Villa in 1897.

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Talbot waited for him to come up.

His pale, drawn face spoke plainly of his sleepless night. He had not failed to notice Tom Merry's curious looks and glances. He knew quite well that the captain of the Shell suspected him. Tom was so transparently honest that it was difficult for him to hide his feelings and thoughts.

"Well?"

Tom faced him squarely.

"It's about what happened last night, Talbot," he said quietly. "I—I did not intend to mention it to you; but I feel that it will be best to have it out. If I'm wrong, and there is nothing in my suspicions, I'm sorry."

"Go on!"

"Someone let that man out of the shed last night, Talbot. It wasn't his accomplice, I'm quite certain. Kildare and his friends chased that fellow over the school wall. He wasn't likely to come back to save his pal—because he didn't know that he'd been captured!"

Talbot said nothing.

"You disappeared just as we went to Kildare's help!" said Tom curtly. "I thought it queer then. And that's not all. I remember quite distinctly hearing that fellow mutter something just as we collared him. He seemed to get a shock quite suddenly, and it fairly floored him. What he muttered was: Something about 'The Toff!' That was the name you were known by in the old days, Talbot."

"It was!"

"He knew you, Talbot?" said Tom.

"If—if he said that he must have done!"

"And you know him?"

Silence!

"Someone let the fellow out of the shed, anyway!" said Tom grimly. "Was it you, Talbot?"

Talbot did not speak.

His silence was enough for Tom Merry. He knew his chum would never lie to him.

"And there's something else," added Tom Merry, after a pause. "When we found you round by the old tower, Talbot, you were not alone; there was a man with you. Was it the fellow we fastened in the shed?"

Again Talbot did not answer.

But this time it was not only because he had nothing to say. His face was pale, and his eyes glinted as he stared at a tree-trunk a couple of yards away.

Tom followed his glance, quite startled.

Then he jumped as he glimpsed a face peering round the trunk. It vanished instantly.

"Crooke!" gasped Tom, in alarm. "Oh, my hat!"

Talbot did not reply. He gave a sudden leap, and was round the tree in a flash. There sounded an angry shout, and then Talbot emerged again, holding a struggling junior in a powerful grasp.

"Let go, Talbot!" hissed Crooke, his eyes glittering.

"Let me go, you cad. What's this game?"

"Eavesdropping!" snapped Talbot. "You sneaking rotter—"

"Hold on, Talbot!" said Tom Merry uneasily. "If Crooke was just sitting there on the seat he could scarcely help—"

"He was sitting there," said Talbot, his voice trembling with anger. "But any decent fellow would have shown himself, knowing we were discussing something private. I saw this cad peeping round the trunk taking in every word."

"I—I wasn't!" panted Crooke. "It wasn't my fault that you came along—"

"Oh, get out!" snapped Talbot.

He sent his cousin whirling away with a swing of his arm. Crooke nearly fell; but he steadied himself; and then, with a glare of hatred at Talbot, he tramped away.

Talbot breathed hard. He gave Tom Merry a bitter look.

"You've done it now, Tom Merry!" he said. "That cad will spread the story over the school now. You know how he hates me! Oh, what awful luck!"

Tom Merry set his lips. He felt bitterly angry with himself for being so careless—for not making sure nobody was within hearing. It was quite by chance that Gerald Crooke was there. But Crooke was the very last fellow at St. Jim's he would have wanted to overhear what he had said.

And Crooke had heard—Crooke, the one fellow at St. Jim's who had cause to hate Talbot—or who believed he had cause. Crooke, like Talbot, was a nephew of the wealthy Colonel Lyndon, and it was Talbot who had supplanted him in the affections of his uncle.

Crooke had never forgotten that. Since Talbot had arrived at St. Jim's he had been his enemy, had shown all the bitter hatred of his mean, ill-natured character.

"I—I'm sorry, Talbot!" said Tom dismally. "I had no more idea than you did that Crooke was there. I'm afraid he did hear—"

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"Of course he did!"

Rarely had Tom heard his chum speak so savagely.

"Well, it can't be helped!" said Tom. "The—the fellows may not believe it, if he does spread the story."

"You know they will—more likely than not!" They all know about my past!" said Talbot bitterly. "People are more ready to believe evil than good of a fellow."

"They know you as you are now, Talbot," said Tom. "There isn't a fellow more liked and respected in the school than you, old man. You couldn't do anything dishonourable—they'll ignore such a yarn—laugh at it!"

Talbot laughed bitterly.

"You ignored it, didn't you?" he said harshly. "And you are supposed to be my best pal here."

Tom winced.

"I couldn't help my suspicions," he said. "I determined to have it out—to settle the matter! But—but does this mean that I am right, Talbot?"

"Find out!"

"What? Talbot, old man—"

"Find out!" snapped Talbot.

And he walked away, his eyes gleaming with anger. His first impulse had been to tell Tom all—to take his chum into his confidence and ask his advice and aid. But the unexpected appearance of Crooke had changed his attitude, and soon filled him with bitter anger. Crooke had heard all. It would soon be all over the school.

Tom went indoors, his face troubled and dismayed. Rarely had he known his chum so angry and bitter. Moreover, Talbot had had no answer to his questions—obviously he could not answer them. What did it mean?

But Tom Merry was not the only one to ask himself that question. Gerald Crooke's face was tense and pale with excitement as he went indoors and sought out Racke. He found his chum in the study, and he told him what he had overheard.

"What do you make of it, Racke?" breathed Crooke.

Racke grinned unpleasantly.

"Ask me another," he remarked. "Looks queer, and no mistake. If he didn't deny it—"

"He didn't while I was there."

"Then it's no end queer. Looks to me as if your dear, beloved cousin's in league with those burglar merchants."

Crooke nodded slowly, his eyes gleaming.

"What else could it mean?" he said. "But—"

"Nice yarn to spread round the school, Crookey," grinned Racke. "I'll help you—I've more than one score to settle with that cad myself."

"Look here, Racke," said Crooke, catching his pal by the arm. "We're saying nothing about this—yet. We'll make sure first. And we'll keep a close eye on Cousin Talbot. Mind—not a word yet!"

"All serene!" yawned Racke. "This is your funeral; not mine. Must be rather rotten to have a relative who's hand in glove with giddy crooks!"

And with that grinning sneer Aubrey Racke strolled out of the study. But Crooke scarcely heard it or noted the sneer. His eyes were gleaming, and there was a very



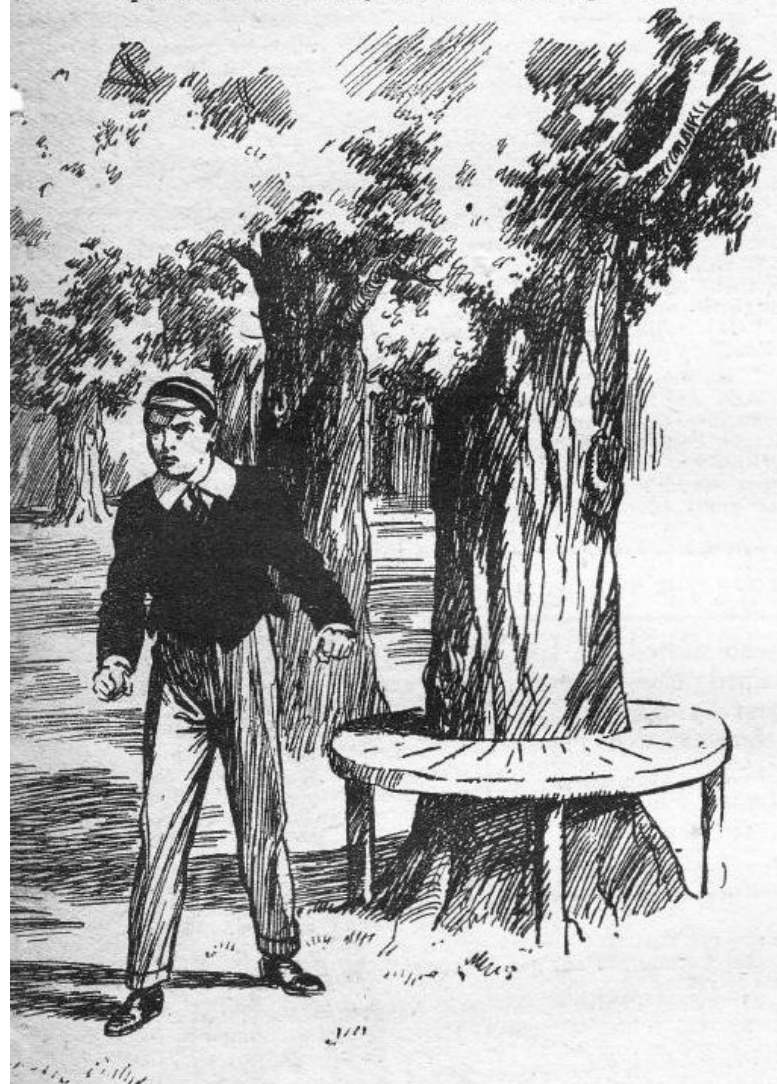
Reginald Talbot gave a scornful, bitter laugh as he walked away. "Even a rotter like Crooke would never believe it!"

spiteful expression on his sallow features—an expression that boded no good to Reginald Talbot.

CHAPTER 8. Talbot's Plan!

"TOFF!"

Reginald Talbot jumped. It was just after tea on the same day. Talbot had gone out for a lonely walk. He had not spoken to Tom Merry since the morning. It had been



of-faced Tom Merry. "You cad—you howling, treacherous cad!" he said have played a dirty trick like you played last night!" Tom Merry stared blank bewilderment. (See Chapter 12.)

one of the most unhappy days the Shell fellow had spent, his only crumb of comfort being the fact that, as yet, Crooke had not spread abroad what he had overheard. Knowing his cousin's enmity and spitefulness Talbot, indeed, was beginning to wonder if, after all, he had not heard.

It seemed too much to hope, however.

Talbot's thoughts were bitter as he walked along the path through the woods. Was he never to be allowed to forget the past? Once again his dark past was to be raked up—the price had still to be paid. He knew he had done wrong to aid Jim Crow—to defeat the ends of justice. Yet what else could he have done in the circumstances? Talbot did not doubt that, but for Jim Crow's loyal unselfishness, he would never have been in his present position. The events that had led to his true identity being discovered would never have come about. He would still have been the prince of cracksmen—a criminal with the record of a long prison term behind him. He would never have come into his own—would never have known his uncle, or earned his affection and trust, nor would have been at St. Jim's, with the prospect of an honourable career before him.

To Jim Crow—the ruthless criminal, yet loyal pal—Talbot owed all that he now was and had. To have stood by in Jim's hour of need, to have allowed him to be taken prisoner, would have been an act of black ingratitude.

Talbot knew he had done wrong; yet not for one moment did he regret it.

If only he could have had a longer talk with Jim—could have had the time to argue with him, to persuade him to drop his criminal intentions—

Talbot knew that the cracksmen would never give up otherwise. They had failed once, but they would not be stopped so easily. If he could only see Jim again—

The junior was just thinking of this when the whispered, stealthy word broke on his ears.

"Toff!"

He knew the voice at once. There was a rustle in the bushes, and then a figure stepped out into his path.

It was Jim Crow, and he glanced about him steadily as he did so.

"Jim—" began Talbot.

"It's me, right enough, kid!" grinned the man. "I've been hoping to see you, Toff. I knew I should drop on you sooner or later. How's things, kid? They don't suspect it was you let me go—"

"The authorities don't," answered Talbot quietly. "But it's not safe to talk here, Jim. At any moment some of our fellows may come along—"

"I've seen some already," said Jim Crow, a curious gleam in his eyes. "Three of 'em passed just now—one of them was a dark-skinned kid—an Indian. Was that Koumi Rao, Toff?"

The man asked the question carelessly, but there was a tense note in his voice for all that.

"Yes, it would be Koumi Rao," said Talbot unguardedly.

"But, Jim—"

"Then I'll know him again, I reckon," grinned Jim Crow. "It may be necessary yet to get friendly with the kid—"

"Jim," said Talbot hoarsely, "you'll leave Koumi Rao alone. You shall not touch him or his property! I warn you here and now that I shall not keep silent if you do!"

The man's eyes glittered.

"That's enough, Toff!" he snapped. "I'm not forcing you to come in with us if you don't want to. But me and Bowyer ain't standing any nonsense! Either come in with us or stand aside and leave us to it. There's trouble coming to you if you don't!"

"Jim," said Talbot pleadingly, "listen to me and drop this game! Clear out while you're safe! The police are already on the job! If the thing you're after is at St. Jim's the Head will guess it at once. Precautions will be taken, and—"

"Cut it out, Toff!" jeered the gangster. "You ought to know better than to think that I funk the narks. Now listen here—there's something I want you to do for me, Toff."

"I've done all I intend to do to help you, Jim Crow."

"It's only a little job," grinned Jim Crow. "No harm in it. When Bowyer bolted last night he left the darned tools behind—a nice little roll as we can't afford to lose. We must have them—quick! It'll be days before we can get a new lot along, Toff."

"You left your tools behind—"

"Yes—that fool Bowyer did! He lost his head and dropped them just below that window—the one as we left open—not the one I got away through, Toff. Luckily, he shoved them out of sight—you'll find them under a laurel-bush, Bowyer says. All you got to do, Toff, is to get them and bring them to me. You can hide them under that tree root there if I ain't about."

Talbot breathed hard.

"You—you mean to try again, Jim?"

Jim Crow grinned.

"Maybe, and maybe not," he chuckled. "You'd better not know anything, Toff. I know you can keep your trap shut. No harm in your doing that, anyway, kid."

Talbot was silent. He realised that the man knew him, and was confident he would not give them away. He realised also, if he had not done before, that the two crooks had no intention of giving up their evil designs on St. Jim's. They were after the diamond, and they meant to get it. Possibly they meant to try again that night. He knew Jim Crow was a man without fear—ruthless and purposeful.

His eyes gleamed as the idea came to him.

"You—you're sure the things are there, Jim?"

"Quite sure—unless they've been found."

"I—I'll get them," said Talbot. "If they're still there I'll get—"

He broke off suddenly.

They had stepped away from the path into the foliage of the trees. But they were still within sight of anyone passing. Talbot had quite forgotten the necessity for caution.

He saw it the next moment.

Along the path came three juniors—they were Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther. Tom Merry started as they sighted the two, and he made a movement towards them. Then he pulled up short.

It was too late—too late to warn Talbot.

From where he was Tom could see what Talbot could not see—a tall, well-known figure striding along the path.

It was Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House! Talbot gasped as he came into sight. But it was too late to retreat—the Housemaster had seen him and his companion. The master's face showed surprise and annoyance. Like Tom, he started as if to come across to Talbot, and then he changed his mind and went on, looking unusually stern.

Talbot was alone now. At sight of the master Jim Crow had slunk away into the bushes and vanished. Tom Merry hesitated and then he ran across to Talbot, making sure Mr. Railton was out of sight first.

"I was just going to warn you, Talbot," he said, his face rather hard. "But it was too late—I knew Railton would spot you before I could get near. You'd better be careful. You must be mad to stand talking to that fellow in broad daylight like that! It's more than likely Railton will want to know who he is."

With that Tom Merry set his lips and rejoined his surprised chums. They moved on, and Talbot, his face white and strained, went in the opposite direction—back to St. Jim's. He knew well enough that Tom Merry had recognised Jim Crow; if he had not recognised him he obviously suspected the truth. Talbot knew that from the expression on his chum's face.

Yet Tom had given him that friendly warning.

Talbot felt a lump in his throat. How was it going to end? In any case, Mr. Railton would undoubtedly speak to him about associating with questionable characters. The junior hurried back to St. Jim's, a dark shadow over his face.

Arrived at the school, he went along to the spot under the window of which Jim Crow had spoken. Making sure he was not observed, Talbot examined the place.

He soon found what he was hunting for. Under a laurel-bush was the canvas package. A glance inside showed him it was packed with familiar tools, each in a separate pocket. Talbot's eyes gleamed, and he hastily covered the package with soil and left the spot.

His mind was made up now: he had decided what to do.

That night he would recover the tools and forestall the crackmen. He would break into the Head's safe himself, and if the diamond was there he would remove it to a safe place. Sooner or later Jim and his accomplice would "crack" the crib again, and if they discovered that the diamond was not there, after all, they might drop their evil scheme.

That was his hope, at all events.

It was risky—terribly risky. But it seemed the only course open to Talbot just then. He was resolved not to give his old associate away—he could not do that. He could not send to prison the man who had saved him from that fate. But he could frustrate his designs. He was resolutely determined that Jim Crow and Bowyer should never gain their ends if he could help it.

With a grim-set face Talbot went indoors. In the hallway he met Mr. Railton, who beckoned to him.

"Talbot," he said quietly, eyeing the junior curiously, "I saw you a short time ago speaking to a stranger—a very questionable-looking man indeed."

"Yes, sir. I—I—"

"You are aware that boys of this school are not expected, or allowed, to have anything to do with questionable characters, Talbot," said Mr. Railton sternly. "May I ask—" he paused. "I will say no more now, Talbot. But you understand? Please do not let such a thing occur again."

"I—I'm sorry, sir—"

"Possibly the man was asking for alms," said Mr. Railton, as if to give Talbot every chance to excuse himself. "In that case—"

"The man was asking me for something, sir."

"In that case, you should not have remained to speak with him, Talbot."

"No, sir. I'm sorry, sir."

The Housemaster nodded and walked on, and Talbot went upstairs slowly. He realised that Mr. Railton was curious—possibly suspicious. Yet he had not pressed the matter, and Talbot felt thankful and relieved.

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CHAPTER 9.

Watched!

"WHEN are you thinkin' of startin' the giddy detectin' stunt, Crooke?"

Aubrey Racke asked the question in his usual, yawning drawl.

Crooke glanced at him quickly. Racke had just entered the study where Crooke was just finishing his prep. Something in the tone of Racke's voice aroused Crooke's interest at once.

"Why?"

"Now's your giddy chance if you do want to make a start," yawned Racke. "I've just spotted dear old Reggie hoofing it out of the House."

"At this hour?" gasped Crooke.

"Yes, old bean. Better buck up, if you want to get on the trail, Crookey."

"Gone out of gates, do you mean?" asked Crooke incredulously.

"I fancy not. I spotted him slinking out of the hall doorway, like a giddy ghost. I was curious, and slipped out after the dear man. He vanished round towards the chapel. After what you told me about his meeting some blighter there last night—"

"Oh! Oh, good man, Racke! Come on—quick, you idiot!"

"Not me, old top! This is your funeral, not mine."

And Aubrey Racke spread his elegant form on the luxurious couch and picked up a magazine. Evidently Racke hadn't very much interest in the matter. Crooke gritted his teeth. Had it been the other way round—had it been Racke's affair—he would have insisted upon Crooke, his crony, helping him.

But there was no time to point this out to Racke, or to urge the matter.

Crooke gave his chum a sour look, snatched his cap and stuffed it into his pocket. Then he hurried out, and, with due exercise of caution, left the School House, and hastened round the lighted house, making for the ruins. The dusk was deep in the old quad, and not a soul was about at that hour, or so it seemed. Crooke had remembered Tom Merry speaking of Talbot in conversation with a man by the ruined tower, and the black sheep's intention was to

make for that spot—to spy on his cousin.

But Crooke did not get within sight of the chapel, or the old tower.

He halted suddenly, abruptly, dodging behind the shelter of a bush lining the path. He had been walking on the grass, not daring to make a sound on the gravel, and he felt thankful for his caution now.

From the bushes near the wall of the House a dark form had emerged suddenly.

It was Reginald Talbot. Crooke knew his cousin's figure too well to mistake it.

Crooke stood frozen into immobility behind the bush, scarcely daring to breathe. Talbot walked past him scarcely a yard away, and vanished towards the entrance steps of the House.

"Now what's that mean?" breathed Crooke. "What the thump was the cad doing in those bushes? And—and he had a parcel, or something, under his coat—something, anyway."

Crooke waited some moments, and then he followed stealthily.

Talbot had vanished indoors by the time he reached the steps. And, after waiting some moments, Crooke followed him.

There was nobody in the hallway. Crooke went upstairs quickly, having pocketed his cap. He was puzzled and angry—angry that he had not been in time to see what Talbot had been "up to" in the bushes.

He went along the Shell passage towards his study, and he had almost reached it when Talbot emerged from his own study higher up. Crooke noted that he was flushed a little.

Crooke entered his own study and closed the door. He waited until Talbot's footsteps had died away, and then he went on again, ignoring Racke, who called in some surprise after him.

The passage was empty, and Crooke walked softly along to Talbot's study. For a few moments he listened outside the door, then he opened it. As he expected, the study was empty. Most of the fellows were down in the Common-

WHAT! HAVE YOU MISSED THE OTHERS?

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room at that time in the evening. Possibly that was where Talbot had gone.

Crooke hoped so as he slipped into the room.

He was determined to risk it, and find out what that parcel of Talbot's contained.

He began to search feverishly.

Crooke was a crafty youth, and he looked only in unlikely places. With other fellows sharing in his study, Talbot was unlikely to leave anything about he did not wish seen. And Crooke was quite certain that what Talbot had carried under his jacket was something he did not wish seen.

He found it at last.

At the bottom of the cupboard, behind a heap of miscellaneous articles—footers boots, old exercise books, and the like—he found the rolled-up bundle. At first he scarcely gave it a glance, yet something about it struck him as unusual.

He rolled it open.

Then he whistled below his breath, and his face paled.

Crooke, so far as he was aware, had never seen a set of burglars' tools before. Yet he had seen illustrations of them, and, apart from that, he knew instinctively that they were cracksmen's tools.

Everything was there, including a tiny electric lamp. The spy gazed at them, his eyes glinting. There was nothing to tell him that this was the package Talbot had carried away from the bushes. Yet he knew that it was; he did not doubt it.

Had they been left there for Talbot? If so, why? Had that man Talbot had been seen speaking with by the old tower left them—the scoundrel Talbot had released from the woodshed?

Crooke caught his breath, and, hurriedly replacing the things in the cupboard as he had found them, he left the study, his heart beating fast with excitement. He did not go back to his own study; he did not want to tell even the cheery Aubrey Racke what he had discovered. This was his affair, and his alone. He could not trust Racke, in any case. Racke would let it out before the time came, and Crooke did not wish to pose as an informer and spy, far from it.

But he soon answered the questions he had asked himself.

To do him justice, Gerald Crooke had never believed absolutely in his cousin's reformation; he had always expected him to break out again, sooner or later. "Once a thief, always a thief," Crooke believed like the cynical Jim Crow in that respect.

"The beastly rotter!" he breathed to himself. "I knew it. Those scoundrels dare not risk it again. They've put Talbot on the job. That cad is in league with them; I see it now. Well, we'll see. If Talbot leaves the dorm to-night he won't be the only one."

Crooke idled about until he had regained control over his excitement, and then he went back to his own study. Racke looked up as he went in.

"Well?" he asked quickly.

"Nothin', you ass! It was a frost. I met Talbot just coming in. He'd been over to the New House with a message for Railton, I fancy."

"You looked in just now—"

"I spotted Talbot leaving his study again. But he was only goin' to the Common-room. Talbot's not so easily spotted as all that, Racke."

"Well, it looked queer to me," grinned Racke; and he went on with his magazine, quite failing to note the curious glint in Crooke's eyes.

For, in Crooke's opinion, Reginald Talbot was easy to "spot." And certainly, for once, Talbot had been careless. Indeed, Crooke wondered how he had dared to hide such things in the store cupboard in a study he shared with other fellows. Obviously, Talbot had banked on nobody looking in the cupboard—a cupboard rarely used. But he had blundered now. Talbot was a fellow older than his years, and his early training in crime had made him cautious and keen-witted to a degree. Yet he had shown utter carelessness in allowing Racke to see him go out in the first place, and, in the second, in hiding such a package in a study.

It was carelessness for which Reginald Talbot was to suffer dearly. In his fear that Jim Crow might ignore his offer to get the tools, and go after them himself after dark, Talbot had blundered badly.

CHAPTER 10.

Caught in the Act!

TOM MERRY found it hard to get to sleep that night. His mind was troubled, full of the curious behaviour of his chum. Despite his belief in the sterling character of Talbot, Tom could not help his thoughts, suspicious as they were for the most part. Talbot had refused to deny his charge—indeed, he had admitted it by his very silence.

And now he had been seen in close conversation with a

doubtful-looking character in the woods. Tom tried hard to believe that it was not the captured burglar of the night before, yet in his own mind he felt almost convinced that it was. He was of the same height; and, though it had been dark the night before, he had glimpsed the thin features and hard, sharp eyes.

The more he thought about it the more his doubts and fears strengthened into certainty. What on earth did it mean? It seemed impossible to believe that Talbot could be in league with the scoundrels. Yet why had he released the captured man? And why had he met the man in the woods—obviously a secret meeting, risky as it was?

What should he do? That was the question which Tom Merry asked himself again and again.

His duty was to tell what he knew to the authorities. Tom felt that, though he tried to think otherwise. But Talbot was his chum. There was a deep bond of affection between the two. More than once had Talbot stood by him in times of trouble. Could he turn on him now and expose him? In any case, Tom Merry was not sure; he had no real proof of his suspicions. He felt thankful that Lowther did not seem to have recognised Talbot's companion that evening as the burglars of the night before, though Lowther certainly had been astonished and curious.

The junior captain's mind was torn between feelings of duty, and loyalty to his chum. He lay staring up at the dark ceiling of the dormitory, sleepless and depressed. That he was not the only fellow awake in the dormitory he did not dream.

But he soon did know.

There came the sudden sound of a bed creaking, and then, as he raised his head sharply, he saw a dim form slip from Talbot's bed. His first impulse was to call out; but he closed his lips and lay still as Talbot quickly dressed and passed from the dormitory.

Then Tom slipped from his bed and began to don trousers and jacket over his pyjamas. Here was his chance to find out the truth. For Talbot's own sake he would follow, and see what was going on. No fellow at St. Jim's had more influence with Talbot than he, and if the one-time Toff was slipping back into his old ways—

Tom set his lips, and finished dressing, little dreaming that a pair of gleaming eyes had watched his every movement.

But not once did he glance towards Crooke's bed. He left the dormitory, closing the door quietly after him. Then he hurried cautiously downstairs.

Not a sound was heard in the great, sleeping building. All was in deep darkness, yet not once was the junior at a loss. He could have found his way about St. Jim's blindfold. Once he paused, fancying he had heard a sound behind him. But it did not come again, and after listening for a moment with bated breath he went on.

He stopped suddenly.

A glance into Talbot's study as he passed had shown that his quarry was not there. Then where was he? Had he gone out? Had he broken bounds? It seemed the most likely thing to Tom. He was just thinking of turning back and trying the box-room window, when he stood stock-still, his heart thumping queerly.

A sharp sound had reached his ears—a faint sound of splintering wood.

It was an ominous and significant sound to hear at that time of the night.

Was it the cracksmen again? Or was it—Talbot?

Tom caught his breath hard. The next moment he was moving noiselessly in his rubber-soled shoes in the direction from which the sound had come.

He did not need to wonder where it came from. He knew that it could only come from the Head's study.

In a matter of seconds he was outside the closed door.

As he feared, a faint gleam of light showed beneath the door.

For a second Tom hesitated, and then he set his teeth and flung the door open.

As he did so he gave a startled cry, that was echoed by a startled gasp from within.

Talbot was there—alone!

The room was shadowy, and Talbot's form was dim. But Tom knew him at once. On the Head's desk a tiny electric lamp was burning, but even as Tom cried out Talbot's hand shot out and snapped it off.

Tom Merry drew a deep breath. His heart felt suddenly like lead at what he had seen in that brief second.

"You can put the light on again, Talbot," he said huskily.

There was a moment's silence, and then the lamp snapped on again. Tom entered the room, pushing the door shut after him.

"Talbot," he said, his voice shaking, "what does this mean?"

Talbot's eyes showed glittering in the gloom, but he said nothing.

"I suppose it's useless asking such a question," said Tom, a hard note coming into his voice. "I find you here at dead of night, Talbot. The safe is open, and you were in the act of breaking open the Head's desk. What have you to say for yourself, Talbot?"

Talbot seemed struck dumb with utter dismay.

It was useless to attempt to deny anything. In that one glance round the room Tom had taken all in. Shadowy as was the room, he had not failed to see the safe door wide open, nor the tools spread out at Talbot's feet. And the light of the lamp glimmered on steel in Talbot's shaking hand as he stood before the desk.

Tom knew now what that sound of splintering wood had meant.

Now the light was on again its narrow beam shone on the splintered desk—a broken lock. Even in that dramatic moment Tom Merry found himself wondering why Talbot, with all his skill, had not failed to see the safe door wide open, nor the tools spread out at Talbot's feet. And the light of the lamp glimmered on steel in Talbot's shaking hand as he stood before the desk.

"I'm waiting, Talbot," said Tom, a steely note in his voice. "After what has already happened, I fancy this requires some explanation."

"I can tell you nothing, Tom Merry," said Talbot at last. Never had he dreamed that this would happen. He was stunned—stupefied with hopeless dismay. He knew he had made no sound on leaving the dormitory. So Tom Merry must have been watching him, spying on him. He could scarcely believe it. "I can tell you nothing," he went on, his voice taking on a harsh note, "except that whatever you may think to the contrary, my motives in doing this are honourable."

Tom Merry eyed him steadily. Despite his horror at the discovery he had made, he could not restrain a grim, harsh laugh.

"You expect me to believe that?" he snapped. "I'll believe it when you tell me how those tools came into your possession, and what you're after here." He pointed a hand to the safe, and then to the desk. "You evidently have not found it in the safe, and are now trying the desk, Talbot. Do you deny that?"

Talbot did not answer, and Tom's heart smote him as he saw the hopeless misery in his white face. He stepped forward and caught his old chum by the arm in a fierce grip.

"Talbot," he said thickly, "why don't you speak? Why don't you tell me what this means? Don't you realise what my duty is—that I must report what I have seen? Can't you see that it's impossible for me to stand by and keep silent about this? I always trusted you—there's not a fellow in St. Jim's that I would have trusted more. Yet—"

He broke off abruptly, with a gesture towards the desk and safe.

Talbot crimsoned, and his eyes fell. In that moment he felt sorely tempted to tell all. Yet what would Tom Merry do if he did? In Tom's view Jim Crow was a scoundrel—a danger to the community. He had no sentimental reasons for shielding him. He would never look at things from Talbot's viewpoint. He would think it his duty to expose the man, and he would do his duty—that much Talbot felt certain.

He could not confide in Tom, though he would have given almost anything to be able to do so. Until they knew the precious stone they were after was not at St. Jim's, Jim Crow and his accomplice would not rest until they had their hands on it. And sooner or later Tom Merry would be obliged to act—to do his duty, which could only mean imprisonment for the man who had sacrificed himself for him.

Talbot bit his lip until the blood came. Then, in his turn, he gripped Tom's arm.

"Tom," he pleaded, "will you believe what I said just now? You've known me for a long time, and you've trusted me when things looked black against me more than once. They look black against me now. I am in a ghastly hole—a position I can see no way out of just now. And you can help me—by trusting me. I won't betray your trust."

"Talbot, how can I—"

"Wait a moment, Tom. Listen! I am happy here—happier than I have ever been in my life. My uncle, Colonel Lyndon, is good to me. He believes in me, and is fond of me. Here at St. Jim's I have far more friends than enemies—good friends. I have a happy and honourable career before me. I love St. Jim's, too, and would hate to leave it. I ask you, am I likely to risk losing all—to ruin my career, lose all my friends, all I have striven and fought for here, to lose the affection and respect of my uncle, all my hopes and ambitions—just to steal something from a safe or a desk? Is there anything a safe or desk could hold that would be worth it, Tom?"

Tom drew a deep, deep breath. The deep earnestness and sincerity in his chum's tone thrilled him. And his argument was sound and convincing. No, he could not believe Talbot to be such a fool, such a madman—to look at it all from a practical point of view.

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He nodded.

"No, there is not, Talbot," he answered quietly. "I can't believe it possible. I do not believe it. But—but—"

"You still doubt!" muttered Talbot. "You still do not believe—"

"I—I wish I could understand," said Tom unsteadily. "But—I will say this, Talbot: Give me your word of honour that what you are doing or about to do is honourable, or from honourable motives, and I will believe you. But—have you taken anything from the safe or desk? I must demand an answer to that."

"I have taken nothing from either safe or desk, Tom Merry."

"Very well. I accept your word," said Tom Merry. "You have never lied to me yet, Talbot. If anything happens—if there is a hue and cry in the morning—or, rather, if anything is found missing from safe or desk—I shall feel bound to speak and act. I shall go straight to Dr. Holmes and tell him what I know. Friendship shall not keep me from doing my strict duty."

"Tom—"

"Otherwise, I shall say nothing of this. I can't pretend to understand it. But I will believe you. I'm trusting to my knowledge of you and your word. I'm going to bed now, and to-morrow—we shall see."

With that, Tom Merry quitted the room. Outside, he fancied he saw something move swiftly, and he halted, his heart leaping. But the next instant, as the thought struck him that it was his own shadow cast from the room behind, he turned and moved away noiselessly down the passage.

CHAPTER 11.

Crooke's Treachery!

BUT it was no shadow—had Tom Merry only taken a second look as he left the study he would have seen that. For Gerald Crooke, slinking back against the wall, had not expected Tom to emerge so suddenly—he had been taken utterly by surprise.

But Tom did not take a second look.

With fast-beating heart, Gerald Crooke watched him move softly along the passage and vanish in the gloom.

The cad of the Shell was trembling.

What he had seen and heard had overwhelmed him.

He had never dreamed of this—of such a discovery as this, significant as had been the finding of the cracksmen's tools in the cupboard.

He had expected, had hoped, that Talbot would make a move that night. And he had remained awake in consequence, determined to play the spy on the fellow he hated—the fellow he believed in his envy and spite had cheated him of his uncle's favour and fortune.

Many times had he sought to harm his cousin—to ruin him in the eyes of his school and uncle. But he had always failed. He did not intend to fail this time. Talbot was playing into his hands. He almost felt a sense of justification as he realised that Talbot had broken the law—was, indeed, ruining his life and prospects by going back to his old criminal ways.

Crooke was only doing what any ordinary, law-abiding fellow would do—what it was his duty to do. With proof in his hands, Crooke would expose Talbot to the world. But Crooke did not intend to allow the world to know that he was the informer. He intended to remain in the background—to show his hand would raise suspicion as to his real motive. He could imagine the scorn that would be hurled at his head if the fellows got to know he had been the spy and informer.

He had lain in bed, still as a mouse, for some moments after Talbot had left the dormitory. And he was thankful he had done so when he saw Tom Merry slip from bed. The sight had amazed him. He almost began to wonder if Tom were in league with Talbot. But he soon dismissed that idea, realising that the captain of the Shell was, like himself, on Talbot's track.

Yet Crooke was curious, and he kept well behind, following Tom like a ghost. He had seen all that had passed in the Head's study, and his lip had curled as he heard the strange agreement between the two.

And now Tom Merry was gone.

What should he do now?

With fast-beating heart Crooke watched Talbot through the slightly-opened door. Apparently Tom Merry had expected the schoolboy cracksmen to follow him shortly, and so he had not closed it. At all events, it was slightly open—a fact Talbot did not appear to realise.

He was standing quite still, breathing hard, his face showing the deep emotion that gripped him. For a moment or so he stood thus, and then he moved.

Crooke drew back; but the next moment he realised that Talbot had not finished his work yet.

With staring eyes and gaping mouth Crooke watched as his cousin worked away at the drawers of the desk that still remained locked. The cad of the Shell wondered

what he could be searching for. It could only be something small, for Talbot searched every inch of the drawers, even looking through bundles of papers as if he might find what he wanted there.

What did it mean? What was he after?

Talbot stopped at last. He tried to straighten some of the disorder he had made. He closed the safe, though apparently he could not lock it again. He straightened up the papers on the desk, and closed the desk drawers, two of which were damaged slightly round the locks.

Then, quite suddenly, the idea came to Crooke.

In another minute or so Talbot would be finished, and it would be too late.

Crooke drew a deep breath, and then his hand stole round the door, and grasped the key. Though his fingers trembled violently, he drew it out gently, and softly closed the door.

The next moment he had slid it into the keyhole on the outside, and twisted it. Click!

This time Talbot did hear. From outside Crooke heard his startled, muttered exclamation, and he gave an ugly grin.

Then he stole away on tip-toe, feeling that his night's work was done. Talbot was trapped—the Head's window was a good height from the ground, and there was no ivy below it—not enough to make descent possible, at all events.

In any case, there would be a burglar-alarm fixed there—Crooke was almost sure of that.

Talbot was done for. He would be found there in the morning, and nothing he said could explain away his position.

Crooke went upstairs. To go into the dormitory would be fatal—Tom Merry was scarcely likely to be asleep yet. Crooke came to a decision swiftly, and made for the box-room, intending to remain there until certain the coast was clear.

Meanwhile, Reginald Talbot had rushed to the door of the Head's study and discovered that it was locked.

The discovery made him feel physically sick.

He stood trembling, beads of perspiration on his face.

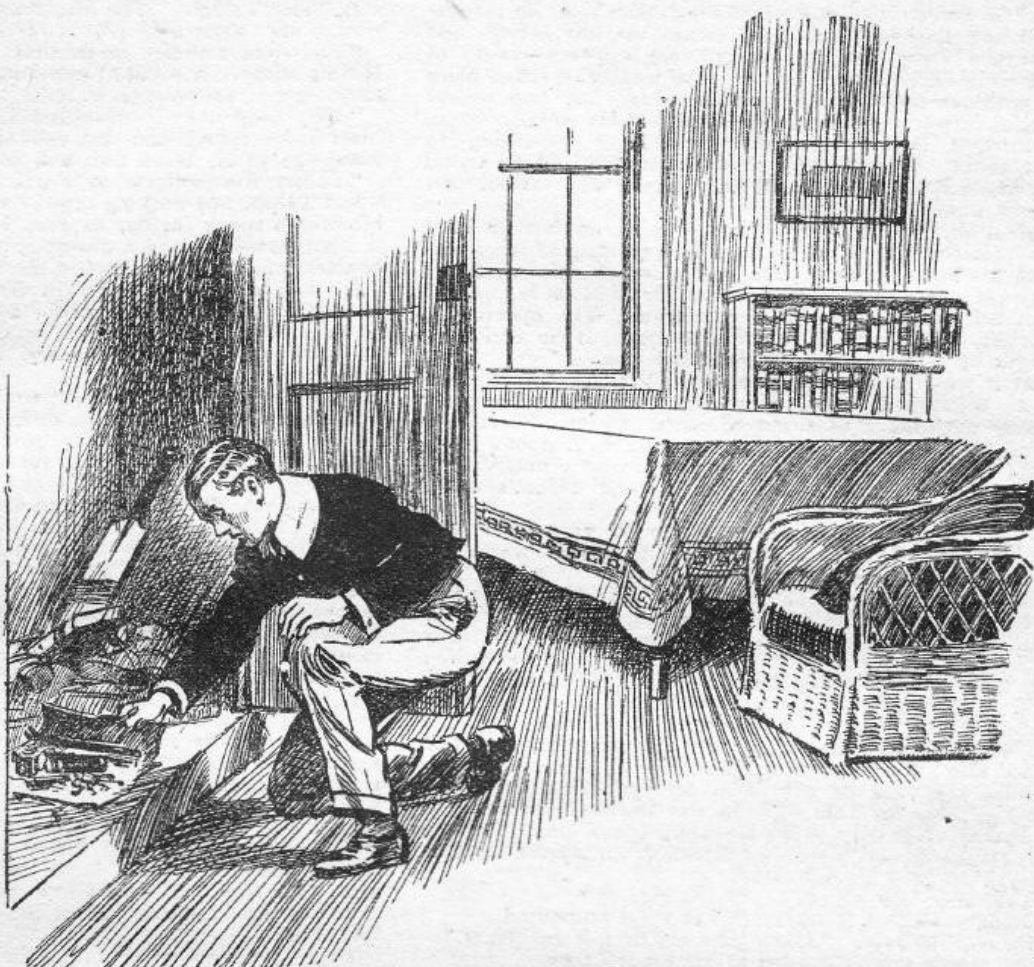
The locked door held no terrors for him—no door-lock at St. Jim's could have resisted his skilful fingers. That was a little point the scheming Crooke had quite overlooked—had completely forgotten in his excitement and triumph.

Yet the discovery was a terrible blow for Talbot. For the thought instantly flashed into his mind that this was Tom Merry's work—that Tom Merry had tricked him, had deceived him, after all.

It seemed incredible. Yet what else was he to think? Tom had gone, and a very few seconds afterwards the door had been locked upon him. Who else could have done it but Tom Merry? His expressions of sympathy and sincerity had been false. He had intended all the time to give him away—to play the traitor and informer.

For what seemed hours Talbot remained still, his mind filled with black and bitter thoughts. The one fellow in all St. Jim's whom he had trusted, in whom he had hopes of help and sympathy, had failed him.

Talbot moved at last.



At the bottom of the cupboard, behind a heap of miscellaneous articles, Gerald Crooke found a rolled-up bundle. As he opened it his face paled, for he knew instinctively that what he had discovered was a set of cracksman's tools. (See Chapter 9.)

He set to work on the lock with trembling fingers, a mist before his eyes. It had taken him but a few minutes to open the big safe, but it took him longer now to pick the lock of the heavy, oaken door. He fumbled with it awkwardly, but he managed it at last.

Then he rolled up his tools again, and, replacing the key on the inside of the door, he left the room and went up to his study softly. He realised it was risky to leave the tools there, but he had no intention of replacing them under the laurels below the window, where Bowyer had left them. Bowyer might return for them if Jim Crow did not—and Talbot had no intention of allowing them to fall into the rascals' hands again. He would hide them in the cupboard again, among the rubbish there—for despite the risk it was extremely unlikely either of his study-mates would want to rummage in the cupboard. They would be safe there for the night, at all events.

So Talbot took the tools there, hid them carefully at the bottom of the cupboard, under the piles of rubbish, and then he crept up to bed. Tom Merry was asleep, and Talbot did not notice Crooke's empty bed—indeed, he did not risk lighting up, and it was too dark even to see the bed.

He was dog-tired, and too disheartened and weary even to stay awake worrying over his troubles. He tumbled into bed, in a mood of savage carelessness as to what would happen; and, like Tom Merry, he soon dozed off. And when Crooke crept softly into the dormitory, some time later, he was fast asleep. The cad of the Shell did not even glance towards Talbot's bed. There was a shock in store for Gerald Crooke in the morning.

CHAPTER 12.

Face to Face!

TOM MERRY had dressed and gone down when Talbot opened his eyes the next morning. Talbot slid wearily out of bed, and was beginning to dress when he suddenly became aware that someone was staring at him.

It was Gerald Crooke.

His cousin's face was white with rage, and his eyes glittered as he eyed his cousin.

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Talbot was startled as he met the look. Then he remembered how he had handled his cousin the day before, and he turned away, his lip curling. He did not dream of connecting Crooke's savage look with what had taken place the previous night in the Head's study. He had deeper troubles to worry him than the enmity of his cousin. Soon, he thought bitterly, Crooke would have something to gloat about. Tom Merry's trick had failed, but he would soon know if his false friend had gone a step farther and exposed him.

Talbot dressed and went down, paying no further heed to Gerald Crooke. That bitterly disappointed schemer was biting his lips with rage. He understood at once what had happened, though. What a fool he had been not to remember Talbot's skill as a cracksman. The opening of a locked door would be a trifle to him. If he had only thought of fastening it in some other way.

But it was too late for that now. Yet there were other ways. What had Talbot done with the tools? He could scarcely have taken them out of doors. Crooke determined to discover if the tools were back again in Talbot's study before that day was out. Still, he almost wished now that he had roused the House, and thus exposed Talbot's crime before the whole school.

Crooke went downstairs seething with anger and disappointment. But he would watch—he would watch his cousin like a cat after this.

Talbot went out into the quadrangle. He was rather surprised as yet that nothing seemed amiss, that there was no excitement. Possibly the Head had not gone to his study yet. Talbot blamed himself bitterly for not having exercised more care, for not having made a neater job of his night's work. Yet what did it matter now? Tom Merry meant to expose him, to play the informer. He would do so at the first chance he had that day—when the damaged desk and opened safe were discovered probably.

Under the elms he saw Tom Merry pacing—it was a favourite place for Tom when he was troubled and worried. He looked up grimly as Talbot approached him. Talbot's face was hard, and his eyes glinted. Tom started back at the look he gave his old chum.

"Talbot—" he began.

Talbot was about to interrupt him; but he paused.

"Go on," he said. "Have your say first, Tom Merry."

Tom Merry was astounded at the other's tone.

"It's all right, I think, Talbot!" he said quickly. "I don't think you need fear anything. Nothing has been taken, anyway."

"You've discovered that, then!" said Talbot bitterly.

"Yes, I'm glad, thankful that I trusted you, Talbot!" said Tom quietly. "But I came down early, anxious to know the worst. The maids discovered what had happened at once. From all accounts the beaks seem to know what those men are after."

"Goodness knows what it is," he added, eyeing Talbot almost questioningly. "But the point is that the beaks believe it was their work again, though they seem puzzled that there were no signs of the men having broken in anywhere. That is the weak point, Talbot."

"Go on!"

"That's all!" said Tom, surprised at seeing no signs of relief in Talbot's white face. "You're pretty safe, Talbot! But I hope, for your sake, old man, that this is the finish so far as you are concerned. For heaven's sake keep clear of anything of this kind!"

Talbot laughed—a scornful, bitter laugh.

"Is this to throw me off my guard so that you can trap me again, Tom Merry?" he asked savagely. "You cad! You howling, treacherous cad! You failed last night! Well, you can try again! You can do your worst! I suppose you think it is your duty. But I think you might be straightforward about it. Even a cad like Crooke would never have played a dirty trick like you played last night!"

Tom Merry jumped. The savage, furious outburst took his breath away for the moment. He stared at Talbot in blank bewilderment.

"Talbot," he exclaimed, after a pause, "what on earth do you mean? What dirty trick have I played?"

"You know what I mean quite well!" said Talbot, his eyes gleaming. "You went off last night, leaving me glad that I had, at least, one friend who intended to stand by me in my hour of need. When I heard the key click in the lock I got the rudest awakening I ever had. I could scarcely believe that you, Tom Merry, could have played me false like that."

"Like what?" almost shouted Tom. "I tell you I don't know—"

"Rubbish!" Talbot's lip curled. "You didn't lock the door upon me last night, of course! You didn't leave me a prisoner for the Head to find me there in the morning!"

"Of course I didn't! Good heavens, do you mean to say—"

"But you forgot that you were dealing with a cracks-

man," said Talbot. "You forgot that a door lock was child's play to me. Your little plot has failed; Tom Merry!"

"You—you actually mean that you were locked in the Head's study last night?" ejaculated Tom Merry, grasping something of the position at last.

"Why keep it up?" answered Talbot in disgust. "Your little dodge failed, and that ends it. You can now do your worst—go to the Head now and be hanged to you!"

"Talbot, for goodness' sake wait! Talbot—"

But Talbot was walking rapidly away. He could not trust himself to speak further to Tom Merry. Bitter anger was in his heart—that and a disappointment that made him feel hopeless and wretched beyond measure.

He had always believed in Tom Merry's unswerving loyalty, he had felt thankful for a pal like Tom who would stand by him. And now—

Ignoring Tom's desperate cry after him, Talbot went indoors.

Tom Merry did not see him again until they were in the Form-room—not to speak to him, at all events. He tried to catch his eye, but Talbot ignored him. After lessons Tom tackled him twice, but Talbot refused to speak.

Tom gave it up then. He had no little pride, and the thought that Talbot refused to listen to him made him angry. Talbot had appealed to him to believe in him, to trust him. Yet here was Talbot himself refusing even to listen to him, much less take his word.

That day St. Jim's once again was in a buzz of excitement. It was soon known that another attempted "burglary" had taken place. Inspector Grimes came down to St. Jim's, looked very wise, and made voluminous notes—and went away again. Both Dr. Holmes and Mr. Railton were looking very serious and grave. Evidently they were very worried indeed over the commotion. As nothing had been taken the fellows saw no reason why they should look so worried. It was unlikely the cracksmen would make another attempt as, apparently, they had found nothing of value worth taking.

That was the view of St. Jim's as a whole. But it was not the view of Reginald Talbot. Tom Merry's seemingly careless words that the beaks knew what the men were after told him that Jim Crow was speaking the truth in claiming the diamond was at St. Jim's—or had been sent there!

The men were after that, and the authorities knew it—and obviously the police also.

The thought filled Talbot with dread and dismay. Up to the last he had held the hope that Jim Crow and his accomplice had been deluded or misinformed in the matter.

He determined to seek out his old associate, and to tell him what he had discovered—that the Star of the East was not in the Head's safe or his desk. And as it was not there it was scarcely likely to be anywhere else at St. Jim's.

If Jim Crow would only believe him and give up the quest!

Immediately after tea Talbot left the School House and started out for Rylcombe Wood. Crow would, doubtless enough, be on the look-out for him—he would be expecting the junior to bring the tools that evening, at all events. Talbot could not help wondering where he and his accomplice were hiding.

He reached the spot at last where he had met Crow the previous day, and there he waited, leaning against a near-by fence bordering a ditch. He was just about to risk a whistle when there sounded a rustling in the bushes, and Jim Crow appeared.

The man looked unkempt—both unwashed and unshaven, and he eyed Talbot eagerly.

"You've come then, Toff?" he said in a low tone. "Brought them things?"

"No—too risky!" said Talbot, speaking the truth. "But I've come to tell you something else, Jim. Hold on, though—it isn't safe to speak here. Come deeper into the woods."

"Right, Toff! I've already seen the marks hanging about these woods," grinned Jim.

He followed Talbot deeper into the trees, and the junior stopped at last.

"We can talk here!" he snapped. "Well, I found the tools, Jim Crow, and last night I did the job myself."

"You mean—"

"I opened the Head's safe; it held a little money—wages, I should think. I opened every drawer in his desk; the stone was not there, either. You've been let down, Jim. The diamond—if it ever was sent to St. Jim's—is not there now. And I'm absolutely certain, after this second burglary," he added, with a mirthless laugh, "that it won't be. The Head would be mad to have it still in his keeping. He would either send it back or else send it to the bank at Wayland."

Jim Crow gritted his teeth.

"You mean that, Toff?"

"Yes."

"You searched and couldn't find it?"

"No. It certainly wasn't there. And there's no other

place in St. Jim's it could possibly be. And every day you remain in the neighbourhood means danger for you, Jim," added Talbot almost pleadingly. "Clear out and chuck the game up—take my tip. I don't want to see you nabbed after what you did for me, Jim Crow."

Crow gripped him by the shoulder savagely. He eyed the junior as if he did not believe him—as if he suspected him of trickery.

"I tell you it's there!" he snarled. "It must be there, Toff. If—if you've double-crossed us—"

"You know me better than that, Jim!" snapped Talbot, flushing. "I'm telling you—"

He broke off abruptly.

From behind them had sounded a sudden crashing, followed by a startled yell in a voice Talbot knew only too well. It was the voice of Gerald Croke.

"Yoooop!"

"The cad followed you along the path," said Blake, his lip curling. "We happened to be sitting on a fence just off Rylcombe Lane when you came along. You didn't see us. Nor did Croke when he came creeping after you, sneaking along like a giddy Red Indian on the trail. Naturally we were interested. We wondered what his little game was. We lost him for a few seconds, and when we did find him again he was here, his ears fairly hanging out."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We felt we'd better chip in in case he did overhear something he shouldn't!" went on Blake, flushing a little. "We'll boot him away, if you like, Talbot."

Talbot panted. So Croke had been listening—Croke, of all people! Why? Did he suspect? Obviously he suspected something. And what had he heard?

"You fellows were here all the time?" he panted.

"Eh? Oh, no!" answered Blake, guessing what Talbot

Smack! Gerald Croke stepped back a trifle too late. Talbot's fist shot out and smacked home, sending the cad of the Shell back head-over-heels. Splash! Croke went backwards into the half-filled ditch. (See Chapter 13.)



CHAPTER 13.

Croke Loses No Time!

REGINALD TALBOT'S heart leaped.

Jim Crow gave vent to a startled oath, hesitated a brief instant, and then slipped away through the trees and vanished.

Talbot found himself alone. He stared through the foliage behind the fence. He jumped at what he saw.

It was Croke right enough. He was lying on his back, and round him were four other juniors—Blake, Herries, D'Arcy, and Digby. All four were looking grim.

"All serene, Talbot!" called Blake, giving him a curious look. "Sorry to startle you, but it had to be done! We thought it best to scotch the rotter's little game. He followed you, and he was spying on you, I fancy. Just as well for you to know it—what?"

Talbot started.

Croke was scrambling to his feet, though Blake and Herries still held him fast. His face was red with hatred and baffled rage.

Talbot bit his lip hard.

If Croke had overheard; if he had been near enough to hear!

"Croke was listening!" he panted. "That spying cad!"

"Listening with all his giddy ears," said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! It was feahfully wude to intewwupt you, Talbot, deah boy!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, who was also eyeing him curiously. "But we thought it best, as the wascal was scarcely a yard from you, all eyes and ears."

"Good heavens! But—but—"

meant. "We've only just come along. But I fancy dear old Croke's overheard more than he should have done. It's not our business to know if it matters at all. But I'd advise you to give the cad a good kicking—do the sneaking toad good!"

"We'll pitch him in the ditch, if you like!" said Herries obligingly.

"Yaas, wathah! The uttah wottah was obviously spyin' on Talbot."

"I—I wasn't!" hissed Croke, his face white with rage. "But—but let Talbot touch me if he dares! I'll get him booted out of St. Jim's, the blackguard. By gad! I'll get him imprisoned. Just let him lay a finger—"

"So you were listening!" snapped Talbot, his face flushing red with rage. "You—you spying cad!"

Croke glared about him. It was useless to deny the fact that he had been eavesdropping now. It was a waste of time with so many witnesses. His eyes glinted with malice.

"I won't trouble to deny it," he sneered. "I was listening! And what I overheard will soon be all over St. Jim's, Talbot. And when the fellows know the truth they won't blame me. They'll know I've done what it was any fellow's duty to do—expose a scoundrel, a thievin' cracksmen! You've proved yourself a traitor to your school, Talbot! You've proved— Oh!"

Smack!

Croke stepped back a trifle too late. Talbot's fist shot out and smacked home, sending the cad of the Shell back head-over-heels.

Splash!

The resounding smack of the blow was instantly followed by a terrific splash as Crooke went backwards into the ditch—a ditch half-filled with dark, smelly water.

Talbot stepped back again, breathing hard and fast. As a rule Crooke's sneers and taunts had not the slightest effect on him. But this time Crooke had succeeded only too well in drawing him.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus. "Cwooke's fairly asked for that, deah boys!"

"Yes, rather!"

Talbot did not answer. He strode away without another glance at his cousin. He vanished through the trees just as Crooke, looking a woeful sight, and covered with slime, staggered out of the ditch.

Blake & Co., without troubling to hide their grins, walked away towards the path, leaving him alone.

Crooke gasped and panted, his eyes glittering with spite. He spent several minutes wiping himself down, and then he started back at a run for St. Jim's. There was a look on his streaked and bruised face that boded ill for Reginald Talbot.

At St. Jim's Crooke changed and washed in a state of seething rage. Then, in such a rage was he that he did not think of prudence, he went along to the Shell passage.

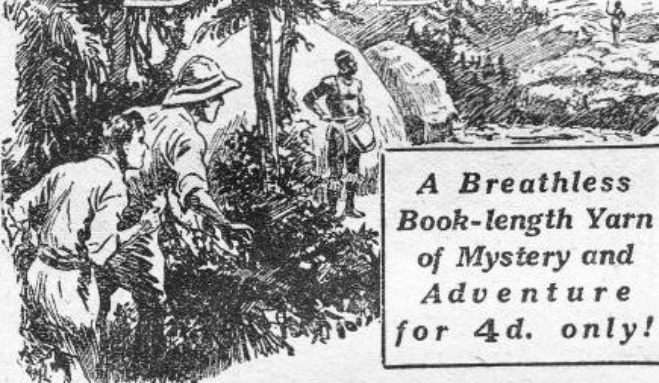
He burst into Study No. 9. It was empty. Talbot's study-mates were out.

Crooke's luck was in again. He closed and locked the door. A moment later he was searching once again.

It was only a matter of a few brief seconds, and when he closed the cupboard door again his face wore a triumphant look.

He unlocked the study door and hurried along to his own study. Ignoring Racke, he took out his letter-case and got pen and ink. Then, taking great care over it, he started to print a note.

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Racke came along and looked over his shoulder curiously. But Crooke ignored him. The look on his face quite scared Aubrey Racke.

He watched in silence as Crooke finished and carefully blotted the sheet of paper.

Racke was looking thunderstruck.

"You—you're sending that, Crooke?"

"Yes; of course!"

"Who the thump to—the Head?"

"Yes; the Head. Who do you think it's for—the porter?"

"Phew! But is it the dashed truth, Crooke?"

"Every word! I can prove it, and bring witnesses, if necessary," said Gerald Crooke, his thin lips twisting into a cruel grin. "I'm doin' my duty as a fellow should if justice is to be done. You saw me come in just now, Racke. You saw the state I was in, and asked me who'd done it!"

"I can guess!" grinned Racke.

"It was my Cousin Talbot," said Crooke calmly. "This is how I hit him back. You've seen your last of Talbot, Racke!"

"You—you're going to let the Head get that now?" said Racke, in some alarm.

"Yes. Aren't I doin' the right thing, Racke? As a dutiful fellow—"

"Quite so!" said Racke, though his face had gone a trifle pale. "Carry on! It's your funeral—not mine, old scout!"

"No; you're wrong there!" grinned Crooke. "It's Talbot's funeral!"

And, with a grim chuckle, Crooke carefully pocketed the folded note and went out.

CHAPTER 14.

Friends Again!

"SEEN Talbot, you fellows?"

Tom Merry asked the question as Blake & Co. came through the gates that afternoon.

All that day Tom had worried about Reginald Talbot. He had not sought out his old chum earlier, feeling still bitter at Talbot's refusal to hear him. But Tom had been thinking things over now. Obviously Talbot meant what he had said. He believed Tom had played a dirty trick on him; had locked him in the Head's study the previous night.

Why should he make such an accusation if he did not believe it? He realised also the bitterness of Talbot's feelings. Something obviously had happened since they had parted in the Head's study.

Thinking it over again and again, Tom decided that it could not go on—he must have a settlement with Talbot at once. His old chum should prove what he had stated. Tom was determined to be patient with him—to keep his temper and try to get a clear explanation. Tom realised only too well that if things went on as they were going Talbot would soon be in grave need of a friend.

He was searching for his old chum when Blake & Co. came through the gates, coming in for tea.

"Seen Talbot?" chuckled Blake. "We have!"

"We has!" said Herries.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"But the question is, have you seen Crooke?" asked Blake. "He should have a prize nose by this time, and should be worth seeing!"

"He asked for it, and got it!" said Digby. "He deserved more than he did get, though, the sneaking, spying cad!"

Tom Merry started.

"What do you mean, you fellows?" he demanded. "Has—has Talbot been having trouble with Crooke?"

Blake chuckled and told him. He was quite surprised at the alarm in Tom's face.

"What's the matter, Tom?" he demanded. "Do you know anything about the business? It looks rather queer to me. I've heard a few whispers about Talbot. That cad Racke—"

"If you believe what that cad says, then you'll believe anything," said Tom, evading the question. "As for Crooke, we know too well how he hates Talbot, to put any value on anything he says. But—but have you seen Talbot since? I'm just looking for him."

"Not seen him since," answered Blake, eyeing Tom curiously. "I say, Tom, is anything the matter, though? Is there anything in Crooke's babbling?"

"Yaas, wathah! It is not our bis'nay, deah boy, but—"

"Then don't gas about it!" snapped Tom, with unusual curtneess. "You fellows know old Talbot as well as I do. Talbot will soon be in need of friends, I'm afraid. I'll just give you fellows a tip. Don't be too quick to jump to conclusions. If it's a case of believing things about Talbot, don't forget he has bitter enemies here."

"Bai Jove! What—"

But Tom Merry did not stay to explain what he meant. He hurried out through the gates. Blake & Co. went indoors looking and feeling mystified, while Tom hung about inside the gates, waiting for Talbot.

He came in at last, his attitude and face showing his hopeless state of mind. He believed that by this time all was up—that Crooke would lose no time in spreading through the school what he had overheard. He could expect nothing less.

"Oh, here you are, Talbot!" said Tom, trying to speak cheerfully. "I hear you've been having trouble with Crooke," he added, lowering his voice. "It sounds bad, old man. Blake's just told me something of what happened. Did the cad hear much?"

Talbot nodded wearily.

"I've been thinking about Crooke," said Tom quietly. "And I've been thinking about what you said this morning, Talbot. You accused me of having locked you in the Head's study."

"I did."

"Talbot," said Tom steadily, "you asked me to take your word last night, and I did. I'm asking you to take my word now. After leaving you last night I went straight to bed. If anyone locked it, it was not I."

"But—but what else could I think?" stammered Talbot, looking at Tom eagerly. "If only I could think—"

"Crooke was dogging you just now," said Tom. "He followed you, spied on you. He was obviously suspicious. Supposing it was not the first time he had done so. Supposing he was near at hand last night, and saw what took place in the Head's study."

"But—but—"

"I remember fancying I heard sounds once or twice," said Tom quietly. "It's quite possible Crooke was spying, Talbot. I never thought of looking at his bed at all—never dreamed of it, of course. If anyone locked you in the room last night it was Crooke, and not me, old man. Can't you see that? It came to me when Blake told me about this rumpus."

"Oh!" panted Talbot.

Into his mind flashed several significant things now. He remembered the look on Crooke's face at rising-bell that morning. He remembered curious glances and meaning stares. Nor could he miss seeing now that Racke's attitude towards him had been one of insolent curiosity.

He felt sure that Tom Merry had hit the right nail on the head.

"Tom," he faltered, "I'm sorry I doubted you, and refused to listen this morning. I ought to have known you could never do such a thing. But I was upset—bitterly hurt and disappointed. I didn't stop to think. What a fool I was. It was Crooke. I'm sure of it!"

"And I'm sure, also," said Tom grimly, his face dark and grave. "But tell me! Does Crooke know more than he saw last night? That is, if he did see anything."

"Yes," said Talbot, after a pause. "He must do now." Tom frowned deeply.

"That's bad," he muttered. "I'm afraid, Talbot, that you've got trouble to face—serious trouble. That cad will do his worst now."

Talbot shifted uneasily.

"Let him!" he said, setting his teeth, though his eyes shone. "But—but does this mean you are backing me up, Tom Merry—that you still believe in me?"

"Yes. You've given me your word that what you've done is above board, and that's enough for me," said Tom steadily. "I don't pretend that I like the position, and I don't understand it. It beats me. But I'm standing by you through this, old man."

"Though you know what that means?" Talbot's voice was husky.

"Yes."

"You're a good pal, Tom Merry," said Talbot. "I know I'm up against trouble if Crooke does do his worst. But I shan't mind so much when I know I've one good chum to stand by me. Now let's get in."

And they went in, Talbot's pale face looking happier than it had done that day and the previous day. He was thankful, at all events, that he had Tom Merry to stand by him.

But his quiet comfort was soon shattered. As they went up the School House steps Kildare appeared at the top. His glance rested on Talbot, and his lips set hard.

"Talbot, you're wanted in the Head's study at once!" he said curtly.

Talbot gave Tom Merry a grim look, and Tom's own heart sank. It was what he had feared. Gerald Crooke had lost no time.

CHAPTER 15.

The Bombshell!

"TALBOT!"

The Head's voice was deep and ominous.

Kildare had gone, and Talbot found himself alone with Dr. Holmes and Mr. Railton. The latter was looking astounded, and almost dazed. He eyed Talbot as if he had never seen the boy before. The Head himself looked grim, but there was more than a trace of sadness in his eyes as he looked at the boy before him.

"Talbot," he repeated quietly, "I have received a severe shock. A few minutes ago I found a note lying on my desk. It was printed in capitals, and it was unsigned. But it was addressed to me."

Talbot said nothing. He did not need telling from whom that note had come.

"In the ordinary way," resumed Dr. Holmes, in the same level tones, "I should have ignored such a document. It is my custom to throw unsigned communications into the wastepaper-basket. In this case I did not do so, because, at the moment of reading it, Mr. Railton came to me with a very curious and alarming report. But first of all I will ask you if you can explain the note."

And he tossed a folded note on to the table.

Talbot took the note with fingers that trembled. It was short, and it read as follows:

"To Dr. Holmes,—If you wish to know who broke open your desk and safe, and who released the prisoner from the woodshed, I can tell you. It was Reginald Talbot of the Shell. If you want proof of this search the lower cupboard in his study. His past career should convince you of his ability to use what you will find there."

That was all.

Talbot caught his breath.

The eyes of both Dr. Holmes and Mr. Railton never once left his face.

"Can you explain that, Talbot?" demanded the Head. "I did not ignore that wretched note, because Mr. Railton came to tell me that a story had reached his ears to the effect that you, Talbot, had released that burglar from the woodshed. He himself would have been inclined to dismiss the story as absurd, but for the fact that he came upon you in the woods in conversation with a very questionable character. Thus, taking everything into consideration, I came to the conclusion that a search was justified. That search, carried out in my presence, resulted in the discovery of—this!"

Talbot shivered as Dr. Holmes opened the rolled-up bundle before him on the desk. It was worse than he had feared, then. What a fool—what a thoughtless fool he had been to hide those tools in the cupboard. Nothing could explain away that.

"I am awaiting any explanation you may have to offer, Talbot," said the Head, in a deep, ominous voice.

Talbot did not answer.

"That you have an enemy at St. Jim's is obvious to me," went on Dr. Holmes. "None the less, that fact does not alter the matter. I will ask you two questions, Talbot, and I demand a direct and instant answer to both. Did you release that man from the woodshed and aid the rascal to escape?"

Talbot did not speak.

Silence.

"Very well. I will now ask you the second question. Did you enter my study last night and break open my safe and desk? Remember, the tools were found in your study, Talbot!"

Again the junior was silent. The Head asked his question again without result. The Housemaster looked more and more dismayed and grave.

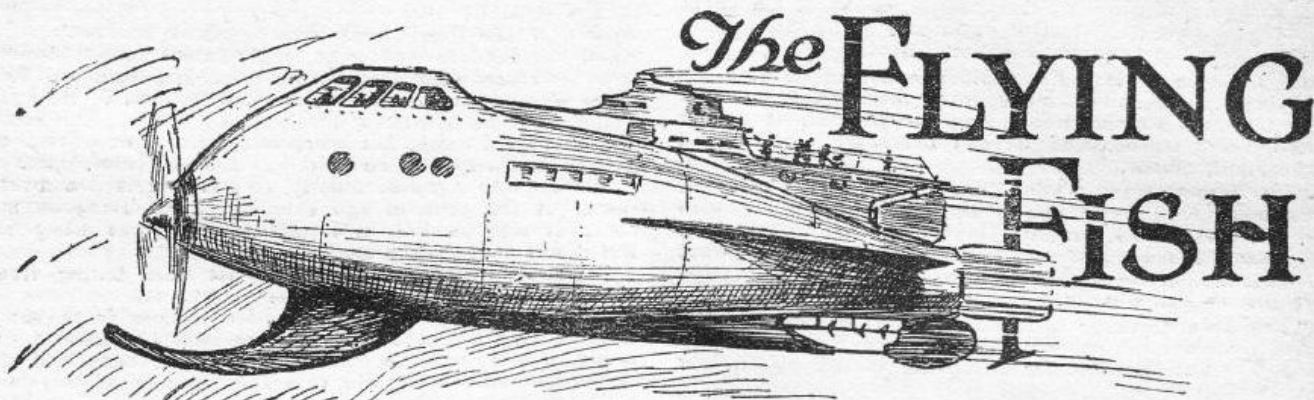
"I can only place one construction on your silence, Talbot," said the Head, in a harsh voice, at last. "But I will give you every chance. As you know, your past career is known to me. I allowed you to enter this school, believing that you had done with the past. I had great faith in you, my boy. Nor have I had reason since to believe you anything but honourable and upright until now. Am I to believe now that my trust was misplaced—that you have deceived me and the school? Am I to think that you are still in touch with your old associates, and are aiding them in this attack upon the school?"

Talbot's heart was beating almost to suffocation. But he held his head high. Whatever happened he would not show fear, nor would he cringe before his accusers. His voice was husky when he spoke at last.

"I can explain nothing, sir—yet," he panted. "I know things look black against me. I had expected this. But I ask—I beg of you, sir, to believe in me for a little longer. I

(Continued on page 28.)

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With their backs to the wall, Rodney and his friends make their last desperate stand against the onslaught of their merciless enemy. Little hope is in their hearts of ever leaving the Valley of No Escape alive!

INTRODUCTION.

Rodney Blake and his chum, Dan Lea, are captured by Prince Karagenski and taken aboard a strange-looking craft resembling in shape an airship and a boat combined. Almost immediately this huge craft rises from the surface of the sea and speeds them away to the "Valley of No Escape." Here, in charge of Herr Boronov, Colonel Stangerfeld, Wummborg, and a host of armed guards are thousands of prisoners building at desperate speed a fleet of Flying Fish. With this formidable fleet the heads of the conspiracy hope to conquer the whole world. Following a rumpus with Wummborg, Rodney to his amazement, comes face to face with his father, a news correspondent. Adrian Blake hurriedly explains that he has gained access to the conspirators' stronghold with a view to encouraging the half-starved slaves to revolt against their task-masters. The deception is discovered almost as soon as the revolution begins, and Rodney and Dan, in company with Karagenski's son, Sacha, are making their way via a secret passage to the castle with the intention of warning Adrian Blake when they are confronted by Kraft, another of Boronov's underlings. Dan and Sacha make good their escape, but Rodney is captured and sentenced to be shot together with his father, Lord Braxton and Karagenski, whom Boronov has accused of being a traitor. The guards' rifles are speeding forth their messengers of death when a shattering explosion rends the air and fills the courtyard behind Boronov and his companions with a vivid sheet of flame. Karagenski is the only one to fall, however. Dragging Rodney through the dense smoke and calling on Lord Braxton to follow, Adrian Blake makes for the underground passage.

"We'll join the others in the town," he cries. "Hurry, for a wasted minute might make the difference between life and death!"

(Now read on.)

Reinforcements from Russia!

IT was so evident to Rodney that his father's advice was right, and the crackling of burning advanced so swiftly towards them, that he lost no time in following Lord Braxton into the gap left by the open wall, and down the flight of steps. It seemed an endless journey in the dark, with Adrian Blake ahead throwing back now and again a warning to duck their heads, or to watch the uneven ground.

Finally, a ray of light showed itself in the distance, and presently the three of them emerged into that underground room where Rodney had first been restored to his father. It was empty, and the wooden door at the top of the steps was wide open, so they passed out into the street.

"Begorrah!" yelled a voice, as they emerged in a little group. "And if that isn't a case of great minds thinking alike, I'd like to know what is! Here are we just organising a grand visit to yez at the castle, and here ye are visiting us! What's the meaning of it at all, at all? And what has been going on up at the castle? We was arguing out whether it was safe to be going up there, or not."

It was, of course, Larry O'Hagan. Behind him, in the narrow flame-lit street, stood Dan and Sacha Karagenski, with a dense crowd of revolutionaries in the background. Rodney made his way eagerly to his friend and the Russian lad, realising more than ever how right his father had been, overjoyed that they had not been left behind in the castle as he had feared, anxious to know how it came that—though they had escaped by the secret way—the wall had been left open.

"There wasn't time to close it," Sacha explained. "When I turned and saw Kraft, I didn't know what to do. At first, when you threw yourself on him, Dan and I were going to your help. Then we saw more guards coming, and Dan said to me that the best way to help you was to get down to the town as soon as we could."

"That was just what I wanted!" nodded Rodney. "It seemed to me that it didn't need three of us to fetch help. And, as things have panned out, it didn't matter."

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Apparently the guards and Kraft had been so occupied in securing Rodney that they had not troubled to follow Sacha and Dan down the underground passage, for the latter had proceeded by it to the town without hindrance, found Larry O'Hagan after some little trouble, and were about to make a raid on the castle the same way, when Rodney and the others turned up, though the explosions taking place at the castle had been puzzling them.

The task of breaking the news of his father's death to Sacha fell to Rodney, when he in turn was explaining to him and Dan about the explosions and what had happened since they parted company, while Adrian Blake had apparently been doing much the same as he stood on one side talking with Lord Braxton and Larry O'Hagan.

"Somehow," said Sacha quietly and simply, "I am not surprised. Almost the last words father said to me in the castle were about his having a feeling that he was near the end. I asked him why, but he wouldn't say. He just said that the time might come any minute when I would find myself the new Prince Karagenski. He told me to be a white man and to play the game. I shall!"

He turned and looked up at the burning castle, which belonged to him as it had belonged to a Karagenski for generation after generation, and he squared his shoulders proudly as he looked across at Adrian Blake.

"Rodney has been telling me how my father died, Mr. Blake," he said. "I'm taking his place on your side. That castle up there belongs to me now, and so does this valley. I'm not going to rest till Boronov and the people who have been in it are broken, as they broke my father."

"Well said, prince," replied Adrian Blake, with emotion, laying a hand on Sacha's shoulder. "And, meantime, your castle has found its own way of clearing out friend Boronov and his little crowd. In the next hour or so, I think, they'll meet with no more mercy than they showed to your father."

News was presently received that Boronov and his confreres had been seen leaving the castle and making their way through the pine forest to the north of it, evidently hoping to get through and join the force of guards which was still holding the northern pass. The last had resisted every attack so far, and remained as the only flaw in what would otherwise have been a complete victory. And, in view of the reinforcements coming from Russia, likely to arrive at any time, the fact that the guards still held the pass was an alarming threat.

Adrian Blake and Larry O'Hagan spent the rest of that night in the capture of the pass, which was achieved just as the first rays of dawn lit the sky. The armed guards were driven back and their fortified posts occupied. Simultaneously, prevented from effecting a junction with the guards, Boronov and his party had been pursued back into the depths of the thick pine forest behind the castle, where they were being gradually forced back on the burning building.

"There's one thing about it, so far as they were concerned," chuckled Adrian Blake, when this news was brought to the headquarters in the Flying Fish, "they helped to make this The Valley of No Escape, so they can't complain if there's no way out of it for themselves. We needn't worry ourselves about them. When they get hungry they'll come in like lambs."

Freed of their oppressors for the first time since they had come to the valley, the revolutionaries gave themselves

over to an orgy of rejoicing. They raided the big stores from which their daily rations had been drawn and issued to them by the guards in the ordinary way, and with the discovery of stacks of liquor cases in the early afternoon commenced a bout of hard drinking throughout the town.

Meanwhile, Adrian Blake and Larry O'Hagan had been devoting themselves to sterner things. Although the northern pass had been taken, and the valley was now free from Boronov and his companions, who still sulked in the pine forest and must eventually give in, there yet remained for those who had been at the root of the victory the problem of how it was going to be used.

"To put it in a nutshell," Adrian Blake observed as they all sat in council in the Flying Fish, "we're all—as the comic song once said—'Dressed Up and with Nowhere to Go.' The valley, and everything in it, is ours; but we don't want to stop here. We've got to get away, and that's not going to be easy."

For one thing, there was the problem as to what should be done about the Flying Fish. All the incomplete ones had been destroyed. Adrian Blake had wasted no time, once complete victory had been gained, in searching for and finding the plans in the central office of the works. In spite of a careful study of the plans, neither Larry O'Hagan nor Adrian Blake felt capable of navigating the vessel. Had that been possible, of course, there would have been no problem about getting away. It looked, however, as if the vessel would have to be destroyed.

That would not only be disappointing, for Lord Braxton and the others were naturally anxious to have secured it for Britain's use, but it meant a hundred and one difficulties for themselves after leaving the valley on foot. Outside there lay an immense stretch of Soviet territory before any frontier and safety were reached.

"It's a positive tragedy that the man who invented the thing should be sitting there in his own creation like a great child and unable to help us!" Adrian Blake was saying as Rodney came into the dining-saloon of the ship where they had been talking over a much-needed meal, with Dr. Fraser and the man of whom Adrian Blake had spoken, Ashton, a blank-faced and speechless creature.

"Well," interposed Rodney, "as I said once before to Mr. O'Hagan, father, there's always Von Roden. He knows how to handle the vessel, and if he's given the option of doing that, or being put up against a wall and shot as they tried to do to us, I know which he'd prefer."

"Possibly!" agreed Adrian Blake. "It certainly is an idea! On the other hand, if he did agree to that, we'd be taking immense risks. There would be nothing to prevent him from doing what I should certainly do myself if placed in such circumstances—very much what Samson did when the Philistines amused themselves with him in a temple—pulled it down about their ears. He might destroy the ship, himself, and us, sooner than carry us as far as England. No. I don't think we can look for help from Von Roden, sonny!"

At that moment Sacha—who had been absent for some little time visiting the castle to see what, if anything, was left of his old home—came in hurriedly. His pale face was set so seriously that Adrian Blake was instinctively alarmed.

"Something wrong, lad?" he asked sharply. It was evident that Sacha had been running so hard that he was out of breath. It took him a minute or two before he could reply.

"The reinforcements from Russia have forced our men from the pass!" he gasped. "They're mostly too drunk to resist. Some of them are putting up a show, but they were completely taken by surprise without a shot being fired."

It was not until then, indeed, that a ragged splatter of bullets rang out across the valley. Adrian Blake and the Irishman hurried out in astonishment and anxiety. Never for a moment had they anticipated such a catastrophe was happening. At the last moment, while discussing the fruits of victory, it looked as if these were to be snatched from them.

By now the late afternoon sun was about to sink low over the peaks to the west of the valley. In the north of the town the rat-tat-tat of machine-guns had begun in an alarming strength. In the town itself the riotous singing of the almost helpless revolutionaries had suddenly been replaced by the silence of stupefaction. Men could be seen running to and fro, and seizing rifles hurriedly.

Rodney, snatching up binoculars, could see gathered at the edge of the pine forest beyond the castle a small group of people—Boronov and his friends come out of hiding to watch their release being effected.

The ragged fire in the town grew heavier with every minute, and still heavier rattled the machine-guns of the newly-arrived troops from the north. Gathered outside the Flying Fish in a group, Adrian Blake and his companions were momentarily impotent and uncertain what to do. Along the river edge of the town fleeing revolutionaries were scurrying towards the locks, east and west, the only means

of reaching the southern end of the valley, from which it became clear that the reinforcements were sweeping the town.

"It's no good our moving from here, Larry," Adrian Blake said presently. "The best thing for us to do is to wait till a good force of ours gets over here, and organise a last desperate stand on this side. We might hold the works easily for some time. Surely all our work isn't going to be so easily thrown away!"

A continuous stream of revolutionaries crossed by the locks; and presently—inspired by Adrian Blake and the Irishman, who roused them to desperation by reminding them what defeat meant at the hands of their late oppressors—a frenzied battle of defence was in progress all along the south of the river. The newly-arrived troops had so completely taken the town that they occupied the north river bank, firing across it heavily with machine-guns and rifles.

They had also come provided with bridge-building appliances, and were soon busy throwing two temporary structures across the stream, with Boronov and the others eagerly watching. They were hard at work when the sun vanished and darkness fell. On the other side the revolutionaries were doing all they could to hamper these operations by their fire, some under the direction of Adrian Blake and others guided by the Irishman.

But presently the fire slackened, and both Adrian Blake and the Irishman joined the others at the Flying Fish with grim faces. The revolutionary ammunition was giving out.

"I'm afraid it's the beginning of the end," muttered Adrian Blake, with bowed head. "We can't hope to do more than hold out for another hour, at the most. Anyhow, we've given them a good run for their money. Before they do get us we'll still have won a victory in one respect. We'll have completely ruined their purpose. We'll have burned the plans of poor Ashton's invention, and we'll have blown up this vessel with dynamite. Let's waste no time doing that, Larry."

Promptly, with the use of a petrol lighter, Adrian Blake lit a corner of those precious plans, and the others stood around while they were consumed to ashes. Then, with a nonchalant shrug of his shoulders, Larry O'Hagan indicated that he would walk across to the office in the works and fetch some dynamite sticks which were kept there.

He was just leaving the Flying Fish to do this, when shouts of fear rose from the works, and it was evident that something serious had happened. Adrian Blake had followed the Irishman to the door at this sound of alarm, peered out a moment, sniffed the air suspiciously, and dragged O'Hagan violently back by the arm.

"Inside—for your life!" he said. "And close the ship everywhere as tight as possible! We're in a cloud of poison-gas!"

The Cloud of Death!

FRENZIEDLY obeying Adrian Blake's shouted orders, Rodney and the others hurried about the big bulk of the airship, seeing to it that no windows or doors were open, and that no crevice was left through which the poisonous fumes could trickle sufficiently to be dangerous. Luckily, as it happened, this action was taken in time, though even then there had crept into the atmosphere a faint, acrid odour which made everyone cough and feel dizzy.

It was the boys' first experience of poison-gas, the horrible effects of which in the Great War they had read about. It was a terrifying sensation, standing there in the closed vessel, all its ventilators made fast, the atmosphere growing closer and closer, with nothing to be seen through the windows but a thick, yellowish haze, carrying death with it as it moved slowly along, blown by a slight southerly wind.

Would it pass, or would it linger, that cloud of death? they asked each other with bated breath, gradually becoming aware that, in spite of their efforts, there were places in the Flying Fish where the gas—even in tiny puffs—was finding its way through the heavy metallic outer casing. More than once Adrian Blake sniffed the air anxiously before turning round to O'Hagan.

"Didn't they carry any gas-masks on board during that last voyage, Larry? I thought they did. Some were taken out of the store, I know. And if much more gas gets in here we'll be dead men."

"I'll be after looking," said O'Hagan, turning to go doubtfully. "But I must say I never saw any, to my recollection."

A few minutes later he came back, shaking his head; and the others knew that there was no hope that way. It was a matter of waiting for their fate, with the acrid odour growing stronger and stronger.

Then, from the control-cabin—into which he had clambered, and from the windows of which he had been peering,

with Dan beside him—Rodney shouted on a note of excitement:

"It's moving away, dad! It's getting much clearer round the ship now!"

Apparently the southerly wind had suddenly begun to freshen. You could see the great yellow mass of poison death rolling now steadily northward, flung away from the airship in great whirling eddies. Those in the vessel felt a wave of relief. Gradually the atmosphere around them grew cooler and more pure. Good healthy oxygen was replacing the deadly fumes which had earlier trickled through the crevices.

"In another minute or two I think we might open up again, Fraser. Don't you?" said Adrian Blake, after a while; and the doctor, watching the moving yellow cloud—now thrust by the wind some way from the ship, and covering the river and town with its pall—nodded in agreement.

"There'll be a little lingering still, but not enough to hurt," he said. "I should try it, Blake. The only fear is that if the wind did suddenly veer round again—as it might in a mountainous district like this—we should get it all back on us. We'll have to watch out for that."

"We've certainly had a lucky escape," said Adrian Blake grimly, when the airship had been opened again and they stood outside, cautiously sniffing the air and finding it really pure again. "If we hadn't had this vessel for shelter, we must have been wiped out as other people seem to have been, poor devils!"

Around them—and indeed over the whole valley—a deep silence had fallen. Everywhere within view, evidently caught in the act of trying frenziedly to escape, lay the dead bodies of revolutionaries, killed by an invisible hand. The town lay hidden under that deep yellow cloud still, but it had passed over the river, and every minute more of the town became visible. There was no sign of movement to be seen there, only—if any of them used the binoculars—the motionless figures of the dead.

"How on earth can it have happened?" asked Rodney.

"Likely enough, in one of those last explosions in the works, one or both of the filled tanks have been struck," replied his father. "It's the only explanation I can give. At any rate, there's no one living in sight, and there won't be many left alive in the town, I imagine by this time. This has about put an end to the battle. There's no one left to do any fighting on our side, and I doubt if the other side will be fit or anxious to go on."

"And the blighters that ought to have been poisoned first are alive and kicking still!" intervened the Irishman, who had the binoculars turned on the castle and its surroundings high above the yellow cloud and outside its devastating path.

He passed the glasses to the others, who looked through them in turn. Outside the gas-cloud the night was clear and moonlit by now, and they could see a number of figures clustered on the height near the castle, evidently wondering what was happening down in the town. The vulture-like Boronov and his friends, Rodney saw, were foremost among them.

While they were alive, as Adrian Blake pointed out, the fight was not won. And now that the gas peril had passed, in case, too it should return, it was necessary to decide what was to be done.

"I still think we ought to try to get the old ship up in the air and out of this!" Rodney urged.

"And, begorra, I'm not so sure that the spalpeen's wrong, Blake!" exclaimed Larry O'Hagan. "As I said when you and I talked about it before, there's not really enough of us here to handle the ship, and with none of us knowing really how to navigate her it's taking terrific risks. Besides, then there wasn't the time for us to go into the workings of her, or start off with a proper chance. But now, with that gas-cloud between us, those fellows on the hill by the castle can't worry us yet."

"That's true enough!" agreed Adrian Blake. "It's a shame to blow up a fine craft like this, if there was a chance to get her back to England. Let's get inside and see if anything can be done."

There followed a long and earnest consultation between Adrian Blake and the Irishman in the control cabin, as they studied the levers and gadgets, over each of which a word in German gave some explanation of its use, and eventually O'Hagan went down into the engine-room to start up.

The motors had scarcely begun to purr softly down in the depths of the vessel, however, when the keen ears of Rodney, by the open door of the ship, caught a sound which made him glance quickly skywards in surprise. The sound was a low, droning one, growing louder and louder with every second, that of a motor—and more than one motor, too.

"Aeroplanes!" he called to his friend. "Bring me the glasses—quick, Dan!"

There were three of them, shining shapes clearly to be seen in the moonlight, flying high and circling overhead as if the valley was their destination and they were preparing to come down into it.

"Soviet planes, begad!" declared the voice of Larry O'Hagan. "That's what they are. Coming down, too. They're just making sure they've found the right spot. They'll have been sent from Moscow to help ould Boronov."

That was clearly true, for the three planes had scarcely descended over the valley to a lesser height than the group of people near the castle commenced signalling violently with a lantern. Droning loudly, the winged shapes came lower and lower till they were flying almost level with the castle, obviously searching for a landing-place.

One after the other they eventually found one on the large, flat piece of ground which the two lads remembered behind the castle, all the machines vanishing from sight, with Boronov and the rest racing round after them in a hurry.

"That's going to be awkward, me boys!" muttered the Irishman; and, followed by the two lads, went in to Adrian Blake in the control cabin and explained what had happened.

"Then we're done for, I'm afraid!" said Rodney's father, who had been hunched over the control table, from which he now turned with a gesture of disappointment. "That settles it. I can't make her budge. There's some catch about it, O'Hagan, that Von Roden knew, and you and I can't find. I'm afraid there's nothing for it but to blow her up, so that they can't get her, and do what we can afterwards to get ourselves out of this."

"Looks like it," nodded the Irishman gloomily. "And yet, begorra, I don't see how you're going to do that. Cock an eye out there, boys. It looks as if they're either after bombing us to bits, or settling down to capture us."

From the control cabin windows it could be seen that the three aeroplanes had risen again and were approaching, their engines roaring louder and louder. Their intention, evidently, was to descend near the airship. At the same time, apparently having crossed by the eastern lock, a fair-sized body of uniformed guards was nearing the ship at a trot, spread out in a line of attack.

"There's one thing about it," said Adrian Blake, "they won't bomb the vessel, or do her any harm, if they can help it. It's us they want. Well, we'll give them a fight for it. We're under cover, and they're not, and there are machine-guns on board."

Rodney and Dan were about to hasten away to where they knew these were when Adrian Blake called them back by a sudden exclamation.

"Half a minute!" he said. "Here's Von Roden with a white flag. We'd better hear what he's got to say first."

"It may be a trap!" laughed the Irishman warningly. But Adrian Blake made his may to the main door and opened it.

"We shan't come off any the worse for respecting the white flag, old friend!" he said.

Between Two Fires!

"WHAT is it?" he called out to the approaching German.

"Ve make you an offer!" answered Von Roden at once, with a grin of malicious triumph. "And unless you accept that offer, you cannot get away from here."

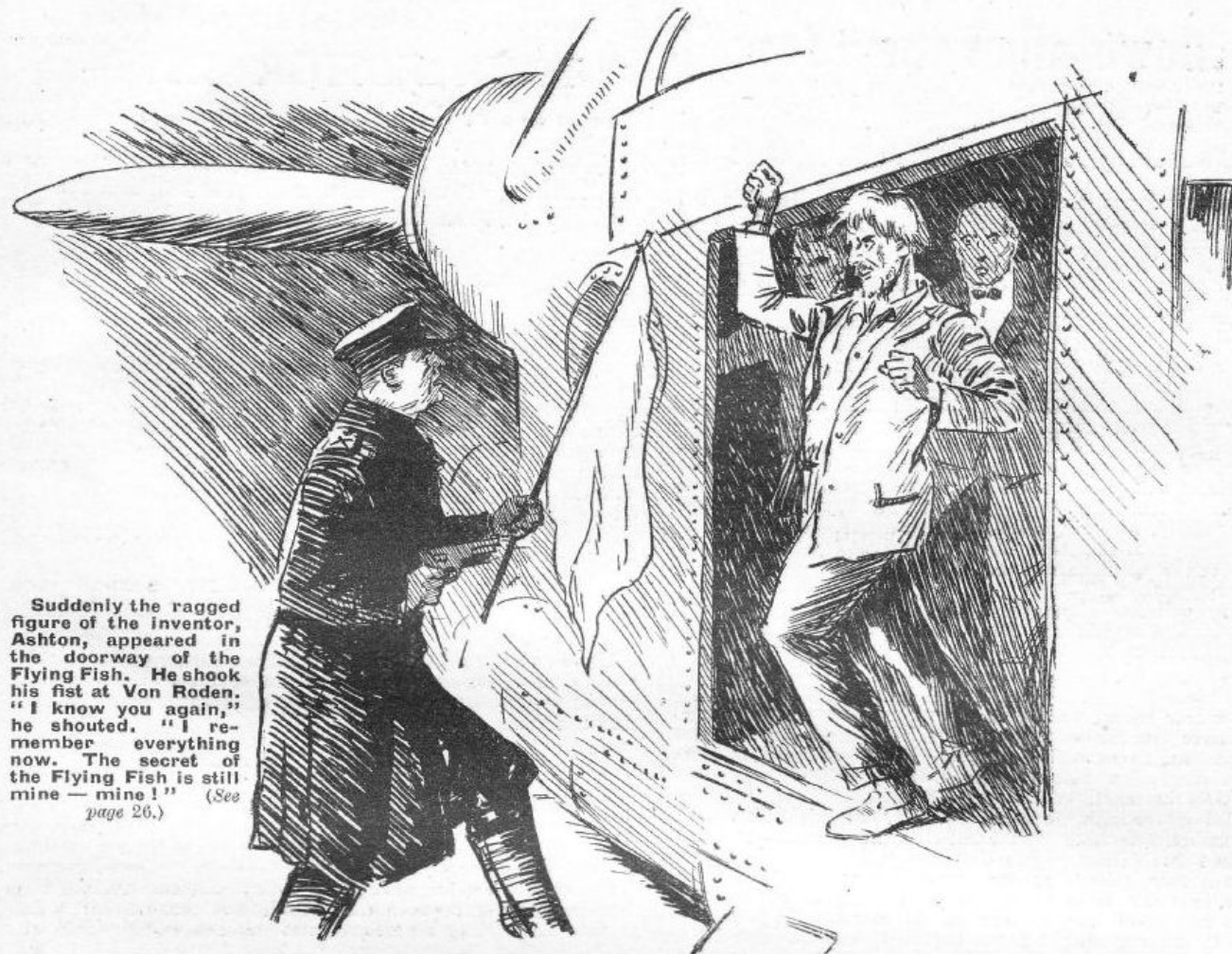
"And what is the offer?" demanded Adrian Blake.

"If you vas all leave that vessel at vonce, ve promise that you shall all be taken in these aeroplanes to some place outside Russia and be free to go where you vill."

"So that you can have the airship, and at the same time go back on your word and take us prisoners, Von Roden?" laughed Adrian Blake. "You must think us fools. Besides, you're not going to get this airship if we can help it—"

"You can't help it!" shouted Von Roden. "Here vas three aeroplanes surrounding you vith machine-guns, and my men vas there. It vas mad of you to attempt to defy us. You can't get away. No one but us knows the secret how to navigate the ship—"

"That's where you're wrong, you infernal blackguard!" yelled suddenly a voice behind Adrian Blake and the others, astonishing them as much as Von Roden was astonished. Through the group in the open door of the vessel there suddenly stalked a figure which took the breath away from Rodney—the figure of the mad inventor, Ashton, seemingly suddenly restored to reason in some miraculous way. He shook a fist at the German, shouting:



Suddenly the ragged figure of the inventor, Ashton, appeared in the doorway of the Flying Fish. He shook his fist at Von Roden. "I know you again," he shouted. "I remember everything now. The secret of the Flying Fish is still mine — mine!" (See page 26.)

"I know you again, Von Roden, though something's been wrong with my head lately since you struck me that blow from behind. That's what you said then. 'No one but me knows the secret how to navigate the ship,' you said. I remember now. That's why you tried to kill me, you fiend. But I remember now. The secret was mine, and remains mine—"

The voice of the inventor was interrupted by the sound of a shot, Von Roden having drawn an automatic and fired point blank at him under the cover of the white flag he was holding. The inventor staggered back, and the others hurriedly closed the door, against the metal exterior of which a rain of bullets could be heard pounding.

"The rotten blighter!" exclaimed Rodney furiously, while his father and Dr. Fraser were busy examining Ashton.

"No," the latter was saying faintly, "I'm all right. Get me to the controls—quick. The engines are going. I can get her up. Don't worry about me. Get me to the controls!"

Between the doctor and Adrian Blake the wounded man was taken to the control cabin and seated before the secret he alone knew. The Irishman hurried downstairs to the engine-room, and Rodney and Dan and Sacha settled themselves by the machine-guns. In a very few minutes the three boys had opened fire on Von Roden and his men, the Soviet aeroplanes, or anything within sight.

But, of course, now that the other side knew Ashton was on board and able to take the vessel aloft, they were no longer so careful not to damage the craft. Their great fear was that she should escape into the outer world. Yet, almost as soon as the lads at their machine-guns had begun to get busy, they realised that the Flying Fish was fast leaving the earth with her amazing vertical lift.

The get-away, brought about by a miracle, had begun. Already the Valley of No Escape was growing smaller and smaller below them. Cumbersomely, but roaring with fury as their engines spat and coughed into renewed activity, the Soviet planes were rising, too, in pursuit, climbing in circles slowly, but clearly determined to see that the Flying Fish did not even now escape.

For the moment, with her quick vertical rise, the latter had all the advantage, and for the first time for hours those on board her were able to breathe a little more freely. The three lads, anxious to know how the inventor was, left their guns and hurried to the control cabin, where he was

sitting with Dr. Fraser attending to his wound as well as he could.

"It was a question of patching him up for the time being," the latter told them presently. "It's a bad wound, though if he went to bed now he might easily enough recover from it. As it is—well, if we can completely outrace those Soviet planes and get down somewhere safe, he certainly may pull through yet. But I doubt it."

And meantime, in case the worst should happen to him before the vessel was entirely safe, Ashton was explaining to Rodney's father the secret of the vessel's control. To Rodney, listening to the explanation, it sounded extraordinarily simple once it was made clear, though, as the inventor pointed out, it was necessary also to understand the internal mechanism of the vessel, in case anything went seriously wrong.

That was not so simple or so easily to be done, and they could only hope that the vessel would continue to run as smoothly as she had begun. By now she had left far behind her that sinister valley with its poisoned dead and burning ruins. The three Soviet planes were still in pursuit, but were being kept well at a distance, and Rodney felt a thrill of triumph as he watched them from the circular outlook turret and told himself that it looked as if they were giving up the chase.

"I shouldn't make so sure about that, lad!" said Rodney's father grimly, as the boy reported the gradual slowing up of the chase. "It will be extraordinary if Boronov lets us off so lightly. He simply dare not let us take this vessel to England, if he can possibly help it. No; I can't believe he's giving up the chase yet awhile."

At this moment Sacha came running to the control cabin from the fore part of the vessel with news which proved how true Adrian Blake's prophecy had been.

"There's a large squadron of planes risen ahead of us," he called out breathlessly. "Nine of them altogether. They're a good way below us as yet, and I only caught sight of them by accident, but they seem to be trying to cut us off!"

(It seems as though luck is against our intrepid adventurers aboard the Flying Fish. But fortune may turn in their favour yet. Who knows? Be sure you read next week's thrilling instalment of this gripping serial.)

The Downfall of the "Toff"!

(Continued from page 23.)

"swear I am aiding no one in an attack on St. Jim's—far from it."

"Is that all you can tell me, Talbot?" the Head asked angrily. "I demand an instant and straightforward answer to my questions, boy!"

"I'm sorry, sir, dreadfully sorry, but I cannot explain."

Dr. Holmes looked at Mr. Railton, and then he set his lips.

"Very well, Talbot," he snapped, after a tense pause. "In view of your previous good character, I will give you yet another opportunity to speak. I will give you until nine o'clock to-morrow morning to think matters over. The finding of those tools shall not be reported to the police yet. But I warn you solemnly that you are in a very serious position indeed. Should the charges against you be proved, the matter may be taken out of my hands. I think you understand what I mean, Talbot. Think your position over well; and I trust, for your own sake, my boy, that you will decide wisely, and will give me a frank and honest explanation before it is too late. Mr. Railton, will you kindly see Talbot to the punishment-room?"

"Very good, sir."

And, with the Housemaster's grasp on his shoulder, Reginald Talbot left the study, the Head's ominous words ringing in his ears.

The whole school was buzzing with the news that evening. The ringing of the fire-bell, and the burglar alarm, had not provided such a sensation as this. It was amazing, almost incredible. The fellows could scarcely believe their ears when they heard it.

Yet it seemed true enough. More than one fellow had seen Talbot led away and locked in the punishment-room for the night.

Tom Merry & Co. were utterly dismayed.

And in the punishment-room, alone and sick at heart, Talbot sat on the bed, his head in his hands. What should he do? What could he do? To tell all would be an act of black ingratitude to Jim Crow, the man who trusted him not to "split," who had sacrificed his own liberty—three years of his life—that he should not bear the brand of a felon. Jim Crow, rascal as he undoubtedly was, had been a loyal pal. Was Talbot to prove disloyal, even by doing what was his duty?

No—a thousand times no! Whatever else came of went, he knew he could never betray Jim Crow's trust in him. Yet it was hard—bitterly hard! Talbot's mind was torn with doubt and distress as he pondered the situation, and thought of what the future held for him—dishonour and a ruined career, and disgrace and bitter disappointment for his uncle, Colonel Lyndon, and all who believed in him.

Yet Tom Merry would stand by him, he was sure of that. And in that thought Talbot found comfort in his dark hour.

THE END.

(Whatever you do, chums, don't miss the grand sequel to this yarn, entitled: "TALBOT'S ENEMY!" which will appear in next week's bumper issue of the GEM. And what's more be sure you get the next dandy FREE picture card—unquestionably the best in the series—depicting a giant rocket "shooting the moon." You can only make sure of obtaining this by ordering your copy WELL IN ADVANCE!)



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ALL ABOARD FOR THE MOON!

I dare say most of my readers, at some time or other, have read stories having as their plot the thrilling idea of a trip to the moon. The thought of shooting away from mother earth, with everything depending on the space-destroyer that is taking you towards another planet at appalling speed, grips the imagination of anyone with a spark of adventure in him. That is why I am sure our next free picture card will prove to be one of the most popular of the lot. "By Rocket to the Moon" as it is called, gives a vivid impression of an amazing rocket machine starting on its journey through space. Don't spoil your set by missing this fascinating addition to the GEM's Picture Gallery of the Future.

ORDER NEXT WEDNESDAY'S GEM TO-DAY!

I know you're all looking forward to a fitting sequel to this week's powerful story of the chums of St. Jim's, and you can take it from me that it will be right up to your expectations. From the title:

"TALBOT'S ENEMY!"

you can guess that Reginald Talbot of the Shell, the one-time Toff, is still "up against it." But without spoiling things in advance, I'll just tell you that, thanks to his own pluck, the loyal junior wins through in the end. 'Nuff said!

Other features for next week that you'll vote A.1., are a further instalment with thrills galore of our serial, "The Flying Fish!" more replies from our cheerful answer man, the ORACLE, and last, but not least, another interesting article on the L.M.S. Royal Scot, Locomotive No. 6109.

NOW, YOU POETS!

Ronald Gravesshaw, of Nottingham, is very worried because, in the writing of the last verse of a lengthy poem he finds himself absolutely up against it for a word to rhyme with month. He appeals to me to help him out, and, although it is very gratifying and proper, I'm afraid I can't supply him with a word that will do the trick. No, and neither can anyone else, for you see there is no word that will rhyme with the word month. So, Ronald, start that last verse again, forget the existence of the word month, and everything will round off nicely, I feel sure. Which reminds me, this talk of rhyming, why don't you and other GEM readers have a shot at writing Greyfriars Limericks? Our Companion Paper, the "Magnet," awards handsome leather pocket-wallets for winning Limericks. Get a copy of the "Magnet" to-day and see for yourselves.

Cheerio, chums,

YOUR EDITOR.

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