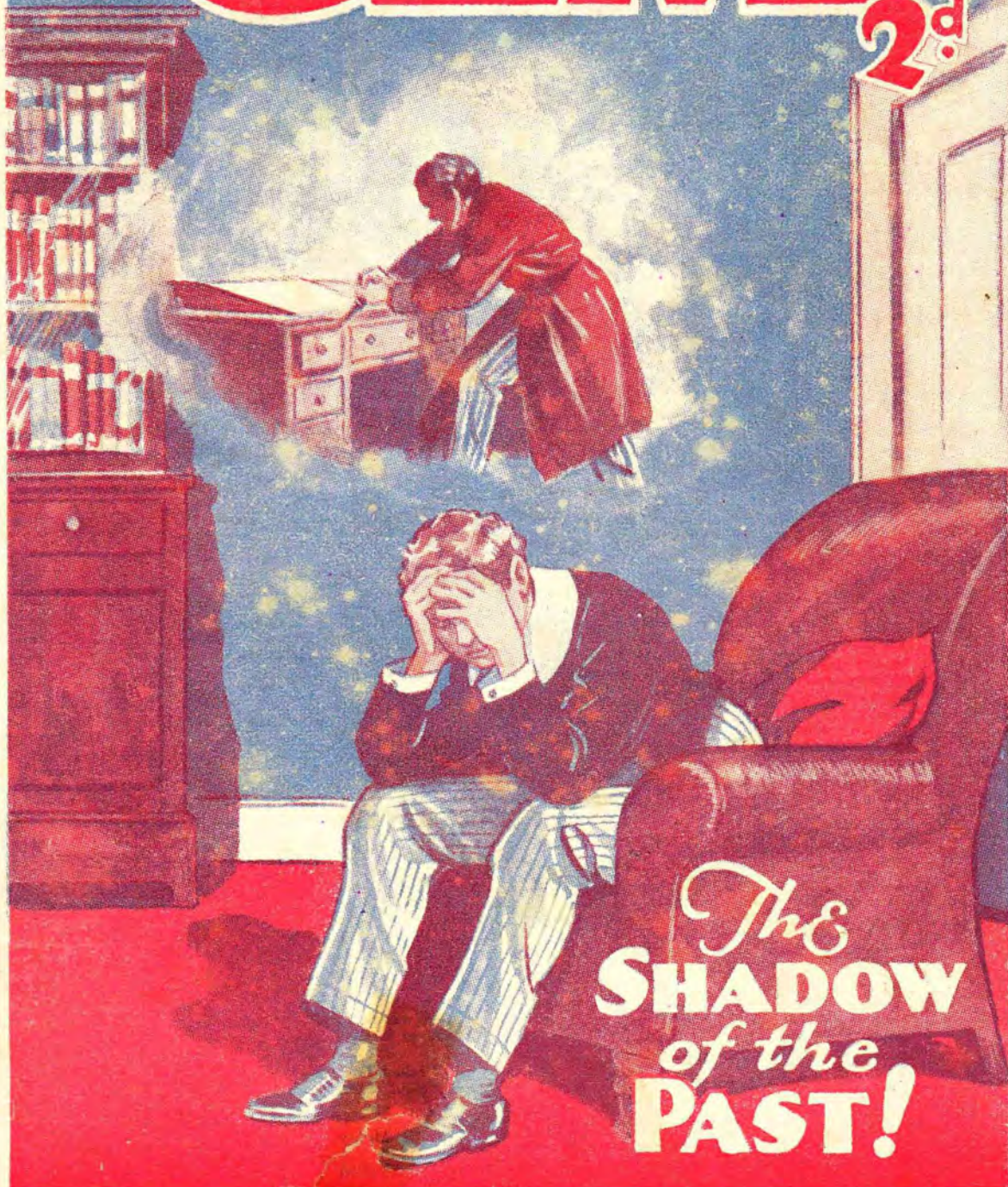


GREAT YARNS OF ST. JIM'S AND GREYFRIARS INSIDE!

The GEM ^{2d}



WHO STOLE THE FUNDS OF THE FIFTH FORM FOOTBALL CLUB? THE FINGER OF SUSPICION POINTS TO REGINALD TALBOT!

The SHADOW of the PAST!



"Talbot, I ask you to allow the boy to search your person," said the Head! "He is welcome, sir!" replied the Toff. Toby proceeded to search Talbot's pockets. Through the half-open door the juniors watched with all their eyes.

CHAPTER 1.

Landed at Last!

"COME in!" sang out Tom Merry cheerily.

There were four to tea in Tom Merry's study in the School House. A cheerful fire blazed in the grate, and the light gleamed upon a well-spread table.

Outside, in the old quadrangle of St. Jim's, the dusk was deepening into night, and a keen wind rustled the branches of the old elms. But within the study all was bright and cheery, and Talbot, their guest, looked particularly "chippy."

Talbot's study was next door, with Gore and Skimpole; but Talbot much preferred tea with the Terrible Three. And they were very glad to have him. And the talk was running cheerily on football when a tap came at the study door.

It was a slight, timid tap, as if the applicant for admission was in doubt whether to knock at all. But, in response to Tom Merry's hearty call, the door of the study opened.

Levison of the Fourth entered the study.

"Hallo!" said Tom Merry, not very cordially.

The cad of the Fourth was not very popular in that study. He was not very popular at all, as a matter of fact.

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The Terrible Three had had unpleasant experiences of his underhand maneuvers and customs—and Talbot had been made to feel what his enmity was like. The four Shell fellows stared at him inquiringly.

"Anything wanted?" asked Monty Lowther, proceeding with his tea.

"I—I just looked in—" said Levison, hesitating.

"Good! And now you can look out again!" said Manners, who was an extremely plain-spoken youth. "Good-bye!"

"I—I—"

"Shut the door after you," said Manners.

Levison gave him a dark look, and seemed about to make an angry reply. But he checked himself. Evidently he had not come there to quarrel with the Terrible Three.

Tom Merry's expression changed a little as he regarded the cad of the Fourth more closely. Levison was not looking his usual aggressive self. The sneering expression that was habitual to him had vanished. His face was pale, and his brow had a wrinkle in it that told of worry.

"Nothing wrong, I hope?" asked Tom Merry good-naturedly. "Shut up, Manners!"

"Oh rats!" said Manners.

"And many of them!" said Monty Lowther. "Run away, Levison!"

Talbot did not speak, but he looked

very curiously at the Fourth Former. Levison had been his enemy, at a time when his enmity made a good deal of trouble for the Shell fellow. But Talbot had known worry enough in his experience to make him sorry for any fellow who was "up against" it.

"Cheese it, you chaps!" said Tom Merry. "File in, Levison! If there's anything up, get it off your chest!"

Manners and Lowther sniffed. They did not like Levison, and they did not trust him, and they considered Tom Merry a great deal too good-natured.

But that was Tom Merry's way.

"I—I just looked in—" Levison stammered again. "I—I wanted to speak to you, Tom Merry. I—I know it's no good, but I thought I'd speak to you. I'm in trouble."

"Sorry!" said Tom politely.

He was sorry, right enough, but, really, he could not see what Levison's trouble had to do with him. They were not friends, and had never been on good terms.

"Been looking for trouble, and found some, I suppose?" Monty Lowther asked humorously.

"Yes," said Levison, somewhat to Lowther's surprise. "I've been looking for trouble, and I've found it—bad!"

"You don't mean to say you've got the check to come to Tommy to help you out?" demanded Manners indignantly.

"Shut up, Manners!" implored Tom

A POWERFUL YARN OF HUMAN INTEREST, IN WHICH THE SHADOW OF THE TOFF'S PAST DARKENS HIS NEW LIFE AT ST. JIM'S.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD

Merry. "Give the chap a chance to speak."

Levison's pale face flushed.

"I—I've got landed at last!" he muttered.

Lowther snorted.

"Oh, I smell a mouse! Any ass could have told you what you were heading for, Levison! You've been following a bit too closely the shining example of Cutts. Is that it?"

"That's it," said Levison, with unexpected meekness.

"Then it serves you right if you're landed!" said Lowther coolly. "Cutts, Gilmore, Tresham, and St. Leger, and that set in the Fifth, they're all rotters; but they know how to look after themselves. And they've got the money to pay up when they make fools of themselves; you haven't. You've been following their lead, without the cash or brains to keep yourself out of a scrape. If you've come a cropper, it's your own business. Like your cheek to come here, I think!"

"Monty, old man, you talk too much," said Tom Merry.

"Bow-wow!" said Lowther.

"I think the same as Monty——" began Manners warmly.

"Then don't let's have it all over again," said Tom Merry, laughing. "Do give Levison a chance to speak. If he wants some good advice, we can give it to him, I suppose. Don't hit a chap when he's down!"

"Well, I don't want to do that," said Monty Lowther, relenting a little. "Get it out, Levison! What's the matter?"

"I—I owe some money!"

Another emphatic sniff from Lowther. "Might have guessed that! Backed the wrong horse—what?" he growled. "Been taking some of Cutts' or Tresham's tips, and they haven't come off?"

"Cutts thought it was a cert, but it wasn't. I—I must have five quid!" said Levison desperately. "I've come here as a last chance—not that I think it's any good."

"Quite right there!" said Lowther. "Quids don't grow on study tables, and you don't pick fivers from the bushes. Better go to your precious pals in the Fifth! They've got you into this; let 'em get you out!"

"They—they can't! They're all hard hit. I've been to them."

"Do you mean that you owe somebody the money?" asked Talbot, speaking for the first time.

"Yes."

"Schoolboys can't be made to pay gambling debts!"

"Of course they can't," said Tom Merry. "And they oughtn't to, either. You're all right, Levison!"

"It isn't a gambling debt. I—I've settled that. I had to. And—and I bought something on tick, and—and sold it to raise the money," said Levison, in a low voice. "Now I've got the bill—with a threat if I don't pay! I—I bought a bike on tick, you see, and—and I've paid something off it; but it was supposed to be for cash, and Hatney's won't wait any longer. They want the bike back at once, or the rest of the money. And—and I haven't the bike. And I can't raise the money."

"My hat!"

"And—and they're going to send the

bill to the Head to-morrow if I don't pay!" groaned Levison. "Then there'll be an inquiry. My pater's hard up; I know he won't pay. The Head will want to know where the bike is; and then it will all come out! It means the finish here for me!"

The Shell fellows stared grimly at Levison.

"Do you know what you've done?" said Manners. "You've swindled! What you've done is the same as stealing!"

"I—I've got to get out of it somehow. I—I shall have to leave St. Jim's if it all comes out."

"Jolly good thing for St. Jim's!" growled Manners.

"If—if some of you fellows would help me——" muttered Levison wretchedly.

"Try your own pals!" growled Lowther.

"I—I've tried them. Mellish and Gore can't help me, and Crooke won't."

"Nice pals!" snorted Manners.

"I—I know I've no right to come to you chaps. We've never been on good terms. But—but——"

"We can't do anything, Levison," said Tom Merry. "It's rather too thick, you know. I'm sorry, but we couldn't raise five pounds, any more than we could raise five hundred. Five shillings would be nearer the mark."

Levison gave a groan.

"Well, I'm sorry, too," said Lowther, after some consideration. "Still, I must

When Reginald Talbot saves Ernest Levison from the sack, the Toff's generous action is not forgotten by his old enemy. And the time comes when Levison pays his debt in full!

say that if you're landed at last, Levison, you've only got yourself to thank. You can't say you haven't had warning; and yet you would keep on playing the goat!"

"Cheese it, Monty!"

"Well, I can't stand him, and never could!" growled Lowther. "What right has he to come here and tell us he's been swindling, as if it were a thing any chap might do?"

Levison's eyes glittered. He had come there for nothing; he could see that. Tom Merry's good nature was well known, and the cad of the Fourth had presumed upon that knowledge. If Tom had had the money, there was little doubt that he would have handed it out, even to a fellow he disliked and despised, to save that fellow from ruin. But he hadn't the money, or anything like it, and that settled it.

The wretched junior had humiliated himself for nothing. And as there was nothing to gain by further servility, Levison's real nature showed itself at once.

"Well, if you can't lend a fellow a hand, don't give me jaw!" he broke out savagely. "I never expected anything of you, anyway. And as for not being able to stand swindlers, you seem to be able to stand a convicted thief pretty well."

Talbot of the Shell turned deathly pale.

He had not said a word to call for that outburst of insult from the cad of the Fourth; but Levison's meanness had no bounds. He could strike the Terrible Three through their chum, and he was quivering with spiteful rage and revenge.

Talbot, before he became a scholarship boy at St. Jim's, had had a peculiar past. It was well known in the school, and it was agreed on all hands that it was to be buried in oblivion. It was like Levison to drag it to light.

The Terrible Three jumped up with one accord.

"You rotten cad!" shouted Monty Lowther.

"You—you worm!" blazed out Tom Merry. "What has Talbot done to you? Get out!"

Levison sneered—quite his old sneer. "You're down on me. You're glad I'm landed! And yet you chum up with a fellow who's been a criminal—a crackman—a thief——"

Levison got no farther. Tom Merry's sympathy had been quite crushed by that attack on Talbot. His face was flushed with anger, and he strode straight at Levison, his eyes blazing.

Lowther and Manners were not far behind. The three Shell fellows grasped Levison, and he went spinning through the doorway.

"There, you cad!" panted Tom Merry. "Now come in again, and we'll smash you!"

Levison did not come in again. He picked himself up in the passage and limped away.

Manners slammed the door after him. "Don't mind the cad, Talbot, old chap," said Tom, a little awkwardly.

"I don't," said Talbot. "It's true what he said. He knows my past. It's hard that I should never hear the end of it. But I deserved it before, if I don't deserve it now. I can stand it."

"The rotten cad!" growled Lowther. "My hat! I've a jolly good mind to go after him and wipe up the floor with him!"

"Don't," said Talbot quietly.

"Well, he's going to be sacked from the school, most likely, and that will be a jolly good thing all round," said Manners.

The chums of the Shell settled down to their tea again. But there was a cloud on Talbot's brow now, and the Terrible Three were feeling a little constrained. Levison's visit had had the effect of banishing the cheery atmosphere of the study, and tea was finished almost in silence.

CHAPTER 2.

The Mighty Fallen!

CUTTS of the Fifth did not look happy.

There was gloom in Cutts' handsome study, the headquarters of the "blades" of St. Jim's.

Four youths were there—Cutts himself, the dandy of the Fifth, and Gilmore, Tresham, and St. Leger, his admiring disciples and followers.

The "blades" of the Fifth had fallen upon evil days. Luck had gone against them. As a rule, Cutts' luck was phenomenal. It was not only that he was always successful in keeping his little peculiar ways a secret from the powers that were, and escaping the "sack," which would have rewarded any

fellow who was less acute and resourceful, but his "dead certs" sometimes were really certs, and Cutts generally had plenty of money in his pockets.

His followers had great faith in him. But Cutts' luck had failed him at last, and the latest plunge had been a ghastly failure. Cutts was "stony" with difficult debts to meet, and Gilmore and Tresham and St. Leger were in the same bad box, to say nothing of their wretched imitator in the Fourth Form—Levison.

The heroes of the "smart set" at St. Jim's were feeling exceedingly sorry—not for their conduct, by any means, but for themselves.

Gloomiest of all was the face of Cyril Tresham. The other three seniors had resources in one way or another upon which they could draw to tide over the evil time; but Tresham hadn't, and his face was pale and lined with anxiety.

And the looks his comrades gave him were far from friendly. It was, as Cutts remarked, a case of each for himself, and they had no time to bother about other people's troubles. And Tresham, who had asked his friends to help him out, had to make the best of that reply.

"But something will have to be done, Cutts," said Tresham desperately. "I'm in deeper than you are—right up to the neck."

Cutts laughed harshly. "You can't be in much deeper," he said. "I'm broke to the wide. My allowance is booked up to the end of the term."

"Same here," remarked St. Leger—"worse than that. I've had to sell most of my things; and the fellows have been asking me what I sold my bike for. I've got the prospect of being penniless till I can screw out something from home—and I've had too much lately to get any more in a hurry."

"As for me, I'm fairly done," said Gilmore. "Only that Banks has agreed to give me time, I shouldn't know which way to turn. And he won't wait long, either. The fact is, we've made a ghastly muck of it this time, and we've got to face it."

"Yes, but—"

St. Leger made an angry gesture. "For goodness' sake, Tresham, don't ask us to bear your troubles!" he exclaimed tartly. "Can't you see we're loaded up with our own? If you couldn't afford to face bad luck, what did you plunge for? It looked like being a good thing for us all round, but there was a chance of coming a cropper, as you ought to have known."

"Cutts said it was a good thing," said Tresham sullenly. "I followed his lead."

"Don't put it on me!" growled Cutts. "I did think it was a good thing; but the horse was beaten, and there's an end of it. I can't see that you're worse off than we are. The bookie will wait a bit for his tin—he'll have to. It wouldn't pay him to show you up. He wouldn't get his money then, anyway. You'll get time on your debts."

"Besides, you've got resources that we haven't," said Gilmore in a low voice. "You're treasurer of the Form footer club, and if you borrowed some of the funds for a week or two nobody would be the wiser."

"Chuck that!" said Cutts sharply. "Don't make bad worse! Tresham will have to account for all the money in his hands as treasurer, and if he

couldn't do it, it would mean trouble. I wouldn't stand by him, for one, if he were caught swindling the club."

"You wouldn't?" said Tresham, with a haggard look at the dandy of the Fifth.

Cutts shook his head decidedly.

"No, I wouldn't! Having a little flutter is all very well, but I bar swindling. If you touched the club funds it would be theft. And, as a member of the club, I'd be as down on you as anybody. I warn you of that!"

Tresham bit his lip.

"But—but suppose I—"

"I'm not going to suppose anything about it," said Cutts. "Leave money alone that isn't yours. You'll get through somehow. If you can't—well, take it like a man, without becoming an embezzler and a thief. You'd better keep your head shut on that subject, Gilmore. No need to make bad worse."

"Well, it was only a suggestion," said Gilmore. "I wouldn't do it myself, but—"

"Then don't advise Tresham to do it. It's bad enough without that; besides, it couldn't be hidden for long. There are some good-sized bills to be paid this week or next, and then it would come out. And Lefevre would be down on Tresham like a shot if he suspected anything was wrong."

"But—but suppose—" repeated Tresham wretchedly.

"Oh rats!"

Knock!

"Mum's the word!" said Cutts hastily.

"Come in!"

Levison came into the study and closed the door behind him. The four Fifth Formers glared at him. Levison was the person they least desired to see just now.

"What do you want, confound you?" snapped Cutts.

"I—I want help!" said Levison sullenly. "Look here, Cutts—"

Gerald Cutts pointed to the door.

"You've been here cadging before," he said. "Don't I keep on telling you that I'm broke to the wide? I can't help myself, let alone help you. I don't know that I'd help you, anyway. I'm not a philanthropist, and I've got no sympathy for lame ducks. Tresham's been hammering at me for money already, and I haven't any. Do you think I can supply cash for every fool who plunges and loses?" asked the dandy of the Fifth in an exasperated tone.

"Tresham could raise some money if he liked," said Levison. "I could tell him how to do it—"

"Cheese it! Get out!"

"Well, I'll tell you this!" said Levison bitterly. "If I get the sack—and it looks like it now—somebody else will suffer, too."

Cutts shrugged his shoulders.

"Which means that you will tell tales about us?" he sneered. "Well, go ahead and do it. Something more than your word will be wanted—especially as you're known to be an habitual liar, Levison. If you say a single word against me, I'll have you up before the Head and demand an inquiry."

"Wha-a-at!"

"And where would you be then?" demanded Cutts contemptuously.

"Your word against mine. And you'd be flogged for slandering me, and sacked, too, and serve you right."

The other Fifth Formers, who had looked uneasy for a moment, burst into

a laugh at the expression on Levison's face. Levison clenched his hands. It was true enough. He knew that Gerald Cutts had covered up his tracks very carefully. He could make an accusation if he liked, but he would not have an atom of proof to offer in support of it. Cutts had taken good care of that.

"Now you'd better clear," said Gilmore. "We've got bother enough without a rotten fag troubling us, too."

Cutts threw open the door.

"Travel!" he said tersely.

"Look here, Cutts—"

"Will you get out, or shall I pitch you out?" said Cutts savagely. "I tell you I'm fed-up with you!"

"Pitch me out, and I'll go straight to the Housemaster and tell him what I know," said the junior, between his teeth.

"All serene! Go, if you like!" Cutts grasped the Fourth Former by the shoulders, and swung him out of the study. Levison staggered across the passage, and reeled against the opposite wall. "Now go and do as you like, you young cad!"

The door slammed on Levison.

"I—I say, do—do you think he'll go to Railton?" stammered Tresham nervously.

Cutts laughed jeeringly.

"Of course he won't! He daren't!

But I don't care if he does!"

"You—you don't care?"

"Not a scrap! Do you think I haven't foreseen anything of the kind? All we've got to do is stick together and deny it," said Cutts coolly. "Where is his proof coming from?"

"I—I suppose you're right, Cutts. But—but what is going to be done about me?" said Tresham, returning to that subject wearily.

"That's for you to think out," said Cutts shortly.

"I must get some money somehow."

"Well, you know that we haven't any, and can't raise any. What's the good of telling us that you must have money?" said Cutts irritably.

"You must see that it's no good, Tressy, old man," said St. Leger. "I'd stand by you like a shot if I could, but I'm in the same hole."

"So are we all," said Gilmore.

Tresham nodded.

"I—I suppose you can't help me," he said. "Goodness knows what's going to be done! I—I must try to think it out."

He left the study with downcast face and heavy step. Cutts gave a sniff of contempt as he departed. The cool, hard-hearted, iron-nerved dandy of the Fifth had no sympathy for a lame duck. A fellow who could not face the music in bad times should keep clear of the risk—that was Cutts' view.

Tresham went slowly along the passage to his own study. The door was open, and Levison was there. The Fourth Former was standing close to Tresham's desk, which was locked. He swung round suddenly as the Fifth Former came in. Tresham gave him an angry look.

"What are you doing at my desk?" he asked.

"Nothing. It's locked, anyway. Look here, Tresham, I've got a suggestion to make," said Levison, in a low, eager voice. "You've got the funds of the Fifth Form club, and I know it must be a good amount."

"Hold your tongue!"

"Nobody will know. You could replace it afterwards. We might have

a stroke of luck before you'd be called on to pay up."

Tresham flung himself into a chair with a groan.

"Shut up, you young idiot! You don't know what you're talking about! Get out!"

Levison gave him a startled look. The haggard misery in the senior's face seemed to tell him a secret. He drew a quick, sharp breath.

"I—I say, Tresham—you don't mean to say you've already—"

Tresham started to his feet, passing suddenly from despairing weakness to savage anger, after the manner of a weak character.

"What do you mean, you young cad? Get out of my study! What are you daring to insinuate? By gad, I'll—"

Levison whipped out of the study as Tresham caught up a stick. He hurried away, with a new expression on his face.

"My hat!" muttered Levison. "The silly fool—the silly ass! He's dipped into the funds already—that's what's the matter with him. He's in a worse hole than I am, and serve him right! What am I going to do?"

Levison went to his study in the Fourth Form passage to think it out. There was evidently no help to be had from the "blades" of the Fifth. Matters were very bad with the heroes of the "smart set," and never had a set of doggish youths had so much reason for sincerely repenting of their doggishness.

CHAPTER 3.

A Friend in Need!

"CAN I come in?" Talbot asked the question as he looked into Levison's study.

Levison was alone there. He was seated at the table, with his elbows resting there, and his head on his hands. He was plunged in deep and despairing thought, and he had not heard a knock at the door. He looked up quickly, however, at the sound of Talbot's voice, and turned a stare of hatred upon the Shell fellow.

Talbot held the open door in his hand and hesitated. There was a curious expression upon his handsome face—an expression Levison did not understand, and did not choose to understand.

There was only spite and hatred in Levison's face as he looked at the sturdy Shell fellow.

"Oh, come in!" said Levison, with bitter sarcasm. "I'm glad to see you! It must be amusing for you to see me like this."

Talbot flushed a little, but he came into the study and closed the door behind him.

"I haven't come for that," he said.

"Oh, pile in—it's your turn now," said Levison, rising to his feet and facing the Shell fellow. "You're up, and I'm down. Quite a change, isn't it? When you were first here, I was up, and you were down."

"And you were pretty hard on me," said Talbot quietly.

"I knew you for what you were. I knew you were a thief—that you'd shoved yourself into the school under false pretences. When it came out that you were the Toff, the son of a crackman, and a crackman yourself, all the fellows had to admit that I was right; but they were down on me all the same. I expected that. Well, now

you've got your revenge. I tried to get you kicked out of the school because you were a criminal. You'll see me kicked out in a day or two because I'm a swindler. Then I hope you'll be satisfied."

"I—"

"All the same, I'm not so bad as you are," said Levison. "I don't have your luck, that's all. You made the Head believe that you'd reformed. Rot! You even dodged the police, and earned the King's pardon for stopping a Spaniard from blowing up a troop-train! And they gave you a Founders' Scholarship for it, along with the pardon; and you've the cheek to come back to the school—the Toff, the crackman—setting up as a St. Jim's fellow! You're staying here, and I'm going to be sacked. Where's the justice of that?"

"But—"

"You're staying here—popular with everybody, although a few months ago you were in a gang of criminals!" said Levison venomously. "How's your old friend Hookey Walker? Have the police caught him yet? I suppose you keep up your acquaintance with him?"

"I have heard nothing of him."

"Perhaps. It would pay you to keep honest now, I suppose!" sneered Levison. "You're making it pay pretty well. St. Jim's has swallowed you whole. No reference to your past, in case it should hurt your feelings. Pah! You'll hear enough of it from me, till I get the order of the boot, anyway!"

"Probably."

"I shall be called a swindler; but what's that to what you've done before your precious reform, which I don't believe in, for one!" said Levison passionately. "Now you come here to gloat over me, you thief—you criminal!"

Talbot's face went very pale. "Ah, that touches you on the raw, does it?" sneered Levison.

"Yes, it does."

"What did you come here for, then? Did you expect me to make polite speeches?"

"No. I came here to be a friend to you, if you'll let me."

"Oh, cheese it!"

"I came here to help you out of your scrape," said Talbot quietly. "What you said is true enough. What you've done is nothing to what I've done in the past. I've no right to throw stones, anyway. And—and now you're down, I don't want to gloat over you, as you suppose. I want to help you out of your scrape."

Levison stared at him blankly.

"You—you're only mocking me!" he gasped. "You don't mean it—you can't mean it!"

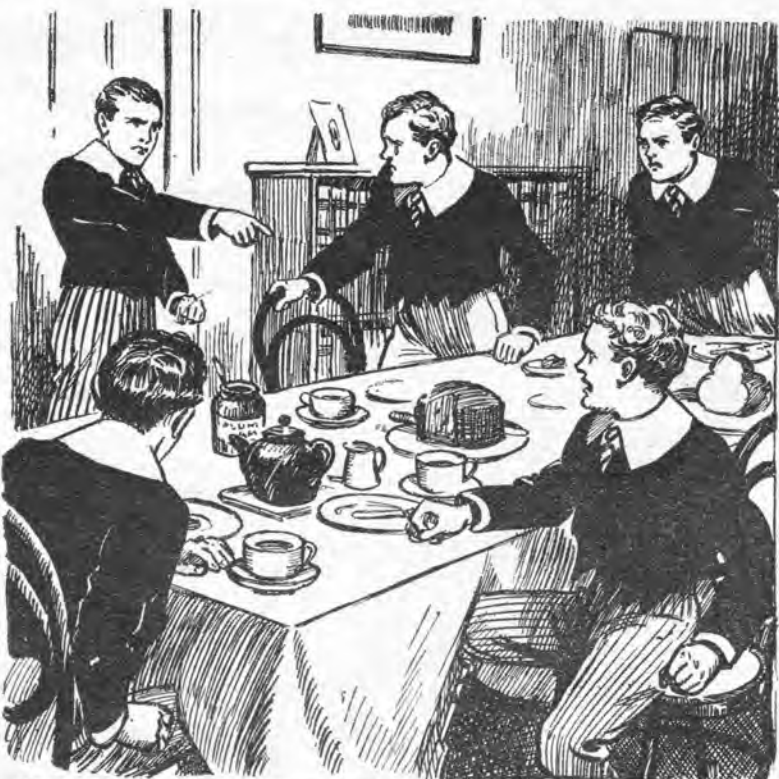
"I do mean it!"

"Words aren't much good!" said Levison savagely. "I've had plenty of words from Mellish and Crooke and Piggott. What I need is money."

"I understand."

"Well, you've got no money, unless you're keeping up your crackman's game in secret!" said Levison, with a sneer. "You're a beggarly scholarship kid now. You're going to help me with good advice—what? Keep it!"

"I haven't much money," said Talbot evenly. "I never kept a penny that didn't belong to me. But I saved a little while I was at work on Slingsby's Farm. And along with the scholarship, I have an allowance for my expenses. It isn't more than enough for my use. I have to be careful with it. But I've been through hard times, and I know how to be careful with money; and,



"Well, if you can't lend a fellow a hand, don't give me jaw!" broke out Levison savagely. "And as for not being able to stand swindlers, you seem to be able to stand a convicted thief pretty well!"

"You—you worm!" exclaimed Tom Merry, jumping up. "Get out!"

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in a word, I'll stand you the five quid you need, if you like."

Levison started back.

"You can't mean it! You're fooling me!" he muttered hoarsely.

"Money talks!" said Talbot quietly.

He opened a cheap little wallet, and counted out five pounds on the table.

Levison watched him as if mesmerised. Even the sight of the money hardly convinced him. He felt like a fellow in a dream. After the insults and injuries he had heaped upon Talbot, it seemed impossible that the junior would come to his aid in this way. And it was not as if Talbot was the Toff of old, with plenty of money in his pockets.

Parting with five pounds meant rigid economy and privation for a long time for the generous fellow who was helping him out of the scrape into which his own rascality and folly had led him.

Levison looked blankly at the five pound-notes. Talbot stepped back.

"I—I—I—" stammered Levison. "Talbot! What—what are you doing this for? You can't be in earnest—you can't! What are you doing it for?"

Talbot smiled slightly.

"I've been in a bad scrape myself—as bad a scrape as a fellow could be in," he said in his quiet tone. "Well, I found helping hands at that time. I've been a rascal—when I knew no better. I've thrown all that behind. I've made a fresh start. I've found friends who believe in me, and help me, and stand by me. You can do the same if you like, Levison. You've had a bitter lesson—well, chuck up playing the fool, and when you're out of this scrape, don't get into another. But I don't want to preach to you; I won't say any more. There's the tin. Good-bye!"

Talbot turned to the door.

Levison gathered the money up and slipped it into his pocket. He realised it now—realised all that it meant to him. It meant salvation—freedom from debt; freedom from the carking care that had made his life a burden for the past week or more. It meant safety for the present and hope for the future.

And it had come from the lad he had injured and reviled—whom he had greeted, only this moment, with insults and mockery.

"I—I say, Talbot," he stammered, "hold on a minute! This—this rather knocks me over! I—I—I'm sorry I—I talked to you like that!"

"That's all right. You misunderstood what I'd come for, I suppose."

"Well, I couldn't guess that you meant this," said Levison, "and I don't understand it now. But you're a good chap! My own friends wouldn't have done this for me, and I've always been your enemy. I—I'd never have believed that any fellow would have done this, Talbot. I—I ask your pardon."

"That's all right!"

"I—I'll let you have the money back when I can—next term, perhaps—"

"Don't worry about that."

"Well, I'm not any good saying much; I don't know where to get the money, and that's the truth. But I'll pay it up some time. I must say you're a brick, Talbot! And if—if I get a chance of helping you at any time—I don't suppose I shall, but if I do I'll show you that I haven't forgotten this! I mean it!"

The sneering look was quite gone from Levison's face; he was earnest for once in his life—deeply earnest and grateful. Talbot's action had touched even his hard heart; it had made him realise that his conception of human nature was wrong somewhere. Look at it how he would, there was no selfish motive he could discover for Talbot's action, and Levison felt abashed and ashamed.

Talbot smiled, and held out his hand impulsively.

Levison took his hand, and then they parted without another word. And Levison, with joy in his heart, relief in his face, hurried away to pay his debt—with Talbot's money. When he came back to the school, Levison looked as if he were walking on air. One, at least, of the black sheep of St. Jim's had been freed from black care.

And Levison, in an unusual mood of gratitude and cordiality, repeated to himself more than once:

"I'll make it up to him somehow!"

And, little as he thought of it then, the time was at hand when Levison, the cad of the Fourth, was to have his opportunity of repaying Talbot's act of generous kindness, and in a way he would never have dreamed of.

CHAPTER 4.

In a Hornets' Nest!

"MIND your pockets!" Tom Merry started, and looked round with a gleam in his eyes.

A group of juniors were standing in the doorway and porch of the School House, cheerily discussing the forthcoming football match with the Grammar School.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth Form was laying down the law on the subject of the offside rule, keeping on cheerfully, though nobody was listening to his remarks. Talbot, looking very fit and cheerful, was leaning against the stone balustrade of the steps, with his hands in his pockets.

Talbot had been given a place in the St. Jim's junior team as a matter of course. He was, in fact, a rod in pickle for the Grammarians, and Tom Merry rejoiced at having secured such a recruit.

Cutts & Co. came along—Cutts, Gilmore, and Tresham—and it was the last-named who made that offensive remark as he passed Talbot.

The cheery talk of the juniors stopped dead.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy forgot all about the offside rule, and turned his eyeglass witheringly upon Cyril Tresham. The Fifth Former's words were, of course, referring to Talbot.

Talbot did not seem to hear.

The one-time Toff had come back to St. Jim's expecting that all reference to his unfortunate past would be dropped. There were fellows who delighted in bringing it to mind—only a few, but enough of them to keep the subject alive. Talbot bore it quietly. It was a matter upon which he could scarcely defend himself. He could only hope that, in the course of time, he would live it down. Meanwhile, he bore it as cheerfully as he could, without giving a sign of how it hurt him.

But his friends were not disposed to take that kind of thing quietly. And it surprised them, as well as angered them, to hear it from Tresham.

For a Fifth Former, naturally, had very little to do with the juniors. Tresham never came into contact with Talbot, and it was not possible for enmity to rise between them. Why the Fifth Form fellow should go out of his way to make himself unpleasant to a junior who had never offended him was a puzzle.

Even Cutts—not a very good-natured fellow himself—was surprised.

"Chuck that, Tresham!" he muttered. "What do you want to rag that kid for? What has he done to you?"

Tresham gave a sneering laugh.

"I was only giving you a warning," he said. "It's necessary to be careful when there's a pickpocket about!"

"Oh, ring off!" snapped Cutts. "Don't get into a row with a gang of fags!"

"Bai Jove! You wottah, Twesham!"

"Cad!"

"Rotter!"

"Bump him!"

Tresham glanced sneeringly at the angry juniors, who were gathering round him.

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Talbot looked up, a red spot burning in his cheeks.

"Don't make a rag of it, you fellows," he said quietly. "Never mind!"

"But we do mind," said Tom Merry heatedly. "What is that cad slanging you for?"

"Don't give me any of your cheek!" began Tresham.

"I'll give you more than cheek," said Tom Merry. "Take that!"

"That" was a fierce smack from Tom Merry's hand, and it rang like the crack of a whip on the Fifth Former's cheek.

Tresham started back with a cry. Then he rushed at the captain of the Shell.

Tom Merry, athlete as he was, was hardly a match for a senior in the Fifth, and it would have gone hard with him if he had been alone. But his chums were with him, and they were all anxious to get at the fellow who had so wantonly insulted Talbot. The Terrible Three met Tresham's rush together, and laid violent hands on him, and the next moment he was down on the steps, struggling with the three juniors.

"Pile in!" roared Blake of the Fourth. "Give him beans!"

"Yaas, wathah! Go for him!"

"Bump the rotter!"

"Bumping" a Fifth Form senior was an unusual performance, even for the reckless juniors of the School House; but they meant to bump Tresham. Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy laid hands on him, as well as the Terrible Three, and Tresham struggled wildly and unavailingly with the mob of juniors.

"Help me, Cutts—Gilmore—" he gasped.

Cutts shrugged his shoulders.

"If you choose to get into a fog row, you can get out of it by yourself!" he snapped. "Come on, Gilly! Let's get out of this!"

Cutts and Gilmore walked away. They had no mind to take part in a free fight with an army of fags in the doorway. The masters' studies were close at hand, and there was certain to be interruption from the masters; but for that the angry juniors cared nothing. They clawed Tresham up, and bumped him heartily on the steps. There was a yell of anguish from the cad of the Fifth.

"Leggo! You young villains! Ow! Oh! Ow!"

Bump, bump, bump!

"Yarooooop!"

"Huwwah! Give him anoathah, deah boys!"

Bump, bump!

"Yarooooop! Help! Oh crumbs! Leggo!" wailed Tresham. "Oh, my hat! Yaroooooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

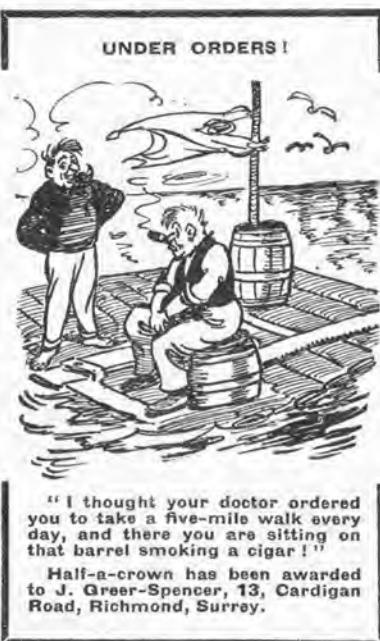
"Sure, and lemme get at him!" roared Reilly of the Fourth. "Gimmine a hold, ye spalpeens! Can't I have a whack, too?"

"Make room for a chap!" yelled Kangaroo of the Shell. "Don't keep the cad all to yourselves! Fair play's a jewel!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Juniors were crowding round from all sides, all anxious to get hold of Tresham and have a hand in punishing him.

In two or three minutes the unfortunate Fifth Former was in a shocking state. His collar was torn out, his tie was gone, his hair rumpled, his coat



split up the back, and all the buttons gone from his waistcoat. He struggled wildly in the midst of the hornets' nest he had suddenly awakened. But his struggles were of no avail. He was helpless in the grasp of so many hands. "Cave!" called out Levison from indoors. "Here comes Railton."

"I don't care!" panted Tom Merry. "Bump him again! Give him a lesson! Rag the cad bald-headed!"

"Yaas, wathah! Rag the wottah! Huwwah!"

Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House, strode upon the scene with a thunderous brow, and a cane in his hand. He was amazed at such an uproar in the doorway of the House, and close to his own study. And he was as angry as he was amazed.

"Boys!" he thundered. "How dare you! What does this mean? Cease this disturbance instantly!"

The juniors reluctantly relinquished their victim. As they fell back, panting, Tresham staggered up on the steps—a pitiable object. Mr. Railton gazed at him blankly.

"What—who is this?" he gasped.

"Ow—ow—ow—ow—ow!" gurgled Tresham.

"Tresham!" ejaculated Mr. Railton. "Upon my word! Merry, Blake—all of you—you have dared to handle a Fifth Form senior in this manner—and in this place!"

"Yes, sir!" said Tom Merry fearlessly. "And we'd do it again, too, if he repeated what he said about Talbot—the rotter!"

"Merry! That is not the way to speak to me!"

"I'm sorry, sir! But that cad—"

"Come into my study, all of you!" said Mr. Railton sternly. "Go into my study also, Tresham. This must be inquired into."

The panting, spluttering Fifth Former limped into the Housemaster's study, and Mr. Railton followed him; and after the Housemaster came the dusty and gasping juniors. They were feeling a little uneasy now. But they were not sorry for handling Tresham. Even if it meant a licking all round they were not sorry for that.

CHAPTER 5.

Compelled to Apologise!

TRESHAM, torn, dishevelled, and smothered with dust, stood panting in the Housemaster's study. He was aching all over, and nearly frantic with rage.

All his dignity as a member of a senior Form was gone; he looked like a fag who had been through an especially severe rough-and-tumble.

Mr. Railton fixed his eyes sternly upon the crowd of juniors.

"Now, tell me what this means!" he exclaimed. "You have attacked and ragged a senior boy! How dare you!"

"Weally, Mr. Railton—"

"You see, sir—"

"The cad—"

"The rotter—"

"Don't all speak at once!" rapped out the Housemaster. "Merry, explain this to me! What excuse have you to offer?"

Tom Merry breathed hard. His eyes gleamed contemptuously at the tattered, dusty, and infuriated Fifth Former as he answered.

"That cad insulted Talbot, sir! So we ragged him! Serve him right!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Indeed!" Mr. Railton understood, and his eyes had a glint in them as they turned upon Tresham. "What did you say to Talbot, Tresham?"

"I—I—I—" Tresham stammered. He knew how little the Housemaster would approve of what he had done. Mr. Railton had been one of those who had helped the one-time Toff to obtain the scholarship for St. Jim's. "I—it was merely a remark, sir!"

"What was the remark?"

"I—I really, sir—"

"Did you make some unpleasant reference to Talbot's unfortunate past, Tresham?"

"Yes, I did, sir," said Tresham, pulling himself together, and speaking sullenly. "I don't like the fellow. I think it's wrong to have such a fellow in the school. It's well-known that he was an associate of criminals; and I don't believe in the talk about his reformation, and all that. I think he's a disgrace to the school! And I believe he will break out again if he is allowed to remain here!"

"You uttah wottah—"

"You cad—"

"Silence!" thundered Mr. Railton; and the furious juniors held their tongues, but with savage looks at the Fifth Former. "Tresham, what you say is utterly unjustifiable!" said Mr. Railton severely. "Talbot had an unfortunate upbringing. He has fully atoned for the past—given full proof that he is now as honest and straight as any boy in this school—"

"Heah, heah!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Silence, D'Arcy! The faith that Talbot's own Form-fellows have in him, Tresham, should be proof to you that your ungenerous opinion is totally mistaken. At all events, you are aware that Talbot has been admitted here with the knowledge and approval of the whole board of governors. You have acted scandalously."

Tresham set his lips sullenly.

"I cannot blame these boys for having lost their tempers, Tresham, when they heard you taunt an unfortunate lad with what he cannot help," said Mr. Railton. "Merry, call Talbot here!"

"Yes, sir!"

Tom Merry fetched Talbot into the study.

"Tresham, you will immediately beg Talbot's pardon—here, in my presence, THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,517.

and the presence of the boys who heard you utter your insult!"

Tresham's face became scarlet. "Oh, no, sir!" exclaimed Talbot hurriedly. "It—it doesn't matter, sir! I—I—"

"This matter is in my hands, Talbot. Tresham, if you do not immediately beg Talbot's pardon, and promise me that there shall be no recurrence of your gross conduct, I shall take you to the Head at once!"

There was no help for it. Tresham turned towards Talbot with burning eyes.

"I—I—I—" It did not come out easily. "I—I beg your pardon, Talbot," Talbot nodded without speaking.

"Now your promise, Tresham!" rapped out Mr. Railton.

"I—I promise that it shall not occur again, sir," stammered Tresham.

"Very good! You may go!" Tresham limped furiously from the study. Mr. Railton made a gesture of dismissal to the juniors, and they crowded out after the Fifth Former.

Tresham, with fury in his face, hurried away to the Fifth Form dormitory. He needed a change.

"Good old Railton!" said Blake cheerily. "Isn't he a brick—a real brick?"

"Yaas, wathah! I wathah think that Twesham will think twice before he plays the giddy ox again!" chuckled Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I'm afraid we've wathah wuined his clothes. On any othah occasion I should not approve of wuinin' a fellow's clobber—"

"The rotter didn't get half of what he deserved!" growled Tom Merry, as Talbot walked away in silence. "He ought to have had some more. Talbot doesn't say much, but anything of that kind hits him awfully hard."

"It's a rotten shame!" said Levison.

Tom Merry stared at him. It was his own opinion, but he had not expected to hear it endorsed by the cad of the Fourth.

"Glad you can see it!" he said shortly.

Levison coloured. "Talbot's a brick!" he said. "I've got good reason to think so. You'll never hear me say another word against him; and I'm sorry I ever said anything. I can't say more than that."

"Bai Jove, you are weally not such a wottah as I have always supposed, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus, with unaccustomed cordiality. "Of course, anybody who isn't an out-and-out wottah must see that Talbot is one of the best!"

"It's jolly odd that Tresham should go for him like this," said Levison. "What did he do it for?"

"Because he's a rotter, I suppose!" growled Monty Lowther.

"But he hardly knows Talbot," said Levison, evidently very much puzzled. "He never has anything to do with him; they haven't quarrelled. Tresham's never taken any notice of him before. It's jolly queer that he should go for him like this for nothing at all that anybody can see!"

"Oh, he's a cad!" said Tom Merry. "That's all there is about it. Now, about that match with the Grammar School chaps, you fellows—"

Levison walked away, his brow wrinkled in thought. He was not interested in the footer match with the Grammar School, but he was interested in the question of Tresham's sudden and curious attack upon Talbot. Why had he done it? Why had the black sheep of the Fifth—whom Levison more than

suspected of dishonesty himself—gone out of his way to taunt Talbot—to bring into publicity once more the fact that Talbot's past was shady and questionable? It was a puzzling question. Levison was much keener than most of the juniors, and he was not disposed to dismiss it as they did, by saying that the fellow was a cad. There was something more than that in it. Tresham had had a motive. And Levison—in his new role of faithful friend to the lad who had generously helped and saved him from ruin—meant to know what that motive was, and what it meant.

CHAPTER 6.

Black Suspicion!

"MY dear Gore— Ow! My d-dear— O-ow! Gore— Yow!"

The Terrible Three recognised Skimpole's voice as they came along the passage.

It was the day after the affair with Tresham. Lessons were over, and the Terrible Three had been taking advantage of what light remained to get in a little footer practice. But the dusk drove them in to an early tea, and as they came tramping along the Shell passage Skimpole's voice came to their ears from the study next to their own.

"That blessed bully Gore again!" growled Tom Merry. "He's always ragging Skimmy. We'll look in."

"My dear Gore, I assure you— Ow-ow!"

Tom Merry threw open the study door. The Terrible Three looked in, frowning. The study belonged to Talbot and Gore and Skimpole; but Talbot was not there, not yet having come in from the footer ground. Skimpole, the brainy youth of the Shell, was dodging round the study table, and Gore was pursuing him with a poker in his hand.

Skimpole was a terrifically clever youth, and knew all sorts of brainy things that the other fellows didn't know—and didn't want to know; but he didn't know anything about fisticuffs—knowledge that would have been more useful to him in the Shell at St. Jim's than any amount of wisdom on abstruse subjects. Gore of the Shell was a first-class bully, though since Talbot had been his studymate he had been kept in somewhat better order.

"Hallo! What's the trouble?" demanded Tom Merry.

Skimpole blinked at him through his large glasses, and then gave a howl as the poker lunged across the table and caught him in the waistcoat.

"Oh! Yow-ow! Oh, really, Gore—"

"Put that poker down!" said Tom Merry firmly.

"Mind your own business!" growled Gore. "I'm going to make him own up what he's done with it!"

"My dear Gore, I haven't seen it!" wailed Skimpole. "I do assure you, my dear Gore—"

George Gore made another lunge with the poker, and Tom Merry caught him by the shoulder and jerked him back. Gore swung round with a growl, and Tom twisted the poker from his hand and flung it, with a clang, against the grate.

"Look here—" roared Gore.

"I'm looking," said Tom. "Nuff of that! You're too much of a bully, Gore. If you touch Skimmy again, I'll go for you!"

"Mind your own business, hang you! He's going to give me my ten-bob note!"

"My dear Gore—"

"It isn't the first time he's done it!"

howled the aggrieved Gore. "He gave my cake to a beggar the other day—"

"The poor man was in want, my dear Gore," said Skimpole, who was a philanthropist, among his many other "ists." And Skimpole did not always take care to be just before he was generous.

"Blow the poor man!" snorted Gore. "Then he gave a pair of my boots to a kid who was on tramp—actually my boots!"

"His own boots were quite worn out, my dear Gore—"

"That was bad enough," continued Gore, breathing fury. "But when it comes to giving my money away—"

"My hat! You'd better draw the line at that, Skimmy," said Monty Lowther. "That isn't philanthropy; that's stealing!"

"But I assure you—I assure Gore—"

"Told me there was a tramp wanted some cash, and asked me for it!" howled Gore. "Ten-bob note that came this morning. Soon as he saw it, he asked me for it to give to a tramp. I dotted him on the nose."

"You acted very brutally, my dear Gore."

"And now he's taken it out of my desk," said Gore, "and I'm jolly well going to have it back, or smash him! Don't talk philanthropy to me! I want my ten bob!"

"Well, that's only natural; but you can ask for it without a poker," said Tom Merry. "Skimmy, old man, you had better draw the line at giving other people's money away."

"Keep yourself from picking and stealing, Skimmy," said Monty Lowther solemnly.

Skimpole blinked at the Shell fellows distressfully.

"But I have not taken it," he said. "I have not seen it since it was in Gore's hand this morning. I keep on telling Gore that I have not taken it."

"Gammon!" said Gore.

"My dear Gore, I assure you—"

"Bosh! Hand over my note, I tell you!" shouted Gore. "If you've given it away already, I'll go to the House-master about it, by Jove! I'm not going to be robbed!"

"Hold on!" said Tom Merry steadily. "Skimmy is several sorts of an ass and a chump and a fathead, but he isn't a liar! If he says he hasn't taken the note, Gore, he hasn't."

"Then where is it?" demanded Gore. "I put it in my desk for safety, and it's gone. If Skimpole hasn't given it away to one of his precious tramps, somebody's stolen it, that's all!"

"Oh rot! Who'd steal your blessed ten-bob note?" said Manners. "Look in your desk again."

"I've looked! Look yourself!"

"Well, in your pockets, then."

"I've been through my pockets, though I know I left it in my desk. If Skimpole hasn't had it, there's a thief about here!" growled Gore. "Now will you say that that howling ass hasn't taken it?"

"My dear Gore, I assure you on my word—"

"Skimmy's giving it to us straight," said Tom Merry shortly. "He hasn't had it. And before you start a yarn about somebody having stolen it, you'd better make jolly sure it's gone."

Gore grunted and went to his desk again. He realised himself that it was necessary to be quite sure before he made so serious a statement. He took out the contents of the desk savagely. Mellish of the Fourth and Crooke of the Shell looked in while the search was going on.

"Isn't tea ready?" asked Mellish.

"You told us five o'clock," said Crooke.

"How can I have tea ready, when I can't find my money?" demanded Gore gruffly. "Somebody's pinched a ten-bob note from my desk—the one I had from my pater this morning. I thought Skimmy had given it away to some tramp, but he says he hasn't—"

"I assure you, my dear Gore—"
"Oh, shut up! It's not here," said Gore. "Now I want to know who took it. I know jolly well I'm not going to be robbed, and take it lying down!"

Mellish gave one of his unpleasant chuckles.

"Considering the kind of fellow you have in the study, Gore, I don't see much to be surprised at," he drawled. "I shouldn't leave my money lying about if I were in this study."

Gore started.

"Talbot, do you mean? What rot!"
"You cad!" burst out Tom Merry, making a stride towards Mellish. "How dare you insinuate—"

Mellish promptly dodged behind Crooke.

"Keep your wool on," he said. "I'm not insinuating anything. But when a banknote is stolen, and a fellow's in the study who used to—Keep your hands off, you rotter! Ow!"

Mellish landed in the passage with a bump and a yell. Gore was standing with a startled expression on his face.

"My hat!" he said. "It does look queer!"

Tom Merry turned on him.
"You dare to hint that Talbot—"

"Oh, don't try to bullrag me!" said Gore, with a sniff. "I'm not a funk like Mellish, and I'll give you as good as you send, I'll promise you. I say it's queer about my note being taken out of my desk, considering what Talbot was when he came here, that's all. I don't accuse anybody. But I'm jolly well going to the Housemaster about it. If there's a thief in the School House, the sooner he's nailed the better, whoever he is!"

The disturbance in Gore's study had brought a good many fellows along the passage now. Most of the juniors had come in to tea, and were on the spot. Talbot, Levison, and Dane, and a dozen other fellows came on the scene as Mellish scrambled to his feet in the passage.

"What's that about a thief in the House?" demanded Jack Blake. "Are you talking out of the back of your neck, Gore?"

"Gore says a ten-bob note has been taken from his desk," said Tom Merry, with a worried look.

"More ass Gore to leave it there!" growled Herries.

"Well, I shouldn't have left it there if it had been in silver," said Gore.

"But I didn't want to carry it about with me as, I must admit, I'm careless with money. But I've got the number all right in my pater's letter; he jotted it down. Nobody can pass it without being bowled out."

"Nobody could pass it here," said Crooke, with an unpleasant grin. "A fellow who happened to have connections among the criminal classes could send it away to be passed safely enough somewhere else, I fancy!"

"By Jove, Crooke, you rotter—"

"Keep your wool on, Tommy," murmured Lowther, catching his chum by the arm. "This can't be settled by fisticuffs. It's jolly lucky it was a note, and not ten shillings in silver. We shall be able to trace it now, and prove that it wasn't Talbot."

"Yes, that's so," said Tom Merry, relieved.

Not for a single instant did the Terrible Three waver in their faith in Talbot. That the Toff had broken out again, in spite of his plighted word, they would never have believed, unless he had told them so himself.

"Here's Talbot," said Levison. "Let him speak for himself. I for one know quite well that Talbot knows nothing of it!"

"You!" said Mellish, with a stare. Talbot came through the crowd of juniors into the study with a pale face. He had heard the words from the study, and knew what had happened.

George Gore fixed an inquiring—or rather, an accusing look on him.

"Do you know where my note is, Talbot?" he asked.

"No," said Talbot quietly.
"Have you taken it?"

Talbot's eyes blazed for a moment. Only for a moment; then he was quiet and subdued again.

"That question is an insult," he said in a steady voice. "I mean, it would be an insult, but for—for what I have been. In the circumstances, I suppose it is natural such a suspicion should come into your mind, Gore, and I have no right to resent it. So I will answer you. I did not take it."

The quiet dignity of Talbot's look and manner somewhat abashed Gore.

"Well, I—I don't say you did," he mumbled. "Only somebody did; and there's only us three in the study, and Skimpole says he didn't."

"Anybody might have come into the study and taken it," said Kangaroo.

"Who'd know it was there?" said Gore. "Only my studymates!"

The juniors looked exceedingly uncomfortable. There was force in that remark. No one outside the study was likely to know that there was a ten-shilling note in Gore's desk.

"Might have come here on spec," murmured Blake.

Gore grunted.

"If some thief were going round on spec, he wouldn't come here. There's better studies than this for robbing—D'Arcy's, for instance, or Tom Merry's. Whoever took that note out of my desk knew it was there, and I don't see how anybody but my own studymates could know!"

"That's as good as saying that it was Talbot or Skimpole," said Digby.

"I don't think it was Skimpole," said Gore. "I thought he might have given it to some beggar, as he gave my boots; but he says he didn't, and that ends it."

Talbot drew a hard breath.

"That narrows it down to me," he said quietly. "I give you my word, Gore, that I know nothing about it!"

"Go to the Housemaster, Gore!" said Crooke.

Gore hesitated. He was a great deal of a bully, but he was not a bad-hearted fellow in the main. And he had rather a liking for Talbot, in spite of, or because of, the fact that Talbot would not stand any of his nonsense.

"I don't want to make an uproar over ten bob," said Gore at last. "I—I can't think it was Talbot, really. He's been decent ever since he came back here. I—I shan't say anything about it. If the fellow who took it likes to put it back in my desk, that will make it all right. I'll give him a chance. And I warn him, whoever he is, that I've got the number of the note, so he can't pass it. That's all I've got to say."

"I—I rather think the matter ought to go to the Housemaster," said Tom Merry. "It's rotten unpleasant to leave it like this."

"Well, you can go to the Housemaster if you like," said Gore. "I'm not going to. I don't want to jump on a fellow when he's down."

"I don't object to your calling Mr. Railton in," said Talbot. "I'm not afraid. My conscience is clear."

"Yaas, wathah! We all know that, Talbot, old chap."

"Oh, let it drop!" said Gore. "The rotter may bring it back when he knows he can't pass it, and that will be good enough for me."

And Gore refused to say another word on the subject.

The juniors dispersed from the study with clouded faces and mingled feelings. There was a thief in the School House. And, whatever Gore might say, the matter could not rest there. Something would have to be done. In a few hours the story would be all over St. Jim's—School House and New House would be buzzing with it.

(Continued on the next page.)

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And when it came to the ears of the Housemaster—as it must come—there would be an investigation. And then there—

Hardly anything else was discussed in the junior studies, and the name of Talbot cropped up continuously in the discussion. Fellows like Mellish, Crooke, and Piggott made as much capital out of it as they could. They did not disguise their belief that it was the Toff—the one-time crackman—at work again.

And other fellows could not help admitting, even unwillingly, that it looked like it. A theft had been committed, and it had happened in the Toff's study, and Skimpole was certainly above suspicion.

Some of the fellows said sapiently: "Once a thief always a thief." And, anyway, it looked very suspicious. And before an hour had passed, Talbot knew that the finger of suspicion was pointed at him from all sides.

CHAPTER 7.

Not Levison!

"I—I SAY, you chaps, this is rotten!"

Tom Merry muttered the words miserably.

The Terrible Three had come in to tea; but they were not thinking of tea now. The happening in George Gore's study had taken their appetites away.

They knew the talk that was going on all over the School House—that had spread to the New House by this time. The theft—and Talbot's name coupled with the theft—was the theme on all tongues.

How could it be otherwise? The chums who knew Talbot so well had the most loyal faith in him. But fellows who did not know him so well naturally did not share their faith.

Upon the whole, St. Jim's had treated Talbot very well when he came there with his scholarship. It could not be denied that his past was black—as black as it could be painted. His repentance and reform—the heroic deed by which he had won his pardon—had blotted out the past—atoned for it fully, it was agreed on all hands. And the obvious fact that he was now as straight as a die weighed in his favour.

Almost everybody in the school had agreed that the chap ought to have a chance to live down his wretched past. Indeed, schoolboys had short memories, and that unpleasant past was already fading out of mind, when Tresham's conduct had recalled it, and blazoned it forth, as it were.

Most of the fellows heartily agreed that Tresham was a cad; but the incident brought Talbot's wretched past freshly and clearly to everybody's mind. And now, on the heels of that incident, followed a theft in Talbot's own study—from one of his study-mates.

The most impartial fellows could not fail to put two and two together. It looked as if Tresham had been right, after all.

Tom Merry & Co. had been down in the Common-room; but the nods and whispers and significant expressions of the fellows got on their nerves, and they retreated to their study again.

"I'll never believe it of Talbot," said Monty Lowther. "Of course, Mellish & Co. are making the most of it."

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"They would," explained Manners.

"And Levison, I suppose?"

"No. That's queer enough," said Lowther. "Levison's standing up for Talbot—blessed if I know why! He's had a fight with Crooke about it—so I heard. Knocked Crooke down for saying Talbot was a thief."

"Levison did?"

"Yes. Blessed if I catch on to it! Can't be Levison himself who had the note, I suppose?" demanded Lowther.

"He'd be glad to fix it on Talbot, if that were the case," said Tom Merry. "Levison seems to be playing up quite decently. But it's no good blinking the fact that most of the fellows suspect Talbot. In the circumstances, it's not to be wondered at; but I know there's nothing in it."

"Only—only somebody must have the note," said Manners musingly. "Who the dickens could it have been?"

"Goodness knows!"

"Now that Gore's told everybody he's got the number, the thief won't try to pass it," said Lowther. "We shan't be able to spot him that way."

"There ought to be a general search."

"I suppose there will be when Railton gets to hear of it," said Tom Merry. "Only a note is so easily destroyed. The thief may burn it, if he's in danger. Then it will never come out."

"And that means that old Talbot will always be under suspicion," said Manners.

"Looks like it! It's rotten!" ejaculated Tom Merry. "I jolly well wish I knew who the rotter was! No way of finding out, either. The place was deserted while we were all down at the footer, and anybody might have come along here without being spotted. Might even have been a New House chap, for all we know. If—if it had been a larger amount, I should have thought of Levison. We know he was badly in need of money. But a miserable ten bob."

"Every little helps," said Lowther.

"It wouldn't be fair to suggest it without an atom of proof; and Levison seems to be standing up for Talbot, too," said Tom reflectively. "That might be only his cunning, of course. He's as deep as a well. We know how he was up against old Talbot all the time. Only the other evening here, you remember what he said. And he was frightfully pushed for money."

"Let's go and see him," said Lowther. "He's none too good for it, I know that; and if it had been a five-pound note instead of ten bob, I'd have plumped for Levison at once. He may have gone there for more, and only taken what he could get. Anyway, we may be able to spot him—by seeing him—if he's really the rotter."

Tom Merry nodded.

"Might as well try," he said. "If he's innocent, he's only got himself to thank for being suspected. A fellow who would swindle—as he told us the other night he had done—wouldn't stop far short of stealing."

The chums of the Shell made their way to Levison's study. All four of the juniors who occupied it were there—Levison, Mellish, Lumley-Lumley, and Blenkinsop. Three of them were doing their preparation. Mellish was dabbing his nose with a handkerchief, which was stained red. Lumley-Lumley greeted the Terrible Three with a grin.

"Just too late for the fun," he remarked.

The Shell fellows looked at Mellish.

"What's happened?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Levison, in his new role of champion of the oppressed, I guess," said Lumley-Lumley, with a chuckle. "He considers that he is the only chap who has the right to slang Talbot. Our esteemed friend Percy took the liberty of calling Talbot a thief. I was just going to punch his nose, when Levison saved me the trouble."

"I'll punch anybody's nose who calls Talbot a thief," said Levison savagely.

The Terrible Three stared at him.

"What's the little game, Levison?" demanded Tom Merry. "If you mean that, I'm with you. But it's rather a sudden change of front, isn't it?"

Levison was silent.

"At his old games," said Lowther. "He's trying to throw dust in our eyes, of course. I suppose we know better than to trust him, by this time."

"Yes, rather," said Manners emphatically.

Levison flushed.

"I don't suppose you fellows would understand," he said awkwardly. "I've said before that I'm sorry I'm up against Talbot. He's one of the best. That's all I've got to say."

"Quite enough, too, if you mean it," said Lowther. "But you can't catch an old bird with chaff, my infant. We didn't come here to have our legs pulled."

"I guess it does sound rather thick from Levison!" chuckled Lumley-Lumley. "But he did punch Mellish's nose. Look at it!"

"Groogh!" came from Mellish, as he dabbed his nose.

"We want to speak to you, Levison," said Tom Merry. "We'd rather speak to you alone, if you don't mind. Will you trot along to our study?"

"No, I won't!" said Levison, with a scowl. "Say what you've got to say here, and go and eat oke. You say you can't trust me—you can't take my word. Leave me alone, then. I'm not asking you to talk to me."

"It isn't for the pleasure of your conversation," said Lowther. "If you'd rather have it out in public, here it is! You were saying the other night—Do you still want it in public?"

"I—I'll come to your study!" snarled Levison. "I told you that in confidence, and you're a cad if you blab it about the House."

"Keep your rotten confidences to yourself," said Lowther. "Still, if you'd rather have it in private, come along."

Levison sullenly accompanied the Shell fellows to their study. Tom Merry closed the door, and Levison eyed the Terrible Three defiantly.

"Well, what is it?" he growled.

"Have you paid that debt you were speaking of the other night?"

"What business is that of yours?"

"We want to know and we mean to know," said Tom Merry quietly.

"Well, I have paid it."

"When?"

"End of last week—the same evening I came to you, if you want to know," said Levison.

"You raised the money, then?"

"Looks like it, doesn't it, if I've paid the bill?" said Levison, with a sneer. "If I hadn't paid it, I should have been sacked before now. Monday morning was the latest."

The Shell fellows looked a little non-plussed. If Levison had settled that pressing account several days ago, certainly he could not have taken the ten-shilling note from Gore's desk this very day to help towards it. Levison regarded them with a sneer. He could read quite easily what was in their minds.

"You're on the wrong track, you see!" he said sarcastically. "I didn't take Gore's ten-bob note. I know that's what's in your minds. Well, you're barking up the wrong tree. And if you dare to hint it in public, I'll call you to account for it, too."

"You've only got yourself to blame if it crossed our minds," said Tom Merry quietly. "It seems rather suspicious to us the way you are standing up for Talbot. Only the other night you were slanging him in our presence. You must have some motive for it. I don't pretend to be as deep as you are, so I can't suggest what it is."

"It's no business of yours!" snarled Levison. "But I'd rather satisfy you than have you starting a story about me. I can prove it."

Talbot coloured a little. "That's right enough," he said. "Levison had the money that night." "You—you saw it?" asked Lowther. "Yes, I saw it," said Talbot, with a slight smile.

Levison burst into a laugh. "You duffers! Can't you see how it was?"

"No need to talk about it, Levison," said Talbot quickly.

"I don't care if they know so long as they don't jaw it over the House," said Levison. "Talbot lent me the money—or, rather, he gave it to me. I told him I hadn't any idea when I could pay it back."

"Talbot!" almost shouted Tom Merry.

"It—it came out of my scholarship money, you know," said Talbot, his flush

too. But we were on the wrong track, you chaps. This business in Gore's study wasn't Levison."

Tom Merry and Manners shook their heads. They were satisfied upon that point now. But the certainty that their first vague suspicion was ill-founded only left them farther at sea than ever. It was not Levison.

But who was it? Not Talbot. True, his generous help to Levison must have straitened his already circumscribed funds. He would be in want of money, and if his action had been generally known it would have been an added point against him, probably. But the Terrible Three would not entertain such a thought for a moment. Their admiration and affection for their chum was stronger than ever since that discovery.



"Don't give me any of your cheek——" began Tresham. "I'll give you more than cheek!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Take that!" "That" was a fierce smack from Tom Merry's hand, and it rang like the crack of a whip on the Fifth Former's cheek.

"Prove it, then."

"Call Talbot here."

"Talbot!" exclaimed the Terrible Three, in astonishment.

"Yes."

"What on earth can Talbot know about it?"

"Call him in and ask him."

"He's in the next study," said Manners. "I'll call him in."

Manners stepped to the next study, and came back in a minute or so with Talbot, who was looking surprised. Talbot glanced at Levison.

"What's wanted?" he asked.

"These fellows suspect me of robbing Gore," said Levison, with a sneer. "They think I was getting money together to settle my bill with Hannev's. I told them to ask you about it. You know whether I had the money to pay it or not last Friday."

deepening. "I—I wanted to help him, out of a hole, that's all."

"After the way he slanged you!" yelled Monty Lowther. "Well, you ass—you fathead—you brick!"

Talbot laughed, and quitted the study. Levison looked sarcastically at the Terrible Three.

"I don't want it jawed all over the House," he said.

"We shan't jaw it," said Tom Merry. "But I must say Talbot's a grand chap to help you like that!"

"Now you know why I punched Mellish's nose, and Crooke's, too!" said Levison, and he left the study and slammed the door.

The chums of the Shell looked at one another.

"It was ripping of Talbot," said Lowther, "and Levison seems to see it,

But the task of clearing him of suspicion was harder than ever.

CHAPTER 8.

Tresham's Trouble!

LEFEVRE, the captain of the Fifth, looked into Tresham's study. Tresham and Gilmore, who shared that study, had finished their preparation, and they were chatting and smoking cigarettes.

Lefevre sniffed, partly because of the haze of smoke, partly to show his contempt for that pet indulgence of the "blades."

"Hallo!" yawned Gilmore. "Help yourself, Fervy!" And he extended his case towards the captain of the Fifth.

"Rats!" said Lefevre ungraciously.

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"If I were a prefect I'd report you fellows for playing the giddy ox like that. That's what I say—I'd report you!"

"Lucky you're not a prefect then!" said Tresham, laughing.

"I looked in to speak to you, Tresham," said Lefevre. "I met Benson in Wayland."

Tresham's countenance changed a little.

"Benson? By Jove! I forgot to square up his bill."

"So he told me," said Lefevre grimly. "I thought I'd remind you, Tresham. As you seem to devote yourself more to smoking than to looking after the accounts, it mightn't be a bad idea for the footer club to get another secretary and treasurer."

"Oh, don't be an ass!" said Tresham lightly. "I'll settle Benson's account to-morrow; I'm going over to Wayland."

"Have you settled Hanney's account, too—for the new goalposts?"

"Hanney's? Yes, I think I settled that."

"Then he's forgotten all about it," said Lefevre sarcastically. "I was in his shop to-day, about a new footer, and I found out that he wants his bill paid."

Tresham flushed.

"I—I—I suppose I overlooked it," he said. "Now—yes, when I come to think of it, I didn't settle with him."

"He allows a discount for cash," said Lefevre. "That won't be taken off now. It means a loss to the club."

"I'll make it all right," said Tresham.

"That's all very well, but it isn't a secretary's duty to lose money for the club and make it up out of his own pocket," said Lefevre tartly. "It seems to me that you're getting pretty slack, Tresham. I've been going to speak about it before, as a matter of fact; and if you don't buck up a little I shall have to put it to the club at the next meeting that we want a new sec."

"Put it to the club—and be blown!" said Tresham sulkily.

"Peace, my infants—peace!" said Gilmore, as Lefevre was about to make an angry retort. "It's all right, Fevvy, old man; I'll see that Tresham settles the bills to-morrow. I'll go down with him and see him do it. Treshy's a jolly good sec; only he's had some private worries lately, and he's let things slide a bit."

"Well, I want those bills paid before I see the people again," growled Lefevre. "It's jolly unpleasant to me to be dunned for money because Tresham forgets to pay the accounts."

"I'll see to it," said Tresham.

Lefevre grunted and left the study. Tresham sat very still in his armchair, the cigarette burning between his fingers. He was no longer smoking.

Gilmore looked at him very curiously. "I suppose it's all right, Tres, old man?" he said suddenly, when the silence of the study had lasted some minutes.

Tresham started out of the reverie into which he had fallen.

"What's all right?" he asked. "What do you mean?"

"About the money."

"What money?"

"The club money," said Gilmore testily. "You know what I mean well enough. You've got the money to pay the accounts, haven't you?"

Tresham's cigarette trembled in his hand.

"Of course I have," he said. "What makes you ask such a question as that, Gilmore? The fellows have all paid up their subscriptions long ago."

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"Yes, I know that. I was wondering whether—"

"Whether I'd taken your precious advice?" asked Tresham, with a sneer. "No, I haven't. I'm not quite such a fool as that."

"Well, I only suggested your borrowing it for a time, if you were certain of putting it back before it was wanted," said Gilmore. "You seemed so worried for money. Not that it's a thing that I would have done myself."

"Well, I wouldn't do it, either," said Tresham. "The money's all right; it's in my desk there, locked up quite safe."

"All of it?"

"Of course!" said Tresham irritably. "How you keep on, Gilmore! There's about twelve pounds in all—as near as I remember. Anyway, I've got it down in my accounts."

"Well, that's all right," said Gilmore, rising, with a yawn. "Only the thought crossed my mind: you've left the accounts so jolly late. Fevvy is annoyed about that discount being lost. Don't leave it over to-morrow, anyway."

"You can come with me to pay the bills if you like!" said Tresham tartly.

"All right; don't get ratty! I'm off to bed."

Gilmore left the study, giving his studymate a very curious look as he departed.

Tresham did not notice it. He remained in his chair, staring at the dying fire, the cigarette going out unsmoked.

Tresham's face was pale; a deep line furrowed his brow. As he sat there alone, gazing at the dying embers, his brow grew more and more haggard.

He rose at last restlessly and began to pace the study. It was past bedtime, but he did not notice it. The door opened, and Gerald Cutts looked in.

"Not going to bed?" asked Cutts, looking at him curiously. "All the fellows are gone up. Anything the matter, Tresham?"

"No. What should be the matter?" muttered Tresham. "Yes, I'm going up to bed. I didn't notice it was so late."

He turned out the light in his study quickly without waiting for Cutts to reply; but Cutts had seen his face, and he wondered.

In the Fifth Form dormitory the dandy of the Fifth glanced several times at Tresham with a very odd expression on his face. Tresham did not seem to see it and he turned in quickly without a word.

CHAPTER 9.

What the Morning Brought!

KILDARE of the Sixth saw lights out for the Shell that evening. Kildare looked at the juniors a little suspiciously. There was an unusual quietness in the dormitory, in the place of the usual buzz of cheery talk.

The Terrible Three were looking grim and Talbot was very grave and quiet. Some of the fellows spoke to one another in low voices, and that was all.

It was so unusual for the Shell to be so subdued that the captain of St. Jim's could not help observing it. He suspected at once that something was "on," though as yet he had not heard of the happening in Gore's study. So far, that had not come to the knowledge of the prefects.

"No larks here to-night," said Kildare warningly.

Some of the juniors grinned a little. Kildare's surmise was that a "rag" was

in preparation. The Shell fellows felt little enough in the humour for "larks."

"All serene, Kildare," said Kangaroo.

Kildare gave the juniors another suspicious glance and turned out the light and retired from the dormitory.

There was a low buzz of voices in the dark; some of the Shell fellows were conversing in whispers. Talbot did not speak, and none of the whispered remarks reached his ears, but he knew that he was the subject of them.

No one had spoken to him that evening, with the exception of Tom Merry and his friends. The juniors did not exactly avoid him, but they did not address any remarks to him, and Talbot knew only too well why.

He was under suspicion.

It was a heavy blow to him, but he could not wonder at it. A theft had taken place in his study, and it could not but bring to the minds of the juniors his old record. It was fairly certain that if anything of the kind occurred, suspicion would turn upon the Toff.

It was only to be expected, and Talbot did not allow himself to feel bitter or resentful towards the juniors who averted their eyes from him. It was part of the price he had to pay for the miserable past. He was not bitter, but he was inexpressibly sad and downcast. It seemed as if he would never be able to emerge from the black shadow of his early career.

If the thief was not discovered, vague suspicion and distrust would cling to him. There could be no doubt about that. It would make his position at the school intolerable. His faithful friends would stand by him loyally, but he would gradually find himself avoided by all the rest.

In the course of time, even his own chums might fall away from his side. Indeed, he questioned whether he had a right to make a division between them and the rest of the fellows. For it was pretty certain that the juniors who stood by him would at last become isolated, along with him. The outcome of their loyalty to him would be estrangement from the rest.

After the buzz of talk had died away and the juniors were asleep, Talbot lay for a long time sleepless. He was trying to think the matter out to decide what he had better do. Who had taken the ten-shilling note from Gore's study? If it were only possible to find the fellow—but he knew that there was slight hope of that.

If Talbot had had an enemy in the House, he felt that he would have suspected that this was merely a trick to cause him injury—that the note had been taken for no other purpose.

If Levison had still been his enemy he would have suspected Levison. But he could not suspect him now. That was out of the question. And who else could have done it? Mellish and Crooke—they were "down" on him, but not so bitterly as Levison had been. They were making capital out of the occurrence, but he knew that it would be absurd to suspect them of having planned the whole thing, as Levison might have done a while ago. They did not dislike him bitterly enough for that, and they would not be rascals enough for such a plot—they would not have nerve enough. And he had no other enemies in the House, that he knew of.

He was driven to the conclusion that it was, after all, an ordinary theft. Some mean rascal had taken the note, knowing that suspicion must fall upon Talbot, and thereby render the real thief secure. Some wretched boy had

taken this cunning and unscrupulous advantage of his old reputation.

That seemed the only possible explanation; and that the truth could be revealed and proved, it seemed impossible to hope.

It was long before Talbot slept.

When the rising-bell rang in the morning he was sleeping soundly. Tom Merry was the first out of bed, and he shook Talbot by the shoulder.

"Wake up, old chap!"

Talbot started and opened his eyes.

"Rising-bell!" said Tom cheerily. "Sleepy?"

"Ye-es, a little," said Talbot, rubbing his eyes. "All right!"

He jumped out of bed.

"Ripping morning!" said Lowther, looking out of the window. "Good weather for footer this afternoon."

"Topping!" said Manners. "Feel in good form, Talbot?"

"Yes, right as rain," said Talbot dully. It was almost too obvious the way the Terrible Three made it a point to speak to Talbot as if nothing had happened.

Kangaroo chimed in cheerfully.

But there was a grim silence from most of the other fellows. They avoided looking at Talbot.

"What are you going to do about your ten-bob note, Gore?" asked Crooke, with a sidelong glance at Talbot.

Gore granted.

"Nothing!" he said.

"Going to lose it?" asked Crooke.

"Oh, blow the note!" said Gore peevishly. "I wish I hadn't said anything about it now. It isn't so very much, after all—ten bob!"

"It isn't the money," said Crooke; "it's having a thief in the House that matters. Nobody's money is safe while this goes on. It's pretty rotten that we've got to take the trouble to lock everything up."

A slight flush came into Talbot's pale cheeks. Crooke was not speaking to him, but he was speaking "at" him, so to express it.

Tom Merry set his teeth, but it was impossible to "come down" on Crooke for his remarks. He was only saying, in fact, what most of the Shell fellows were thinking. If there was a thief in the House it was necessary for all the fellows to be careful with their valuables, and such a worry was enough to exasperate them. A fellow had a right to suppose that his things were safe, without keeping them locked up.

Talbot left the dormitory alone, having dressed quickly. He went out into the quadrangle, but the Terrible Three very soon joined him there. They were determined that they, at all events, should not seem for a moment to be deserting their chum. Blake and D'Arcy joined them in the quad.

"Let's have a trot round before brekker," said Manners cheerfully. "Come on, Talbot!"

"Yaas, wathah, let's have a wun, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus, with a rather anxious look at Talbot.

Talbot shook his head.

"I'd better speak out plainly to you chaps," he said abruptly. "It's no good blinking the facts of the case. The whole House suspects me!"

"Not quite so bad as that," muttered Tom.

"Not the whole House," said Blake. "I'm afraid some of them do; but—but lots of us know it's all right, Talbot. Even Levison stands up for you."

"Yaas, that boundah is weally turnin' up twumps, for once."

"No good moping over it, old chap,"



said Lowther. "The silly asses will get over it—it will be all right!"

Lowther tried to speak cheerfully, but there was no conviction in his tones.

Talbot responded with another shake of the head.

"They won't get over it," he said quietly. "It will get worse, not better. I know you fellows trust me—"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"And you are right. I give you my word of honour that I know nothing about Gore's note—if the Toff's word of honour is worth anything," added Talbot bitterly.

"Don't say that," said Tom Merry quickly. "We know you're as straight as a die. As for the others, let them go and eat coke, the duffers!"

"It can't be done," said Talbot. "I can see how this is going—I'm going to be sent to Coventry. I don't complain; it's only natural in the circumstances that they should think as they do. They don't know me so well as you fellows do—they don't trust me as you do, anyway. Well, I'm not going to get you fellows into trouble with the rest of the House. You'd better make up your minds to it at once, and leave me alone."

"Rats!"

"Yaas, wathah—wats!"

"Don't be an ass!" urged Tom Merry. "Whatever the others think, we know! And we're sticking to you, whether you like it or not!"

"You won't be able to get wid of us, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "We're goin' to stick to you like anything!"

"Like glue!" said Lowther.

"But you can see what it's coming to," said Talbot steadily. "I'm being cut on all sides. If you stand by me, you'll be cut, too, in the long run. It will make dissension—trouble all round. You'd better—"

"Rats!"

"Rot!"

"Bow-wow!"

Talbot laughed in spite of himself. Tom Merry took his arm.

"Now you've done talking rot, come for a sprint," he said cheerily.

And Talbot went. Other fellows came into the quadrangle, and there were whispers and glances as they noticed Talbot sprinting with the Co.

Crooke and Mellish sneered portentously, and other fellows shrugged their shoulders.

"Birds of a feather," said Crooke. "Perhaps they're whacking it out among them."

"Shouldn't wonder!" said Mellish.

The chums of the School House stopped as Figgins & Co. came out of the New House and bore down on them. Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn had evidently heard the story. They greeted Talbot cheerily.

"We heard a yarn from your House last night," said Figgins, in his direct way. "It seems that some silly duffers have an idea in their heads—" He paused. "Look here, Talbot! I may as well out with it. You must know the jaw that's going on. Well, I want you to understand that we know you're true blue. Rely on us!"

"Yes, rather!" said Kerr and Wynn together.

"Thank you!" said Talbot, in a low voice.

"Pity you didn't come into the New House, after all, when you came here," said Figgins. "Look here! You can change over, if you like. The Head will let you, and we'd be jolly glad to have you in our House. And if any fellow there said a word against you, I'd pulverise him!"

Talbot smiled.

"You're a good chap, Figgy! I'm afraid you can't change a chap's ideas by pulverising him, though. Thanks, all the same!"

"It's rotten!" said Figgins to the Co., as the School House fellows went on their way. "We all know that Talbot is one of the best. And if they make things warm for him in the School House, we'll have him over here, whether he likes it or not. We know a decent chap when we see him, if those duffers don't!"

"Hear, hear!" said the Co. heartily.

Tom Merry & Co. came back to the School House flushed and cheery after their sprint round in the keen morning air. But as they came into the House the cheery looks died off their faces. Kildare met them in the doorway, and the expression on his face was quite enough to banish their momentary high spirits. The captain of St. Jim's was looking grave and worried, and his eyes fixed upon Talbot.

"You're wanted, Talbot!" he said shortly.

"Yes?" said Talbot.

"In the Housemaster's study, please."

"I say," burst out Tom Merry, "if Gore has been complaining—"

"Gore!" said Kildare. "What has Gore to do with this?"

"I—I thought—"

"It has nothing to do with Gore," said Kildare. "You haven't heard what has happened, then?"

"What's happened?" repeated Tom Merry. "What's the matter?"

"I will tell you, then. It's only just been found out. Tresham's only just come down."

"Tresham?" said Tom, with a vague feeling of alarm. "What are you driving at, Kildare?"

"Last night, Tresham's desk was broken into and burgled!" said Kildare.

"What?"

"The lock was forced, and twelve pounds was taken from his desk!"

"Great Scott!"

"But—but what has that to do with Talbot?" asked Manners.

Kildare shrugged his shoulders, and did not reply to the question.

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Talbot's face had become very pale; there was a look of despair in his eyes. "It's all up!" he said tonelessly.

"Talbot, you—you don't know anything about it?" almost shouted Tom Merry.

"Nothing at all," said Talbot, with quivering lips. "But everybody will believe that I do! I was a fool to come here; I see it now! I'm ready, Kildare!"

With a firm step, Talbot followed the captain of St. Jim's to Mr. Railton's study.

Tom Merry & Co. were left, rooted to the floor, looking at one another in silence, their faces full of horror and consternation.

CHAPTER 10.

The Finishing Blow!

MR. RAILTON greeted Talbot with a searching glance as he entered the study with Kildare.

The School House master was looking deeply troubled.

His faith in the reform of the Toff had been firmly founded, as his severity with Tresham a few days before had shown. But it had received a staggering blow now. There had been a burglary in the House!

And in the light of that unheard-of happening, the Housemaster could not help feeling that perhaps his faith in the boy had been misplaced.

Suspicion pointed to Talbot with an inevitable finger. The boy realised it himself only too clearly. Once he had been guilty—that was known. And Fate was hard upon the guilty. The way of the transgressor is hard, and repentance was no guarantee for the future. Talbot felt inwardly that it was "all up," and the despair and misery in his heart showed only too plainly in his face, and might well have been taken for the signs of conscious guilt.

The searching look of the Housemaster brought a sudden hot flush into his white cheeks. He saw that he was suspected even here.

Tresham was in the study. The Fifth Former was looking harassed, as was only natural in the circumstances. He did not look at Talbot.

"You know why I have sent for you, Talbot?" asked Mr. Railton. His voice was hard; quite unlike his usual kindly tones.

"Kildare has told me, sir," said Talbot dully.

"Do you know anything of what happened last night?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Talbot, I will not say that you are suspected, but you must see for yourself how the matter looks. Tresham reports to me that his study was entered last night, the lock on his desk was forced, and the money there—funds of the Fifth Form Football Club—taken away."

"Yes, sir."

"It was undoubtedly done by someone inside the School House. There is no sign of the House having been entered from outside. Moreover, a common burglar would not go to a boy's study; a burglar would seek the safe, not a boy's desk. And a stranger could not possibly know that Tresham was secretary and treasurer of a football club, and kept the funds in his desk. You see that? This theft was committed by someone belonging to the School House."

"It looks like it, sir."

"And you know nothing of it?"

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"Nothing."

"You did not leave your dormitory last night?"

"I did not."

The Housemaster's look became more searching. Talbot bore it as calmly as he could; but he flinched a little. The knowledge that he was suspected, that in most minds he was already condemned, unnerved him. The iron nerve of the Toff seemed to be gone. He had so much at stake now—his honour was dear to him. The knowledge of all he stood to lose was like ice in his heart.

"Very well, Talbot," said Mr. Railton, after a pause, compressing his lips. "I have asked you the question, and you have denied knowledge of the matter. For the present, do not suppose that your word is doubted. I hope sincerely that you may come out of this without a stain on your name. It is a matter for proof, not for suspicion. There will, of course, be a most searching investigation. The facts, whatever they are, must come to light. The guilty party will be discovered."

"I hope so, sir."

"You will please remain here for the present, Talbot. You have no objection?"

Talbot smiled bitterly. He understood that he was to be detained in the Housemaster's study so that he could have no opportunity of concealing the plunder, if it was in his possession.

"I have no objection, sir."

"Very well; remain here. You may come with me, Tresham."

"Yes, sir," said Tresham, in a subdued voice.

He followed the Housemaster from the study. Talbot was left alone. He sank down in the chair, with a groan that came from the depths of his heart.

A few minutes later the study door opened softly. Tom Merry looked in, and he felt a pang at his heart as he saw Talbot with his face buried in his hands. The unhappy boy did not look up.

Tom Merry gazed at him, and almost fiercely drove away a wretched doubt that crept into his mind. Talbot was innocent, but he did not look innocent at that moment. His attitude was that of guilt and despair.

"Talbot!" muttered Tom.

Talbot dropped his hands from his face. He was deathly pale, and his eyes were burning. He stared at Tom without speaking.

"I—I want to tell you we don't believe it," said Tom hurriedly. "We know it's all right, Talbot. Depend on us."

"Merry!" It was Kildare's sharp voice from the passage. "Come away at once!"

Tom Merry gave Talbot a last reassuring look, and closed the study door.

But his words of faith and loyalty brought no light to Talbot's face, no hope to his heart. The belief of one fellow—of a dozen fellows—what could that help him now? He was lost!

He knew it!

His evil record that he had fought so hard to live down had risen, as it were, from the grave to ruin him.



Levison took out Talbot's hatbox and felt under the lid and he jerked it out. It was the ten-shilling note.

There was no hope!

His honour was gone, tarnished for ever; the honour that was all the dearer to him because it had come newly into his life, because it had cost him many a hard struggle and sacrifice.

Fate had been against it. It was written that he should not succeed in the task he had set himself. All had been in vain. And the unhappy junior, his hopes crushed, his heart aching, sat in the study in stony silence and despair, waiting—waiting for the sentence that was to come, undeserved but irrevocable.

CHAPTER 11.

The Inquiry!

DR. HOLMES, the Head of St. Jim's, was in Tresham's study.

Mr. Railton had told him of what had happened. The news had already buzzed through the school. In the passage, groups of fellows were discussing it with hushed voices.

Tresham, in his study with the Head and Mr. Railton, was very quiet and subdued.

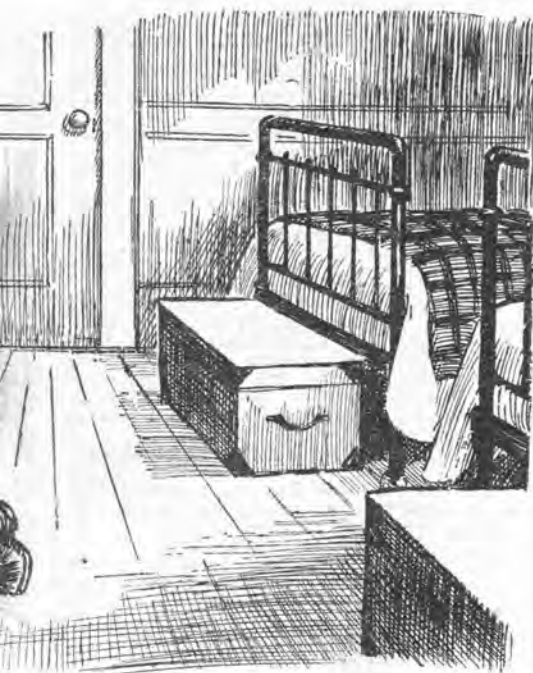
"Tell me exactly what has happened, Tresham," said the Head, in a low voice. "When did you make the discovery?"

"As soon as I came down this morning, sir," said Tresham, speaking with an effort. "I came into my study, and I found my desk—as you see it now, sir."

The Head's eyes were fixed upon Tresham's desk.

It was a strong desk, standing in a corner of the study. The lock had been a strong one, and the key of it was on Tresham's watch-chain. The lock had been forced with a chisel or some sharp instrument.

"I saw that the lock had been broken, sir," said Tresham. "I went to the desk at once to see if the money was safe. I thought of that at once, sir—especially because of the talk I had heard about a theft in the House yesterday—"



the topper inside. A crumpling paper met his fingers, note stolen from Gore. He had found it!

his eyebrows a little. "I should have expected that part of the money at least was in banknotes."

"You see, sir, the subscriptions come in in small amounts," Tresham explained.

"It would have been equally convenient to change it into banknotes, and a great deal safer," said the Head.

"Well, sir, I've always been in the habit of doing so," said Tresham. "Some of the money had been there a good time, too. I was going to pay most of it away to-day, as a matter of fact."

"Well, well, it cannot be helped now," said the Head. "On another occasion you will probably understand that paper money is far safer to keep. The money, being in coin, will be impossible to trace."

"I'm afraid so, sir," said Tresham. "I'm afraid the fellows in the club will blame me. But I couldn't do more than lock it up. I always take care of the key. I wear it on my watch-chain."

"Call Talbot here," said the Head.

Mr. Railton left the study. He returned in a few minutes with Talbot, upon whose face, pale and drawn, the Head's eyes rested scrutinisingly.

"Talbot," said the Head gently, "you know what has occurred, and you understand the suspicion that must enter naturally into many minds on the subject."

"I understand, sir," said Talbot.

"Have you anything to tell me?"

The Head made a gesture towards the rifled desk.

Talbot shook his head.

"I know nothing of it, sir."

"You did not come downstairs last night?"

"No, sir."

"Did you know that Tresham kept the club funds in that desk?"

"I'd never thought about it, sir. I knew he was treasurer of the Fifth Form club, of course. All the fellows knew."

"You give me your word, Talbot, that you are innocent?"

"Yes, sir," Talbot's eyes strayed to the desk, and a pale smile came over his face. "There is proof there, sir, in a way."

"In what way, Talbot?"

"The way the desk has been opened. You remember what I was in the past," Talbot coloured deeply. "If I had robbed that desk when—I was a crackman, I should not have needed to smash the lock like that. Whoever broke that lock must have made a great deal of noise. He might have been heard and interrupted. I could have opened it quite easily without breaking it. I have not lost my skill. That lock would not have delayed me half a minute if I had wanted to open the desk. I should not have risked making a noise in the middle of the night."

"That is very true," said the Head, struck by the remark.

"Talbot is only making the case blacker against himself, sir," said

Tresham, with a curious look at the Shell fellow. "He had better hold his tongue."

"What do you mean, Tresham?"

"We all know, sir,"—Tresham's lip curled—"all the school knows that Talbot was a thief, and that he can pick locks. If that lock had been picked, there wouldn't have been the slightest doubt who'd done it. Talbot might as well have left his card there as picked the lock. That's why he smashed it."

The Head started, and Mr. Railton nodded involuntarily. The point was well taken.

Talbot understood it, too, and he suppressed a groan.

"I didn't think of that," he muttered. "Tresham's right; I've made it look worse instead of better. But I am innocent!"

"You've got to prove that," said Tresham.

"That will do, Tresham," said the Head coldly. "Everyone must be believed innocent till he is proved to be guilty. If the lock had been picked, as you say, it would have been presumptive evidence against Talbot, as no one else in the school could have done it. But the lock has been broken, which proves nothing. Talbot, you may return to Mr. Railton's study. Kindly remain there till you are sent for."

"Yes, sir."

Talbot went out.

"This matter must be carefully investigated," said the Head slowly. "I cannot bring myself to believe that Talbot is guilty; but, at all events, the matter must be proved one way or the other. Let the boys go in to breakfast, Mr. Railton; it is past the time. Afterwards there must be a search. If any boy is found in possession of a large sum of money, he must account for it. And, meanwhile, I will inquire into the matter which Tresham has mentioned—of the theft in a junior study yesterday. Immediately after breakfast, will you bring the boys belonging to that study to me?"

"Very well, sir."

There was a buzz of talk in the dining-room when the School House fellows came in to breakfast. Talbot did not appear. His breakfast was taken to him in the Housemaster's study. It was understood that he was to be kept isolated until the inquiry had taken place.

Many glances were cast at Tresham, and it was not surprising that he was seen to look pale and harassed. He was responsible for the money in his charge, and if he were called upon to make the loss good, it would be a heavy call upon his resources.

Cutts, Gilmore, and St. Leger regarded Tresham very keenly as he joined them at the breakfast-table. Tresham avoided their glances.

After breakfast, Gore and Skimpole were called upon by Mr. Railton, and they followed him to the Head's study. The juniors understood what that meant. The story of George Gore's ten-shilling note had come to light, and was to be inquired into.

Cutts joined Tresham as the fellows left the dining-room. He walked out into the quadrangle with him, and did not speak until they were out of hearing of the others.

"This is a jolly queer business, Tresham," said Cutts, fixing his eyes keenly upon his chum's face.

Tresham met his look defiantly.

"I don't see anything queer in it!" he said tartly. "We've got a reformed

burglar in the House, and it's only natural he should get up to his old tricks again."

"In a way, yes," said Cutts musingly. "I thought the chap was straight; but you never know, of course."

"Once a thief, always a thief!" said Tresham.

"Possibly. But even if he is a rascal, he has never struck me as being a fool—an absolute fool," said Cutts. "And he must be a thumping fool if he has done this! He must have known in advance that he would be suspected immediately."

"Of course, he hopes to brazen it out. I don't suppose any of the money will be found on him. He's hidden that safe enough."

"But he'll have to go, proved guilty or not," said Cutts, with a shake of the head. "It was a bit thick having him here at all, and this suspicion is enough to ruin him. He can't stay—it's impossible!"

"All the better. Let him go back to where he came from."

"Yes. But I mean he must have known all that in advance if he did it," said Cutts. "He's practically given up a valuable scholarship and a good quarterly allowance for the sake of twelve quid. It's very odd. Rascal or not, it's queer that he should be such a fool!"

Tresham shrugged his shoulders.

"Look here," said Cutts abruptly, "is it square, Tresham?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"What I mean is—was the money there?"

Tresham turned deadly pale.

"I—I— What do you mean, Cutts? You know the money was there. The fellows had paid up their subscriptions, and—and the money was there. I haven't paid the bills—"

"Yes, I know. I heard Lefevre grumbling about your leaving the bills so late. He says he was dunned in Hanney's shop. Why did you leave them so late?"

"I—I've had other things to think of. Hang it, you know I've had worries enough on my mind lately, chiefly owing to you and your precious dead certs!" said Tresham, angrily and passionately. "What are you driving at, confound you?"

"Well, it's odd!" said Cutts moodily. "If you'd paid the bills at the proper time, as you ought to have done, the money wouldn't have been there to be stolen!"

"Some of it would have been there!" said Tresham sullenly.

"It's jolly odd! You happened to leave the bills unpaid, and now the money's taken just at the last moment. They were to have been paid to-day. I understand. What about your debts? Have you been settling them lately?"

"You can ask Banks. I haven't settled any."

Cutts looked relieved for a moment. "That's all right, then. I couldn't help thinking. You looked so queer, too; and then there was the way you went for Talbot the other day, dragging it all up about his past—for no reason that I could see. But I suppose it's all right. And—and if he has stolen Gore's banknote, as the juniors think, I suppose that settles it. The club will have to meet the loss; we shan't hold you responsible."

"Well, they ought to," said Tresham.

"Some of the money may be recovered—the notes, anyway."

"There weren't any notes; it was all in silver."

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Dark suspicion came into Gerald Cutts' face again.

"In silver? Twelve pounds in silver? Why, I remember my subscription was in a one-pound note, Tresham!"

"I—I changed it for silver afterwards. I preferred to have it in silver."

Cutts compressed his lips.

"Look here, Cutts," said Tresham, in a low, hoarse voice, "I—I don't know what's in your mind; but if you dare to insinuate—I—I mean, if you say anything that—that—"

He broke off, panting.

Cutts looked him in the eyes.

"I'm not going to say anything," he said shortly. "It's not my business to round on a fellow who's been my pal. But if you've played a rotten, under-hand trick in this business, Tresham, look out for yourself! I'm not a particular chap, but I draw a line at—"

"At what?" said Tresham fiercely.

Cutts gave a shrug of the shoulders.

"Never mind. But hoe your own row; don't expect me to have a hand in that kind of game. You can rely on me to keep my mouth shut, that's all!"

And Cutts walked away, leaving Tresham looking after him with a haggard face.

CHAPTER 12.

What Levison Knew!

LEVISON came out of the School House and looked round the quad.

Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther were standing by the old elms, talking in low tones.

There was glum discomfort in their looks. They believed that Talbot was innocent; but, all the same, they felt that it was "all up" with their clam, as he had himself declared. Levison joined them.

He was greeted with dark looks. To the Terrible Three, his late championship of Talbot did not atone for the fact that he had always been the unfortunate junior's enemy.

"What do you want?" growled Manners.

"A word with you," said Levison, lowering his voice cautiously. "It looks to me as if Talbot is done for this time."

Tom Merry clenched his hands.

"Have you come here to say—"

"Nothing against Talbot," said Levison quietly. "I don't think he's guilty. More than that, I know he isn't."

"You—you know?"

"Yes. Have a little sense. A fellow doesn't give away five pounds for nothing one day, and steal twelve quid another, with a dead certainty of being found out. I didn't believe at first that his reformation was genuine. But I knew he wasn't a silly fool. And only a crass fool would have done this—in Talbot's place. I know he didn't do it."

"It's plain enough to us that he didn't do it," said Tom Merry. "But how is it going to be proved?"

"It's got to be proved."

The Terrible Three stared at Levison. This was an altogether unexpected line for the cad of the Fourth to take. Levison smiled—his old sneering smile—as he read their expressions.

"I mean it!" he said. "Talbot saved me from the sack. I know what I owe him. I'm going to save him—if I can."

"Good luck to you!" said Tom Merry. "I don't see how you're going to do it. I'd give anything to clear him. But we're helpless."

Levison sneered again.

"You may be," he said. "But I'm not. Talbot may find my friendship a little bit more valuable than yours, after all. Look here, I know he's inno-

cent. Never mind how I know it—I do know it. The misery is I can't prove it; if I told what I knew, I shouldn't be believed!"

"Your own fault!" snapped Lowther. "No good rubbing it in now. But I know; it is my own fault in a way. I can't give Tresham away without giving myself away, too—"

"Tresham! What has he to do with it?"

"Never mind!" said Levison hastily. "I—I let my tongue slip—never mind. But look here, I must see Talbot. It's necessary."

"He's shut up in Railton's study," said Tom Merry. "Nobody's allowed to see him. I looked in for a minute, and Kildare called me away. Kildare's keeping an eye on the study now. They think Talbot's got the money somewhere, and that he might slip away and hide it before a search is made! Idiots!"

"I must see him!" said Levison excitedly. "I've seen Kildare in the passage. But I've got to see Talbot. Look here, the money won't be found—not a single pound of it!"

"How do you know?"

"I do know! You'd know, too, if you knew— Never mind. But that money isn't inside the school now."

"Look here, you know too jolly much!" broke out Monty Lowther. "Blessed if you don't make me think that you—"

"That I busted Tresham's desk and took it?" sneered Levison. "Well, you think so if you like—I could prove that I didn't, if it wasn't for other matters coming out at the same time. I want to save Talbot, but I'm not looking for the sack. I tell you, I'm the only one who can save Talbot, because I'm the only one that knows the trick that's been played."

"What trick?"

"This trick!" said Levison impatiently. "Are you a fool? You know Talbot didn't take the money—somebody else did, then. There was a theft in Gore's study yesterday; can't you see it was the same chap?"

"I dare say it was," said Tom Merry. "There's no proof!"

"Proof—proof!" growled Levison. "Haven't you any common sense? What did the thief want with Gore's miserable ten-shilling note? Not to use as money. He can use it for something else, though."

"What else?" asked Tom Merry, utterly mystified.

"Suppose it's found on Talbot, or in Talbot's things?"

"It can't be, as he didn't take it."

"He didn't take it, but it might be found on him, all the same," said Levison, in a shrill whisper. "Can't you see—or won't you see? That note found on Talbot would prove that he was a thief yesterday. If he was a thief yesterday, he was a thief last night—that follows. Can't you see? That note was stolen from Gore's study to make it look suspicious against Talbot, so that this robbery could take place in the night, and be planted on him this morning. Are you blind?"

"Great Scott!" muttered Tom Merry.

"You—you mean to say there's a fellow in the House who's rotter enough—"

"Can't you see for yourself?"

"Oh, it's all rot!" said Lowther uneasily. "There's only one chap in the House who'd be cunning enough to think out such a scheme, and that's you, Levison."

"Well, I didn't think this scheme out, but I've bowled it out," said Levison. "I wondered yesterday what the note had been taken for. I couldn't make it out. I knew it hadn't been

taken to spend. When I heard of this burglary this morning, I knew. And I tell you that note will fix it on Talbot, when it's found among his things. That's what it was taken for—to prove Talbot still a thief. That proved, this robbery will be put down to him as a matter of course, and there won't be an inquiry—the real thief will be as safe as houses. Can't you see?"

"It—it sounds too horrible!"

Levison gave a sneering, impatient laugh.

"I dare say it sounds horrible, but the fellow who did it was at the end of his tether. It was that—or the same for

himself. Either he had to prove that there was another thief in the place, or be proved a thief himself. And he picked on Talbot, because of the Toff's reputation. I dare say he's justified it to himself in his mind, too—very likely thinks that Talbot is really only spoofing, and that he may as well be condemned for this, as allowed to run on till he really breaks out. Anyway, he had to save himself, and Talbot's the scapegoat. And I tell you that Gore's note is in Talbot's pocket—or in his things—and Talbot doesn't know it."

The Terrible Three looked helplessly at one another. The plot was unfolded

by Levison's cunning reasoning. It was such a plot as might have been contrived by Levison himself in his worst days.

"But who—who is the chap?" muttered Manners at last.

"Never mind who. I'm telling you how it is. I must see Talbot, and—"

Levison ground his teeth as if in despair.

"The Shell dormitory is locked up."

"How do you know?"

"I've been there, of course. They suspect the loot may be in Talbot's box, and Mr. Railton went up and locked

(Continued on the next page.)

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the dormitory immediately. I've been there to see. I couldn't get in. Look here, there's no time to waste. The Head is jawing to Gore and Skimpole in his study. The next thing will be a search. Whether you believe me or not, I suppose you want to help Talbot."

"Yes, yes; but—"

"Get to the window of Railton's study and speak to Talbot. Tell him to go through all his pockets and see if the note is there. If it is, make him burn it—no good saying it was planted on him; he wouldn't be believed. Of course, it's much more likely to be in his box; it wouldn't be easy to plant it on Talbot himself. But it might have been done. Go and speak to him, and ask him. And I'll—"

Levison broke off abruptly.

"You'll what? What will you do?"

"Never mind. Go and do as I tell you."

It was curious enough for the Terrible Three to be taking their orders from Levison, the cad of the Fourth, whom they had always disliked and despised. But his fierce excitement had impressed them strangely. They nodded assent, and hurried away towards the window of Mr. Railton's study.

Levison hurried off in the opposite direction.

Tom Merry tapped softly on the study window. Talbot came to it. He was still alone in the study.

He opened the lower sash.

Tom Merry hurriedly explained to him. Talbot started.

"It's impossible!" he muttered.

"I think it is, too. But Levison thinks— Anyway, go through your pockets and see, for goodness' sake!"

"Right—ho!"

Talbot made a hurried search through his pockets. Then he shook his head. The window of the study was closed again; the Terrible Three walked away.

"Where's Levison?"

But Levison was not to be seen.

CHAPTER 13.

Levison's Way!

LEVISON was not far away.

The chums of the Shell would have been surprised, however, if they could have seen him at that moment.

Levison was risking his life.

The School House fellows were mostly in the House, and gathered in groups in the quad near the doorway. Round the angle of the building, where the windows of the Shell dormitory looked out on the old elms, there were no eyes to watch Levison. He was climbing the ivy that grew thick on the old stone walls, and between the high windows of the dormitory.

Tom Merry and one or two other venturesome juniors had climbed the ivy to and from the dormitory windows. But it was a difficult feat and full of danger.

Levison was the last fellow in the school almost who would have been expected to attempt such a feat. But he was attempting it now.

Already he was half-way up the dangerous height. Levison was not in the good physical condition of Tom Merry; he did not follow the same pursuits. And the strain told upon him terribly. Old and strong as the ivy was, there was little foothold to be found in it, and most of the time the climber's weight was on his arms. More than once he swung there, with only his

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aching arms holding him from a sudden and terrible fall.

Levison's face was white, his teeth hard set, and thick perspiration was on his brow and running down his cheeks.

He had set himself to a task beyond his strength, and he knew it. He had known it before he started. But he climbed on with grim resolve. He was already aching in every limb. It was the strength of desperation that upheld him now.

With his eyes turned upwards, he climbed on. To save Talbot he had to get into the Shell dormitory unknown. That he had discovered the plot against the suspected fellow, he was assured. That the thief could have placed the note upon Talbot's person was possible, but not likely.

If it was as Levison suspected, Gore's note was concealed somewhere in Talbot's belongings—somewhere where he would not be likely to find it himself before the time. Somewhere in his box in the dormitory, among his shirts or collars, or in his hatbox. Levison was as clear upon that point as if he himself had planned the whole scheme. It rested upon his shoulders to save the boy who had saved him, and he was striving to do it.

How he finished that terrible climb he hardly knew. But his grasp was upon the window-sill at last. He dragged himself up with a final effort, and his knee rested there. He pushed open the window, and rolled into the dormitory, so spent that he fell upon the floor, and lay there for a full minute without moving, panting and utterly exhausted.

But there was no time to lose. At any minute now the Head might be finished with his examination of Gore and Skimpole, and the search would follow. Before that came, Levison must be gone from the dormitory, unless he was to fail, after all.

He dragged himself to his feet with aching limbs. A moment more, and he was searching Talbot's box. If it had been locked, it would have saved him the trouble; but it was not locked, and so he knew that the plotter had had easy access to it, if he had chosen. With swift fingers Levison made the search.

Nothing—nothing!

Had he been mistaken? And time pressed. Every second he feared to hear steps in the passage—to hear the key turning in the lock. If he were discovered! He smiled bitterly at the thought. If they found him there, suspicion might turn upon himself.

He pursued the search with savage earnestness. He ransacked the box, but he found nothing. He rose to his feet, baffled, and almost in despair. He was sure that his suspicion was well founded.

Was the note hidden so securely that only a minute search of every article in the box would reveal it! Yet how could the plotter have found the opportunity to bestow it so carefully? The rascal would not have ventured to spend much time in the junior dormitory for fear of being surprised there.

Levison uttered a suppressed exclamation.

"Fool, not to think of that before!"

He ran to the large cupboard at the end of the dormitory. There were several hatboxes there, among them Talbot's. He tore it open. Inside reposed the "Sunday topper." He anathematised himself for not thinking of it sooner. That was the place the plotter would have chosen. Talbot was not likely to open that box before Sunday.

Levison felt inside the topper, and his teeth came together with a sharp snap. Under the lining of the top-hat a

crumpling paper met his fingers. He jerked it out. It was a banknote for ten shillings.

He had found it!

If Talbot's best friend had made the discovery it would have staggered his faith in Talbot. But Levison had expected it. He knew that Talbot had not placed it there. For it was clear in his mind that Gore's note had been taken by the same hand that had taken the money from Tresham's desk; and he knew that that was not Talbot's hand. He had the best of reasons for knowing that.

For Levison alone of all fellows in the School House knew that Tresham's desk had contained no money the previous night—that the breaking of the lock, the story of the robbery, were pretences to account for the loss of the money that had already been expended in betting transactions.

He replaced the lid hastily, replaced the box in the cupboard, and closed the door. He had succeeded. It remained only to be gone. He listened; still silence in the passage. He hurried to the window.

His very heart sickened within him as he looked out from the height. Levison was not of the stuff of which heroes are made. The climb looked more terrible from above than from below.

But there was no choice in the matter now.

He nerved himself to it, and climbed out of the window, and gripped the ivy. For a moment the elms, the quadrangle, the buildings, swam before his gaze. Then he pulled himself together. He knew only too well that if he lost his nerve, it would mean serious injury, or worse.

With his teeth set, hand below hand, he clambered down the ivy. It seemed ages before his feet rested on the firm earth; but they rested there at last. He reeled against the wall and panted for breath.

His eyes gleamed with triumph now. He had succeeded. Something yet remained to be done. He had not finished yet. But the rest was easy to Levison.

He dusted down his clothes, rubbed his soiled hands hard on his handkerchief, and, with as much carelessness of manner as he could assume, strolled round to the doorway of the School House.

"Here he is!"

It was Tom Merry's voice, but Levison did not glance towards the Terrible Three. He walked into the House.

Lessons had not commenced that morning as usual. The fellows, seniors and juniors, stood in groups in the passages, talking in hushed tones. The discovery in Tresham's study had put to flight everything else. Before the school settled down to its usual routine there was the investigation to come—and an expulsion.

Tresham was in the passage, with a moody brow. Cutts, Gilmore, and St. Leger seemed to be avoiding him. It was easy for Levison to guess why. What he knew, they suspected.

Levison's eyes glittered as he looked at Tresham. He broke into a run, and, apparently by accident, ran full tilt into the Fifth Former. Tresham staggered under the shock, and Levison threw his arms round him, as if to save himself; and they stumbled to the floor together.

"You clumsy fool!" gasped Tresham. He threw the Fifth Former violently off, and staggered to his feet.

"Sorry, I didn't see you!"

"Why don't you look where you're going, you idiot?"

Levison picked himself up and went on his way. He went into the Common-room, where a crowd of juniors were talking eagerly. There was a smile upon Levison's thin, sharp face now.

His collision with Tresham had not been an accident. Tresham did not know—though most of the Fourth Formers could have told him—that Levison was a past-master of the art of conjuring and sleight-of-hand. Levison had not forgotten his old skill. It had served him many a time to play ill-natured tricks. It had served another purpose now. The ten-shilling note was no longer in Levison's possession. It was in the breast-pocket of Tresham!

The Terrible Three joined Levison in the Common-room. His smile puzzled them a little.

"We've spoken to Talbot," said Tom Merry abruptly. "It's all right—you were mistaken."

Levison nodded coolly.

"Well, any fellow might make mistakes," he remarked.

"But you suspected—"

"They're going to search!" called out Kangaroo, in the passage, and there was a general crowding out of the Common-room. Levison went with the rest; and the Terrible Three followed him, puzzled.

CHAPTER 14.

The Proof of Guilt!

GORE and Skimpole had been closely questioned in the Head's study.

Dr. Holmes and Mr. Railton elicited all the circumstances of the losing of the ten-shilling note. And Gore passed some uncomfortable moments.

"You should have reported the matter immediately to your House-master," the Head said severely.

"I didn't want to make a fuss, sir," said Gore. "It was only ten shillings. And I thought the rotter might put it back when I said that I'd got the number."

"You have the number?"

"Yes, sir, in this letter. T-22-0000044," said Gore.

"That is well. The note at least can be traced. You cannot tell me that you suspect who may have taken it?"

Gore flushed uncomfortably.

"Well, it looks as if it were a chap in my study, sir," he said. "Of course, lots of fellows knew I had the note. Still, as it was taken from my study, naturally it looks suspicious against my studymates; but I know it wasn't Skimpole."

"My dear Gore, I assure you—"

"I am satisfied that it was not Skimpole," said the Head, motioning the genius of the Shell to be silent. "But your only other studymate is Talbot."

"Well, sir, most of the fellows think it was Talbot, considering his record."

"It is not fair to condemn him for the past," said the Head. "Do you yourself think it was Talbot?"

Gore hesitated.

"I—I can't say I do, sir," he said at last. "I know what he was, and—since he's been in my study we've had some rows. But it's only fair to say that he's been thoroughly decent, as straight as a die. I think I ought to say that."

Dr. Holmes nodded approval.

"I am glad to hear you say so, Gore. However, we shall see. The next step, Mr. Railton, is to make a thorough search. Talbot's belongings must be



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examined carefully. He is still in your study?"

"Yes, sir; and I took the precaution of locking up the Shell dormitory so that no one could enter there, in any case."

"Very good. That was well thought of. You may go, boys. Kindly call Toby, Mr. Railton. He shall make the search under our eyes."

Gore and Skimpole left the study, glad to get away. Toby, the page, was called, and he proceeded to the Shell dormitory with the two masters. Mr. Railton signed to Tresham to follow them.

An eager crowd watched them ascend the stairs. Mr. Railton produced the key, and unlocked the door of the Shell dormitory. The juniors ventured to follow as far as the passage outside.

"Better send for Talbot," said the Head. "It is only fair to conduct the search in his presence."

"I was thinking so, sir," Mr. Railton stepped back to the door. "Kildare, will you kindly bring Talbot here? He is in my study."

In a few moments Kildare came through the crowd in the passage with Talbot. They entered the dormitory. Dr. Holmes turned a sorrowful look upon the boy.

"I have ordered a search of your box, Talbot. You have no objection?"

"None, sir."

"Very well."

The search commenced. Toby turned out the contents of the box, and under Mr. Railton's keen eye the search was thorough. Every article was removed and shaken out, but no money came to light. Tresham watched the proceedings with a slight sneer upon his face.

"There is nothing there," said the Head, with a sigh of relief.

"Talbot may have another box, sir," said Tresham.

"Have you any other box here, Talbot?"

"Only my hatbox, sir."

"Please bring it here."

Talbot brought out the hatbox in which reposed his Sunday topper. Tresham's eyes were glistening now.

Toby opened the box, and lifted out the hat.

Mr. Railton looked into the box.

"There is nothing there," he said.

"Then we are finished here," said the Head.

Tresham bit his lip.

"One moment, sir!"

"You have something to suggest, Tresham?"

"Mr. Railton has not looked into the hat, sir."

"It is as well to be thorough," said the Head. And the Housemaster nodded and took the hat. He turned back the lining inside, and shook his head.

"There is nothing there," he said.

Tresham almost staggered.

"Nothing there?" he repeated, in agitated tones. "You—you are sure, sir?"

"Of course I am, Tresham!" said Mr. Railton tartly.

"But—but—" Tresham stammered.

"But what?"

"May—may I look, sir?"

"Certainly, if you wish."

Tresham took the topper and turned back the inside lining, and scanned the interior of the hat. Certainly there was no note there. The Fifth Former turned his eyes upon Talbot with a

strange, hunted look. Talbot met his gaze calmly.

"Well, Tresham?" said the House-master impatiently.

"It—it certainly appears to be as you say, sir," said Tresham, in a voice he vainly endeavoured to render firm. "There is nothing there."

Mr. Railton was looking very hard at him.

"Really, Tresham, this is very peculiar! Had you any special reason for supposing that Talbot had concealed something in this hat?"

"Oh, no, sir!" gasped Tresham. "Not at all, sir! I—I thought, as it wasn't in the box—"

"You have no right to conclude that Talbot had anything to conceal!" said the Head sharply.

"Yes—no, sir," stammered Tresham. "I'm sorry, sir. There—there certainly is nothing here."

"That will do. Talbot, I ask you to allow the boy to search your person," said the Head.

"He is welcome, sir."

Toby proceeded to search Talbot's pockets. Through the half-open doorway the juniors were watching with all their eyes. The Terrible Three were farther along the passage. They were waiting, with sickening apprehension, for the end of the search.

Levison's words were fresh in their minds. Suppose the note had been "planted" on Talbot—suppose it were found in his box? The anxiety they felt was sickening in its intensity.

Levison came back quietly from the door of the dormitory, his eyes gleaming.

"They're going through Talbot's pockets now," he whispered. "They've found nothing in the box."

"Thank goodness!" breathed Tom Merry.

"Nothing proved either way, then," said Lowther. "Not guilty and not innocent. Poor old Talbot!"

"Do you want to save him?" said Levison, in a whisper. "Listen to me. You can speak up; I can't. I must keep out of it—I've my reasons. But now, if you choose to save him, you can—and I will tell you how."

"You know I'll do anything!" muttered Tom Merry. "What are you driving at? For goodness' sake, speak a little plainer!"

"Very well, I will tell you!" Levison spoke in a low, intense whisper, audible only to the ears of the Terrible

Three. "Do you guess how I knew that Talbot hadn't taken the money from Tresham's desk?"

"No!"

"Because I knew that there was no money there!"

Tom Merry caught his breath.

"Levison—"

"Don't you understand?" Levison's whisper was almost fierce. "Tresham, Cutts, and the rest have been gambling—and losing! I was in the same boat. They threw me out when I asked them to help me. Well, Tresham was in deeper than the rest, because he had used the footer club funds. Do you see?"

"Great Scott! How do you know?"

Levison made an impatient gesture.

"Never mind how I know—it's certain! Listen to me! I know—as well as if I saw him do it—that Tresham went down last night and busted that desk, so as to have a yarn to tell to account for the money being gone. It was the only way he could save his skin—by pretending it had been stolen and putting it on Talbot."

"The villain!" said Tom Merry between his teeth.

"But is it true?" said Lowther. "We all know Levison—"

"Do you want to save Talbot?" almost hissed Levison.

"Yes—you know that! What do you want us to do?"

"Tresham made them search Talbot. You can speak up, as Talbot's chum, and demand a search of Tresham."

"I? But—"

"I can't speak—it's impossible for me. You're Talbot's chum. Won't you take that much trouble to save him?"

"I'll do that—or anything. But—"

"You won't do it on my advice!" said Levison bitterly. "You'd rather let Talbot be kicked out of the school! That's what your friendship's worth, is it?"

"I want to be sure before I—"

"Very well, wait till you're sure—after Talbot's turned out of St. Jim's in disgrace! It's now or never! Please yourself!"

Levison turned savagely away.

Tom Merry stood with his brain in a whirl. Was this one more of Levison's old tricks—or was it true? He could not doubt the savage earnestness with which Levison had spoken. He must have some grounds for his statement, and if it was true—

There was a movement in the passage. The Head and Mr. Railton came

out of the dormitory, followed by Tresham and Talbot.

Tom Merry made up his mind. It was only a flimsy chance—still, it was a chance—and he would hesitate at nothing to save his chum. He strode forward.

"Dr. Holmes, may I speak?" he asked.

The Head paused.

"What have you to say, Merry?"

"Before anybody's condemned for taking the money from Tresham's desk, sir, it ought to be proved that the money was there!" said Tom.

There was a buzz in the crowded passage.

Dr. Holmes looked at the Shell fellow in amazement. Tom Merry's heart was thumping, but as he caught the look on Tresham's face he knew that Levison was right.

For the Fifth Former had turned a ghastly colour, and the look in his eyes was of deadly terror—a terror of discovery. The shock of Tom Merry's sudden words had found him utterly unprepared, and he could not pull himself together.

"What do you mean, Merry? Tresham has told me that the money was there—the funds of the Fifth Form Football Club, of which he was secretary."

But Tom Merry was certain now. Tresham's ghastly face was enough for him. And he spoke confidently.

"Anybody could break a lock, sir, and say the desk had been robbed."

"Merry!"

"What is the matter with you, Tresham?" asked Mr. Railton.

"I, sir? N—nothing!" stuttered Tresham.

"Does that young hound mean to insinuate—to imply—"

Dr. Holmes, you do not believe—

"Unless you have some good grounds for what you say, Merry," said the Head sternly, "you are doing very wrong to make such a suggestion."

Tom Merry's heart thumped hard again. But he was in for it now.

"I know that, sir. But Talbot has been searched—and, as Talbot's chum, and a fellow who believes in him, I think it's fair that Tresham should be searched, too."

"Tresham?"

"Yes, sir," said Tom unflinchingly.

"Why not?"

"Either you are speaking wildly, Merry, or else you must know something about this matter that I am not acquainted with!" said Dr. Holmes sternly.

"I have no objection to being searched," said Tresham, with a bitter look at the junior. "Merry is saying this because—"

"I could say a good deal more if I chose!" said Tom Merry, with a flash in his eyes. "But I won't say anything without proof. Let him be searched the same as Talbot has been. What is good enough for the Shell is good enough for the Fifth!"

"Yaas, wathah!" chimed in Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "As a mattah of fact, there isn't any pwoof that there's been a wobbewy at all, only what Twesham says—and I wouldn't take his word against old Talbot's."

"This—this is extraordinary!" said the Head. "However, for Tresham's own sake, a search had better be made, since these unpleasant suspicions seem to be rife. Talbot has submitted to it, so there is really no reason—"

"I have no objection," said Tresham.

The Head made a sign to Toby, and the page proceeded to search Tresham as he had searched Talbot. Almost the

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first object that came to light was a ten-shilling note.

The Head started. "Give that to me," he said. "Of course, this is yours, Tresham—don't think I have any doubt on that point, but I will ascertain the number, so that there can be no room for doubt in anybody else's mind."

Tresham did not reply; his eyes were fastened upon the note in a stare of terror. His head seemed to be turning round.

"T-22-000044!" read out the Head.

There was a yell from George Gore. "That's my note, sir!"

"What?"

"That's the number. I told you in your study, sir. I've got it here in my pater's letter!" yelled Gore excitedly.

The Head, his face very grim now, took Gore's letter and compared the number written therein with the number marked upon the note. Then he turned to Tresham.

"Tresham!"—his voice was like the rumble of distant thunder—"this note is the property of Gore. How came it in your pocket?"

"Bowled out!" yelled Blake. "It was Tresham!"

"Bai Jove! Twesham was the thief!"

"Tresham, I am waiting for your reply. This note was stolen from Gore's desk, and it is found in your possession. What have you to say?"

"I—I—" Tresham's tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. It was the stolen note—the note he had deliberately placed in the lining of Talbot's hat to convict him—and it had been discovered in his own pocket!

Was he dreaming? Or had he blundered? He had acted in fear and trembling, his nerves in a twitter. Had his senses failed him, then, and had he left the note in his pocket instead of placing it where he believed he had placed it?

The passage, the sea of faces, seemed to swim about the wretched boy. His nerves, weakened by dissipation and by the stress of the last few days, failed him utterly in that fearful crisis. He had no time to pull himself together—to reflect. It was there and then that he must speak, and the consciousness of guilt weighed him down and tied his tongue.

Levison had calculated well.

He stammered helplessly, and the guilt and terror in his face was visible to the duller eye.

How had the note come there? In the horrible confusion of mind of the moment he could only believe that he had left it there instead of placing it where it would incriminate Talbot, and he had no time to think it out. If he had been innocent, it would have been different. He would have shown surprise, anxiety, but not the terrible fear that was gripping his heart and drawing his blanching face into haggard lines.

"Tresham!"

"Speak, Tresham!" said Mr. Railton; and his voice sounded to the almost fainting boy like the knell of doom. "The stolen note is in your possession. What have you to say? Do you confess that you yourself are responsible for the money that is missing from your desk?"

Tresham did not speak. The condemnation he read in every face and the guilt that lay like ice upon his own wretched heart was too much for him. He covered his face with his hands.

The Head silently handed the note to Gore. There was a subdued buzz of voices in the passage. Tom Merry put his arm through Talbot's, his face bright with relief.



Talbot was breathing hard. To him, most of all, this came unexpectedly—not for a moment had his suspicions turned upon Tresham. It was as if Providence had interposed to save the innocent and punish the guilty. But now that it was all out, Talbot understood it all. It was clear enough to him now—clear enough to all the fellows who knew or suspected Tresham's entanglements in betting transactions and gambling debts.

"I have only one more word to say to you, Tresham!" The Head's voice was hard as iron. "I need not ask you if you are guilty. You have attempted to deceive me—to deceive us all—to throw your own guilt upon an innocent boy. Tell me why you did this—why you have abandoned every scruple, every consideration of honour—for the sake of a wretched sum of money?"

Tresham groaned.

"It wasn't that—it wasn't the money. It was gone, and I had to account for it!" he moaned miserably. "It was gone, and the fellows—" He broke off in a sob of utter shame and misery.

"I understand. You had spent the money entrusted to you, and you planned to account for it by a pretended robbery, and to this end you were willing to sacrifice a lad who had done you no wrong?"

Tresham moaned again, reeling against the wall as if he were about to faint.

Mr. Railton grasped his arm.

"To your Form-rooms, boys!" said the Head. "Tresham, follow me to my study!"

Tresham was gone from St. Jim's by the time the fellows came out from morning lessons.

There had been no public expulsion; he had left quietly.

What he had told the Head was never precisely known. Cutts & Co. waited in fear and trembling for the end of the interview.

They had not been parties to Tresham's base plot. But the ruined Fifth Former could have told many things, if he had liked, which would have made matters exceedingly uncomfortable for them, and, in his despair, it was only

too likely that he might seek to drag down others into his ruin.

But perhaps some rag of honour prevented him from turning on his old associates.

There came no summons to Cutts & Co. to repair to the Head's study, and when Tresham was gone they breathed more freely.

But it was a blow to Cutts & Co. Tresham was the second member of the detectable circle who had gone to the dogs, and had been sacked from the school, and the prestige of the "blades" of the Fifth suffered in consequence.

With Tom Merry & Co., however, all was rejoicing.

Talbot had been cleared, their faith in their chum was justified. And they rejoiced accordingly.

And, most amazing part of all, they owed it to Levison. And later that day they sought Levison, to make him explain. They listened to what he had to tell them in amazement, and with very grave faces.

For the trick Levison had played upon Tresham was not the kind that was likely to be approved by them.

Levison understood their thoughts, and he smiled his old, sneering smile.

"It wouldn't have hurt him if he'd been innocent," he said. "It was only because he was guilty that it knocked him out. I knew he was guilty. I knew he'd embezzled the funds of the footer club; so, as soon as I heard of the robbery, I knew, of course, it was a dodge to account for the money not being there. Then I could guess easily enough what the note had been taken for. He couldn't plant any of his money on Talbot—he'd spent it all long ago. And a theft in Talbot's own study, of course, looked better—for his plan, I mean."

"Having got Talbot already under suspicion for theft, as soon as a robbery was announced, everybody suspected Talbot at once, instead of suspecting that it was a spoof robbery. It was awfully deep; he was a clever rascal. But there had to be proof; so long as the matter remained open, there was always risk for him. One ten-bob note found in Talbot's traps was enough for proof. He would be supposed to have hidden the other money somewhere else. I worked it all out, you see; I was a match for him. You fellows weren't."

"I don't know that I'd quite like to be a match for him in that peculiar line," said Monty Lowther bluntly.

Levison shrugged his shoulders.

"No; but if I hadn't been, where would Talbot be now?"

"True enough!" said Tom Merry. "We've no right to find fault with Levison when he has saved Talbot. And he's done that right enough."

"One good turn deserves another," said Levison. "Talbot and I are quits now."

"And friends, too, if you choose," said Talbot, holding out his hand.

Levison was not likely to change his character in a hurry.

Tom Merry & Co. did not expect that. But they were not likely to forget his service to their chum, and whatever Levison's faults might be—and their name was legion—he would always have a friend in the junior, who, by his own peculiar methods, he had proved not guilty!

THE END.

THE GREYFRIARS JUNIORS GO ON HUNGER-STRIKE TO FORCE THE FADDIST TO GIVE THEM A SQUARE MEAL!

A Form Meeting!

"GENTLEMEN—" "Hear, hear!" "Gentlemen of the Greyfriars Remove, I rise to address you on this important occasion—"

"Bravo!" The cheer that rang through the Remove-room at Greyfriars was deafening, and it was quite impossible for Harry Wharton to proceed.

It was a Form meeting after school hours in the Form-room, and every member of the Remove—the Lower Fourth Form at Greyfriars—was present, and the enthusiasm was impense.

Harry Wharton, the captain of the Form, was on his feet, standing on a chair to address the meeting. His chums were grouped round him to support him loyally—Bob Cherry, Frank Nugent, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, the Nabob of Bhanipur.

Micky Desmond and Hazeldene were there supporting him, too; and Billy Bunter stood with the group, though, as he was eating a jam tart, he was unable to join in the cheering.

"Gentlemen—" "Hurrah!"

"If you will allow me to proceed—" "Hear, hear!"

"Order!" "Silence for the chair!"

"Go it, Wharton!" "On the ball, old chap!"

The cheers died down at last and there was a partial silence, and the captain of the Greyfriars Remove proceeded.

"Gentlemen of the Greyfriars Remove, I rise to address you upon an important occasion. We shall get to business all the quicker if you don't interrupt."

"Hear, hear!"

"You all know the cause of this meeting. You all know the grievances we labour under, and the wrongs we have suffered—"

"Yes, rather!"

"Hear, hear!"

"The wrongfulness is great," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a shake of his dusky head, "and the sufferfulness of the esteemed Remove has been terrific."

"We have now met together," said Harry Wharton, "to discuss quietly the matter and decide upon a remedy."

"Bravo!"

"If this is quietly discussing the matter," murmured Nugent, "I only hope the chaps won't decide to make a row about it."

"You all know," pursued Harry Wharton, warming to his subject, and growing more and more eloquent as he proceeded—"you all know what we have put up with at the hands of our present Form-master. Our former master, Mr. Quelch, was revered and respected by this great Form—"

"Hear, hear!"

"But an attack of illness caused him to retire for a time from the scene of his labours and scholastic triumphs, and in the meantime a new master took his place to take charge temporarily of the Remove. We have no objection to a new master so long as he behaves himself—"

"Hear, hear!"

"But the new master, known among us as the Chesham ass, has not behaved himself. I put it to you—has he played

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The FALL of the FADDIST!

By Frank Richards.

(Author of the grand long yarns of Greyfriars appearing every Saturday in our companion paper, the "Magnet.")

up in a manner worthy of a master of this great Form?"

"No!" roared the Remove.

"Can he be considered to have played the game?"

"No!"

"For the sake of Mr. Quelch we have been very kind to the new master," went on Harry Wharton. "Quelch asked us to be good—and, in my humble opinion, we have been very good."

"Good!" said the Removites.

"But it has had no effect upon the Chesham ass, except to encourage him

in his ways. With all the respect due to a Form-master, I must say that he is a chump!"

"Hear, hear!"

"We have put up with his funny ways with exemplary—"

"Well, that's a good word," murmured Hazeldene.

"With exemplary patience," Harry Wharton continued, unheeding. "For the sake of Mr. Quelch we have been very gentle and kind. Consider what we have put up with. He is the faddist of faddists. If all the other faddists in the kingdom were to pool their fads, they wouldn't make up more than the Chesham ass has thought of."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He has cut down our grub for the sake of our health—"

There was a general groan from the Remove, and for a moment Billy Bunter left off eating jam tarts to join with all the force of his lungs in that deep groan of disapproval.

"He has started giving us morning baths at different temperatures, and every chap seems to get the temperature he likes least. I have to take a warm bath, instead of a cold one; and Hazeldene has to take a cold one, instead of a warm one; Bulstrode has to take a bath when he doesn't want one at all."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We are ordered to wear nightcaps to keep our heads warm. We don't wear them, of course, but we have to put them on when we go to bed."

The Remove groaned again.

"Instead of a little grub at eleven o'clock, we have horrible tabloids served out to us that taste like burnt glue—"

Groans again.

"We have been ordered to take exercise with skipping ropes in the Close, with the Upper Fourth cackling at us all the time and calling us a girls' school—"

A deeper groan than ever.

"And now," pursued Harry Wharton, "the worm has turned."

"Hurrah!"

"As a great statesman once remarked, there is a limit to human endurance. Besides, the Remove has a great reputation to keep up. We can't let the Upper Fourth go on cackling at us for ever. We have stuck it out, hoping that Quelch would return, but he doesn't seem to be coming back."

"He may not be back this week at all," said Nugent.

"Possibly not next," observed Bob Cherry.

"It is possible. I think the whole Form is agreed that we can't stand the Chesham ass for another week."

"Never!"

"The only question is—how are we to muzzle him?" went on Wharton. "We can't revolt and make a general row on the subject. I don't mean because some of us might be flogged, or expelled; I think we're all game to risk that—"

"Hear, hear!"

"But we don't want to drag the Head into it, and we as good as promised Quelch that there shouldn't be anything of this kind. But there are other ways of managing matters."

"Go it!"

"Are you willing to follow my lead?"

"Rather!"

"We've been waiting long enough for you to lead," said Bulstrode, with a sneer. "If I had been captain of the Form we wouldn't have put up with the Chesham ass so long as we have, I can assure you."

"Well, we're not going to put up with him any longer," said Wharton quietly. "I thought it was only due to Quelch to do our best, as he asked us to when he went away ill."

"Quite right!" said Nugent warmly.

"The rightfulness is terrific!"

"Only now," resumed Harry, "we've done our best, and we can't stand it any longer."

"Hear, hear!"

"I'm willing to lead if you're willing to follow. Only understand, it will mean trouble."

"Sure, and who cares?" shouted Micky Desmond. "Sure, trouble is what we're looking for, darling!"

"Good!" exclaimed a dozen voices.

"It may mean risk, too, and some painful experiences for all of us," said Harry Wharton. "If you're willing to follow, well and good. But I don't want any chap to yell 'Hear, hear!' now and back out when the pinch comes."

"We'll back you up!"

"Very well, then. Now, Chesham has cut down our grub—"

"I've been in a state of famine for days," said Billy Bunter.

"And he has stopped tea in the studies—one of the oldest and most cherished institutions at Greyfriars—"

READ HOW THE CHUMS OF THE REMOVE WORK OUT THEIR WHEEZE FOR BEATING THEIR FORM-MASTER AT HIS OWN GAME!



"We're not going to put up with Chesham any longer!" exclaimed Harry Wharton. "Hear, hear!" agreed the Remove. "It will mean trouble," went on Harry. "Sure, trouble is what we're looking for, darling!" shouted Micky Desmond. "Good!" yelled a dozen voices.

The Remove groaned.

"We have to have our tea in Hall now, and it's a measly feed—weak tea, bread-and-scrape, and not much of that."

"I say, you fellows—"

"It's getting near tea-time now. I propose—"

"I say, you fellows! I think the first step ought to be to devise some means of getting grub in—"

"Cheese it! Go on, Wharton!"

"I propose that, as an active revolt is out of the question, we take up the part of passive resisters," said Harry Wharton. "I don't see why we shouldn't be able passively to resist the Chesham ass. We have to go in to tea—well, we'll boycott the tea."

"What?"

"We won't eat or drink anything."

"Eh?"

"That's what I mean by passive resistance. Chesham will have to give in and let us have something decent, for fear of our getting ill."

"I say, you fellows—"

"Good wheeze!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "I'm with you for one."

"And I," said Nugent.

"Rather!" said Hazeldene heartily.

"The ratherfulness is terrific!" said the Nabob of Bhanipur.

"I say, you fellows, it's a rotten idea! It's bad enough to be starved by Chesham, but there's no sense in starving ourselves, too."

"Shut up, Bunter!"

"But I say, you fellows—"

"Of course, we shall have to manage to get some grub in somehow," said Harry Wharton. "My idea is that the whole Form pools cash for the object, and that we make purchases in the village and smuggle them into the school."

"Now you're talking!" exclaimed Billy Bunter emphatically, and his fat

face cleared. "Why couldn't you say that at first, Wharton?"

"It's a good wheeze," said Bob Cherry. "I don't see why we couldn't manage it easily enough, too."

"The wheeziness of the idea is terrific."

"I don't mind doing the shopping for you, too," said Billy Bunter. "You can trust me to lay out the money to the best advantage."

"And to eat most of the grub before you get it to the school," said Skinner.

"Really, Skinner—"

"There goes the tea-bell," said Nugent. "Come on! It's time to start the passive resistance dodge."

"Right-ho!"

"Yes, let's all go in," said Harry Wharton. "Mind, the wheeze is to be very quiet and good and perfectly respectful, so that the Chesham ass won't have anything to take hold of. He can't make us eat if we don't want to."

"Ha, ha! No!"

"We mustn't be late, either. We're going to be a model Form—that's the cream of the joke in passive resisters, you know—they're so meek and mild that they make the other party get awfully waxy."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Remove, full of the new idea, crowded out of the Form-room and made their way to the big dining-hall.

The Passive Resisters!

MR. CHESHAM was in his place at the head of the Remove table, and there was a mild and gentle smile on his face. Mr. Chesham—quite ignorant of the fact that he was generally known at Greyfriars as the "Chesham ass"—was beginning to feel at home at the school. Things were getting into good order in the Remove—in the opinion of the new Form-master.

Mr. Chesham was a man with ideas. No one would have objected to that if he had kept his ideas to himself. But that was not his way. He felt so much better himself for the rules he laid down for his own guidance, that he simply could not help wanting to confer the same benefits on others.

He forgot the important fact that all human beings are not cast in the same mould, and that what may suit one person may be totally unsuitable to another.

The Remove writhed under the reign of the faddist. They had looked to Harry Wharton, as their recognised leader, to do something, though precisely what he was to do no one could specify.

Harry, for good reasons, had been slow to move. But now, at last, he was moving with a vengeance. The Form meeting meant the beginning of a new campaign, the Remove against Chesham; and there was no telling yet where it would end.

Mr. Chesham nodded pleasantly to the Removites as they came in, hardly a minute late—a record for the Remove. He was a mild, kind-hearted man, and would probably have been very much liked if he had only let the juniors alone. But a fussy man with fads was the last man in the world to get on with the rough and reckless Remove.

Harry Wharton glanced along the table. It was a custom at Greyfriars for boys to have tea in their studies if they liked, provided they obtained the fare at their own cost. Fellows who did not like the trouble of getting tea themselves took the meal in Hall, but they usually provided relishes from the tuck-shop—jam or marmalade, eggs and ham and sausages, and so forth. The school tea was plain bread-and-butter and cake, with sometimes lettuce or watercress.

Mr. Chesham had put his foot down heavily in this direction. Tea in the studies was stopped, and all relishes were forbidden at the tea-table. The juniors could have what the school provided, and nothing more, except something in the shape of tabloids, provided generously by the Form-master himself.

Mr. Chesham declared—quite correctly, as far as that went—that tea in the studies meant the consumption of large quantities of unwholesome pastries, and that the juniors would have a healthier diet under his immediate eye.

The table was as sparsely set as usual. Bread-and-butter and water-cress—and a small allowance of that.

It really did not need much self-denial on the part of the Remove to enter into the passive resistance scheme.

Mr. Chesham commenced his tea. The other tables were busy, and the Upper Fourth fellows were grinning over their cake and jam and eggs and ham. Temple, Dabney & Co. of the Upper Fourth were enjoying the discomfort of the rival Form, and their wish towards Mr. Chesham was that he would continue to reign over the unhappy Lower Fourth for the rest of the term.

There was subdued amusement at the long senior table, too, where the Fifth and Sixth were having their tea, their board being still more plentifully supplied. The Head of Greyfriars did not dine in Hall, and he was still in blissful ignorance of the vagaries of the new Form-master.

"Dear me!" said Mr. Chesham. "You are not having your tea, my boys."

The Remove was silent.

"Pass along the bread-and-butter, Cherry."

"Yes, sir."

Bob Cherry passed the bread-and-butter. It was passed down the side of the table, the juniors, with solemn visages, handing it on, till it reached the bottom of the row. Not a single slice had been taken. Billy Bunter looked at the plate with yearning eyes, but Nugent was looking at Billy Bunter with the glare of a basilisk, and Bunter did not venture.

The plate reached the end of the row, and then came up the other side of the table again. It was restored to its place without a single slice being taken. And still the juniors were as grave and solemn as owls.

Mr. Chesham had watched the proceeding with growing amazement. He looked at the plate, and he looked at the row of boys and the row of empty plates before them on the white cloth.

"Dear me!" he said. "What is the matter? Is there anything wrong with the bread-and-butter, my boys?"

There was no reply. Stony silence and solemn visages—that was all. Mr. Chesham looked more and more amazed.

"Boys! Dear me! Wharton!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Then why don't you eat?"

"I don't care for bread-and-butter, sir."

Mr. Chesham's eyes began to gleam. He understood at last.

"Then this is a prearranged scheme," he said, his voice rising. "You have all agreed, it appears, to refuse your food."

Stony silence.

"Is that the case, Wharton?"

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"Yes, sir!"

"You are hungry, and will not eat?"

"We are ready to eat the usual fare, sir."

"I am the judge of what is to be consumed at this table, Wharton!"

"Very well, sir."

"You will get nothing else if you refuse this good and wholesome food."

Silence.

"Come," said the Form-master, controlling his annoyance, "let us have no more of this nonsense. Pass the bread-and-butter along the table."

"Certainly, sir."

The plate, laden with what the juniors called bread-and-scrape, was solemnly passed down the table again, and solemnly passed up the other side. Not a slice was taken. Mr. Chesham's face became very pink as the plate was restored to its place still piled with bread-and-butter.

"Then I am to understand that you are determined to keep up this foolery!" he said harshly. "Is that so?"

There was no reply. The Form-master was addressing nobody in particular, and nobody felt called upon to reply.

"Is that so, Wharton?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well," said Mr. Chesham angrily, "you have chosen to act in this disrespectful manner, and you will take the consequences. I dare say you will be hungry enough by supper-time to have become more reasonable. Leave the table."

The Remove rose and walked out.

The fellows at the other tables stared at them in surprise now. They saw that the Lower Fourth had eaten nothing, and they did not know what to make of it. Mr. Chesham left the dining-hall with a heightened colour.

In the Close the Removeites grinned at one another.

"We've started the ball rolling, anyway," said Nugent.

"Yes, rather!" grinned Bob Cherry.

"Chesham doesn't know how to handle us, either. We're so orderly and respectful that he can't punish us."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I say, you fellows—"

"What's the matter with you, Bunter?"

"I'm hungry."

"Then go and eat cake!"

The fat junior walked away disconsolately. The Remove were all hungry, but the passive resistance wheeze was extremely popular. There was only one dissentient, and that was Billy Bunter. But in a case like this Billy Bunter did not count.

Rivals to the Rescue!

"HALLO, hallo, hallo! What do you want?"

It was Bob Cherry who asked the question. The chums of the Remove had met in Study No. 1 to discuss the commissariat problem, and while they were busily engaged in the discussion, a tap came at the door and Temple, Dabney, and Fry of the Upper Fourth walked in.

There had been keen rivalry between the Lower and Upper Fourth at Greyfriars, and the chums of the Remove seldom met Temple, Dabney & Co. without exchanging badinage and ragging. Consequently, this unexpected invasion made the four Removeites jump up very quickly.

Harry Wharton reached out his hand to a ruler, Hurree Singh grasped an inkpot, and Nugent made a careless

step backwards to place himself within reach of a cricket stump that stood in the corner. Temple and Dabney grinned as they saw the defensive preparations.

"Hold on!" said Temple. "It's pax."

"Oh, rather!" said Dabney.

"That's it," said Fry. "We're not hitting fellows when they're down, you know. We've come here with friendly intentions."

"Exactly!" said Temple.

"We've come here with the idea of giving you a helping hand. We've had a good many rows with you, and given you a good many lickings—"

"This is the first I've heard of it," said Harry Wharton.

"Ratherfully," remarked the nabob.

"As a matter of exact factfulness, the case is a boot on the other foot."

Temple grinned.

"Well, never mind the lickings. We've had rows—"

"That's true enough."

"But just now we're willing to leave off ragging. That funny beast Chesham amused us at first, but now you've taken to going without grub, matters are getting serious."

"I should say so," said Billy Bunter pathetically. "I'm afraid this will result in injury to my constitution which may be permanent. Do you happen to have any toffee about you, Temple?"

"My idea is that we'll lend you a hand in this affair," said Temple. "I hear that you're stopped having tea in the study."

"Quite correctful, my worthy friend."

"And you're not allowed to buy anything in the tuckshop."

"Not without a written permit from Mr. Chesham," said Harry ruefully.

"Then you're in a fix."

"Something like that."

"Well, I'll tell you what—we're not barred from the school shop," said Temple. "If you like to hand us any cash you may happen to have for the purpose, we'll get in the grub for you, to any quantity, and shove it into a box-room or somewhere where you can feed unknown to the Chesham ass."

The chums of the Remove looked at one another. Billy Bunter gave a gasp of relief. This was, indeed, a tempting offer.

"Well, I can only say that we're awfully obliged, Temple," said Harry Wharton. "After the rows we've had, it's decent of you to come to the rescue in this way."

"Oh, that's all right! You'd do as much for us."

"True. Still, it's ripping of you, and we're very much obliged. We were going to break bounds and get to the village shop; but we'd rather not, of course, if it can be helped. We don't want to give Chesham anything to use against us."

"Good! Write down a list of what you want, and we'll get the grub as soon as you like and put it into the upper box-room. Nobody ever goes there, and you'll be safe."

"Ripping!" said Nugent heartily.

"I say, you fellows, you'd better let me make up the list. Mind you don't let Mrs. Mimble work off any of her stale rabbit pies on you, Temple."

"I'll be careful."

"Jolly hard cheese that I can't do the shopping," murmured Billy Bunter. "Mrs. Mimble is a terror for working off stale things on you when you're not looking. She's never been able to take me in, but you fellows—"

"I'll sniff at everything," said Temple, laughing. "I'll take my microscope and examine them from end to end."

"Well, be careful, that's all. Mrs. Mible always keeps about a dozen stale pies and tarts to work off on any chap who's unwary. I saw young Price eating one the other day that I could have sworn had been made a fortnight before. It was simply talking."

"Rabbit pies, one dozen," said Harry Wharton, making up the list. "Any other pies that are fresh, and six dozen tarts."

"Good!" said Bunter. "Don't forget the cold sausages. They're not so nice as I do myself, but they're better than nothing. Better get a dozen loaves and three pounds of butter. Remember, there will be over thirty chaps to the feed, Wharton."

"Right! Cakes—must be fresh—ad lib.; buns, six dozen; cheese—must be decent—two pounds; a dozen tins of salmon—"

"Good! Better not have any tinned meat, though. You never know what it's made of. May as well have some apples and bananas. Inky likes bananas."

"That is very thoughtful of you, my esteemed Bunterful chum."

"Yes. I'm a chap who's always thoughtful for others," said Bunter. "I like bananas, too. You can often find room for a banana when you're too full up for another tart or bun—I've noticed that."

"Well, you ought to know," said Harry Wharton. "Anything else?"

"Yes. We must have something to drink. Three dozen bottles of ginger-beer."

Temple whistled.

"By Jove, you fellows must be pretty flush of money to stand all that!" he remarked.

"The whole Form has clubbed together over this," explained Harry Wharton. "It's a matter where the Remove stand shoulder to shoulder."

"We are lining up both heartfully and cashfully," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"I think that's about all the stuff we shall want," said Harry.

"No, it isn't," said Billy Bunter hastily. "There's cake—seed and currant—and buns and cream puffs."

"Very well."

"And a few dozen other things—Let me see."

"Never mind—these will do for one occasion."

"Good!" said Temple, as he took the list. "We'll have these things in the box-room upstairs in less than a quarter of an hour."

"Much obliged. I hope you three chaps will join us in the feed."

Temple shook his head.

"Thanks, we won't."

"We'd really like you to."

"Yes, rather."

But the captain of the Upper Fourth shook his head again decidedly.

"No, thanks all the same, but we won't come," he said. "We won't spoil the effect by sharing in the feed. Some of your chaps might say we obliged you for the sake of the feed. I know you wouldn't, but Bulstrode might. We won't come. Ta-ta!"

"Much obliged, all the same!" said Dabney.

"Very much," said Fry.

And the chums of the Upper Fourth quitted the study. They left smiles of satisfaction on the faces of the Removees.

"I say, you fellows—"

"We must pass the word round to the chaps," said Wharton. "It won't do for them to come along to the box-room in a crowd, you know. It might excite suspicion."

Bob Cherry grinned.

"I imagine it would."

"Twos and threes is the idea. Go out now, and let the fellows know on the quiet, and caution them not to give the show away."

"I say, you fellows, perhaps I had better go and meet Temple and Dabney as they go to the box-room, and help them carry the things."

"That you won't!" exclaimed Bob Cherry, seizing the fat junior by the arm. "You'll keep with me till we reach the box-room, you young cormorant!"

"Of course, I didn't mean to sample the stuff—"

passage. Harry looked at him inquiringly.

"It's all right."

"All right? In the upper box-room?"

"Yes."

"Thanks, old fellow!"

"Here's your change. You'll find the stuff all right."

"Many thanks!"

"Cave! There's Chesham looking at us!"

Temple put his hands in his pockets and sauntered away, whistling, with an air of exaggerated carelessness.

Harry Wharton was about to walk away also, when Mr. Chesham signed to him to stop, and came across to him. Inwardly chafing, Harry Wharton waited with all the patience he could muster to hear what the Remove master had to say.



Unable to recover his balance, Levison went flying down the stairs, right into Mr. Chesham, standing by the little stair window. There was a series of bumps and yells, and the Remove master and Levison went rolling down together!

"Of course you didn't! But you'll keep with me, all the same."

"I might have taken a snack."

"Yes; I think that very probable."

"The probablefulness is terrific!"

"I'm fearfully hungry!"

"Never mind. You'll get used to that in time, especially if the Chesham regime lasts much longer."

"But, I say, you fellows—"

"Come on, fatty! Get a move on, you porpoise! Take my arm. Time we were gone."

And Billy Bunter was marched off, with his arm linked in that of the inexorable Bob.

The news of the planned feed was soon spread through the Remove, and all was eagerness and suppressed excitement.

Twenty minutes later Temple tapped Harry Wharton on the arm in the

A Feed in the Box-room!

"WHARTON!"

"Yes, sir?"

"I wish to speak to you," said Mr. Chesham mildly. "I am sorry for the stand you have taken up, and I cannot help seeing that you are the leader of the Form in this mischief—for that is what it is. You have set yourself up in opposition to me, although you know I have your best interests at heart."

Wharton was silent.

It was useless to argue with a confirmed faddist, he knew, even if it had been respectful to speak out candidly to a Form-master.

"Now, Wharton, if you choose to abandon this position you have taken up, I am willing to overlook the

occurrence, and I will instruct the housekeeper to supply you—"

"With what we usually have for tea, sir?"

"With what you refused at the tea-table," said Mr. Chesham, raising his voice a little.

"You need not trouble, sir."

"Does that mean that you are determined to keep on as you have begun?"

"We have not broken any rule of the school that I know of, sir," said Wharton quietly. "We have been ordered to come into Hall for tea, and we have done so. There's no law to make us eat if we don't want to."

"I see that my kindness is wasted on you, Wharton. You are determined to oppose me, and to lead the rest of the Remove into insubordination. But, mind, you cannot deceive me!"

"I have never attempted to deceive you, sir," said Harry Wharton coldly.

"What I mean is, you cannot make me believe that you intend to go without food for the rest of the day. You hope to obtain some somewhere. Is this not the case?"

Wharton did not reply.

"Will you answer my question?"

"I have nothing to say, sir."

"That is as good as an admission. I presume that the Upper Fourth boy with whom I saw you talking has asked you to a feed in his study. Well, I forbid you to go, Wharton!"

"He has not asked me."

"I forbid you, or any of the others, to accept invitations to meals from boys in any other Form in the school!"

"Very well, sir."

Mr. Chesham walked away, with a

frowning face. Harry Wharton rejoined his chums in the upper corridor. Bob Cherry gave him an anxious look. "What did the Chesham beast want?" he asked.

"He thinks we're going to have tea with the Upper Fourth, and he's forbidden it," said Harry Wharton, with a laugh.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Better get along to the box-room before he spots us," suggested Nugent. "Ratherfully!"

Harry Wharton nodded, and the chums of the Remove went upstairs to the upper box-room. It was part of the most ancient remnant of the old building of Greyfriars, and was only used for lumber. It was a very spacious room, and on one side was a boarded-up door, which, when open, gave access to a passage leading through the subterranean depths to an old priory in Friardale Wood.

The windows were thick with dust and cobwebs, and in late afternoon the room was very dim. But that did not affect the juniors of Greyfriars.

Harry found nearly half the Form there, and they were opening the packages deposited in the box-room by Temple, Dabney, and Fry.

Exclamations of delight broke from the hungry Removites as the good things came to view. The juniors were still dropping in in twos and threes and singly, and the room, extensive as it was, was growing crowded.

"Faith, and this is all right entirely!" exclaimed Micky Desmond. "Sure, and they say stolen fruits are the sweetest, me boys!"

"These things aren't stolen," said Billy Bunter, looking up from a tin

of salmon he was opening with a pocket-knife. "They're bought and paid for."

"Sure, and it's a figure of speech, you gossoon!"

"I say, you fellows, have you got a tin-opener? I'm spoiling Nugent's knife; and I can't get the tin open, anyway."

"My knife!" howled Nugent. "Is that my knife you're hacking at that tin with, you young brigand?"

"Well, I suppose we want the tin opened, don't we?" said Billy Bunter, with an injured air. "Do be reasonable, Nugent!"

"Cherry's knife has a tin-opener in it," said Hazeldene.

"Yes; I know it has. But I've lost Cherry's knife—"

"Lost my knife!" exclaimed Bob Cherry.

"I'm sorry, Cherry; but I lost it through a hole in my pocket the day after you lent it to me."

"But I didn't lend it to you!" howled Bob Cherry.

"Well, I borrowed it, which amounts to the same thing. Now, don't shake me, Cherry. You may make my glasses fall off; and if you break them, I shall expect you to pay for them."

"You young ass—"

"Ow! What are you doing, Nugent?"

"Only wiping the salmon-juice off my knife on your hair, Bunt!"

"Well, that is a beastly trick, Nugent!"

"Is it as beastly as using a chap's pocket-knife to open a tin with?"

"Well, the tins have got to be opened. I don't see why one of you fellows couldn't have brought a tin-opener. What are you jabbing at me for, Russell?"

"It isn't Russell, ass! I'm Skinner."

"Are you?" blinked the short-sighted Owl of the Remove. "Well, whoever you are, I wish you wouldn't jab that thing into my ribs, whatever it is!"

"It's a tin-opener, ass!"

"Oh, is it? Thank you, Skinner!"

"These rabbit pies," said Hazeldene, who was half through one, "are ripping! But I think you have to miss your tea to appreciate fully how ripping they are!"

"This veal-and-ham pie is scrumptious!" said Bob Cherry. "I always like veal and ham, and I've got a hunger on me now that I wouldn't take ten pounds for!"

"Wire in!" said Harry Wharton cheerfully. "I think we're nearly all here now. But there's enough for all, latecomers included."

"Rotten if the Chesham ass were to hop in now," Russell remarked, in the interval between two jam tarts.

"Oh, don't croak, old chap!"

"Well, he might come nosing round, looking after our precious health."

"If he does, we'll chuck him out," said Bulstrode.

There was a step in the passage.

"Donner!" exclaimed Fritz Hoffman.

"Tat sounds like te step of te Chesham donkey, ain't it, before?"

The Remove paused in the feast in utter dismay. Billy Bunter was the first to regain his presence of mind. If the feast was to be interrupted, the more he had within him the better, before what was left was confiscated. And Bunter tucked into the salmon at express speed.

"It's only another chap coming," muttered Skinner.

"We're all here."

The footsteps came straight to the



DOWN IN THE DUMPS?

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door of the box-room. Harry Wharton stepped quietly to the door and turned the key in the lock swiftly and silently. He made a sign to the Removites to be silent.

They hardly needed it. With tense expressions, they waited, and the only sound that broke the silence of the box-room was the champing of the jaws of the hungry Bunter. Bob Cherry seized his wrist and stopped the next mouthful going in.

"Quiet!" he whispered fiercely.

"I say, I—"

Bob jammed his hand over Bunter's mouth. At the same moment the handle of the door was tried from without.

The juniors sat as still as mice.

The handle turned and turned again. Then the door was shaken, after which a voice was heard in the passage outside.

"Open this door!"

The Removites were silent. It was the voice of Mr. Chesham, and there was no doubt that he had missed the Remove from their usual haunts, and guessing how they were occupied, had tracked them to the box-room.

In the silence they heard Mr. Chesham descend the narrow stairs as far as the dusty little window, and there they heard him stop. He evidently meant to carry out his threat. There was no means of escape from the box-room, and the juniors were hopelessly caught.

If Mr. Chesham had the patience to wait, they were, as Bob Cherry remarked, "done in."

"Looks to me like a frost," said Bulstrode. "I suppose you know, Wharton, that this means about three hundred lines each?"

"Possibly."

"Chesham is certain to stick it out."

"The certainfulness is terrific," remarked Hurree Singh, with a doleful shake of the head.

"Then we may as well give in now and get out of the impot."

"Is that your advice, Bulstrode?" asked Harry Wharton quietly.

"Yes, it is," said Bulstrode in a blustering tone, "and I expect most of the fellows agree with me."

Harry Wharton looked round.

"Is that the case?" he asked. "Are

"Rather!" said a dozen voices. "We're all backing you up, Wharton! We're not going to funk it!"

"Sure, and the Remove wouldn't funk anything!" exclaimed Micky Desmond. "Say the word, Wharton darling, and we'll go out and chuck the spalpeen down the stairs!"

Harry Wharton laughed.

"I don't think we'll go as far as that, Micky. But we're going to finish the feed. I advise you chaps to make a good meal. We shan't have any supper or any breakfast. Keep that in mind."

"By Jove, yes!" said Turner. "We'd better tuck in, and whatever is left we can hide in our togs, to be eaten later."

"Bunter's doing that already!" grinned Bob Cherry.

Bunter coloured. His fat person was looking very bulgy in places.

"I wouldn't have been in such a hurry to pack up if I had known we were going to finish the feed," he remarked. "I was preparing for a bolt. Still, it's all right; I don't see how I can carry any more."

"You could put a steak pie down the

PEN PALS

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PEN PALS COUPON

13-3-37

But the juniors had no intention of opening the door.

"Wharton!"

No answer.

"Wharton, I command you to answer me if you are there!"

Harry remained grimly silent. The time had gone by for Mr. Chesham to expect to be obeyed at a word.

"Very well," said Mr. Chesham. "I have a book with me, fortunately, and I shall read by the stair window and wait. You can remain in the box-room for as long as you like, but every boy who has disobeyed me shall be severely punished. For the last time, I command you to open this door!"

"Better open it," said Bulstrode.

Harry Wharton shook his head.

"What are you going to do, then?"

"Finish the feed."

And Harry Wharton sat down and took up a cold steak pie upon which he had been busy when the alarm came.

Levison is Not Lucky!

HERE was a painful silence in the box-room. The juniors were free to go on with the feast, but they seemed to have lost their appetites.

there any other rotten funks here?" Bulstrode turned crimson.

"Are you calling me a funk, Wharton?"

"Yes, I am. We agreed to go into this thing and face the music if there was a row. At the Form meeting I gave you all a chance to back out if you liked. I didn't want to force anybody into the game. You all came in of your own accord, and now it's too late to retreat."

"Too late! What do you mean?"

"I mean that nobody is going to give in without having a fight on his hands," said Harry Wharton determinedly. "I think there are enough fellows here with pluck to back me up. We're going to finish this feed, and then go out in a body and face the music, whatever it is. That's what I say."

"Good wheeze!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "And there's one here who will back you up tooth and nail!"

"And there's another here!" said Nugent.

"And I add my honourable voice to the esteemed chorus," said the Nabob of Bhanipur. "I shall backfully support my honourable chum to the full extentfulness of my power."

back of your neck," suggested Bob Cherry.

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"Or some jam tarts in the legs of your trousers."

"Really—"

"He's got enough inside him to last any ordinary cormorant a couple of weeks," said Hazeldene. "My hat, he's starting on a fresh pie!"

Billy Bunter looked up indignantly.

"You heard what Wharton said, Vaseline—we're not going to have any supper or breakfast. I think I ought to be allowed to have a feed now. I say, you fellows, stop that ass! Don't let him open the door till we're done, or the Chesham ass will confiscate the grub!"

Harry Wharton sprang to his feet. It was Levison, the new boy in the Remove, who had stepped to the door. He had his hand on the key when Harry Wharton laid a grasp of iron on his shoulder and dragged him away.

"Where are you going?" asked Harry angrily.

"I'm going out!"

"You're not!"

(Continued on the next page.)

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"Oh, I know your little game!" sneered Levison.

"What do you mean?"

"I suppose you don't want to be spotted as the ringleader in this little business that's all, and you don't care if we get gated for half a dozen holidays," said Levison. "I've got an appointment for the next half-holiday, and I'm not going to be detained in the class-room writing out lines."

"I've given you my reason for the Remove sticking together."

"It doesn't satisfy me, anyway," said Levison. "You're not going to drag me into a row which may end in a fellow getting expelled. I'm out of it!"

"You've had your share in the feed, you cad!" said Bob Cherry.

"I've paid for it!"

"The payfulness of the game is an unknown quantity to the esteemed rotter Levison!" remarked Hurree Singh. "My advicefulness would be to give him an esteemed dot upon his august nose!"

"Let me alone, Wharton!"

"You're not going out of this room till we all go!"

"When father says 'Turn,' we all turn!" sneered the brute. "Don't take any notice of him, Levison, old man!"

"I'm not going to," said Levison, jerking his shoulder away from Harry's grip, and suddenly unlocking the door before he could be prevented. "I'm going out!"

Wharton gripped Levison by the collar. The new boy clenched his fist and struck. The blow landed on Wharton's cheek. Before Harry could recover, Levison tore the door open. But Wharton's grip had closed on him again before he could get out of the room. Levison, with a sudden twist, tore himself loose and struck again.

Harry's temper was never of the most patient kind, and less than a blow was required to rouse it to a white heat. His eyes blazed and his fist lashed out. The blow caught Levison on the chin, and he went through the open doorway in a heap.

The landing was a narrow one. There was room for Levison to fall in the passage, but, as it happened, he fell towards the stairs. He made a desperate effort to recover his balance, but failed. Then he went rolling down the stairs, right into a form standing in the light of the little stair window.

"My hat!" gasped Wharton.

Bob Cherry gave a roar.

"Ha, ha, ha! He's bumped into the Chesham ass! My only aunt!"

There was a series of bumps and yells on the stairs, and the Remove master

and Levison went rolling down. Mr. Chesham picked himself up at the bottom of the stair, in wrath and amazement. Levison lay, gasping, on the linoleum.

"Get up!" shouted Mr. Chesham, more enraged than any of the Removeites had ever seen him before. "Get up immediately!"

Levison staggered to his feet. He was very much shaken, but not otherwise hurt. His face was savage and sullen as he rubbed his bruises.

But his rage was as nothing to that of Mr. Chesham. The Form-master had not the slightest doubt that Levison had fallen over him on purpose, having no suspicion that it was a blow that had sent the new boy rolling off the landing.

"Boy!" Mr. Chesham's voice trembled with anger. "Boy! How dare you!"

"I—"

"This is carrying insolence too far! Come with me!"

"If you please, sir," gasped Levison.

"I—"

"Not a word! Come with me!"

"But I—"

Mr. Chesham grasped the junior by the shoulder, and hurried him along the passage. Bob Cherry chuckled as he saw them go.

"Rough on Levison!" he remarked.

"The Chesham ass is taking him to his study to give him a licking, and serve him jolly well right! Where are you going, Wharton?"

"I'd better own up to Chesham."

"Nothing of the sort! He asked for it!"

Harry Wharton laughed shortly.

"Well, that's so," he said. "It was his own fault. It was a cad's game to want to go back on the Form."

"Yes, rather!" said Nugent. "But, I say, we've got a chance of getting clear while our respected assinine Form-master is laying into Levison. Let's bunk!"

"Good where?"

"I say, you fellows—"

"Get a move on, chaps!"

"I say, you fellows, don't leave any of the grub here! I can't carry any more—"

"Inside or out?" remarked Bob Cherry.

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"Come on!" said Harry Wharton.

The juniors, carrying the unaten portion of the feed in their pockets or under their arms, beat a hasty retreat from the box-room. They scudded along the passage, and doubled along the lower corridor, and escaped into the Close, leaving the coast clear for the return of Mr. Chesham.

Two figures came from the Remove master's study as the juniors were hurrying into the Close—Mr. Chesham, stern and wrathful, and Levison wringing and holding his hands under his arms.

"I hope that will be a lesson to you!" said Mr. Chesham sternly. "This insolence is without parallel, but I think I have adequately punished you!"

Levison appeared to think so, too. He twisted his hands about under his arms in the most uncomfortable manner.

"And now," said Mr. Chesham, "I suppose there were a great many of your Form-fellows in the box-room with you, Levison?"

The new boy of the Remove was silent. He was smarting with the application of the cane, and seething with the spitefulness of a cat against everybody at Greyfriars at that moment. But even then he did not venture to speak. His life would not have been worth living in the Remove afterwards—and he knew it. He said nothing; only his brow grew more sullen and savage.

Mr. Chesham looked at him for a moment, and then turned away. The boy had been punished enough, and even the faddist could respect an honourable scruple.

"I shall soon ascertain!"

He returned quickly to the narrow stair leading to the upper box-room. The door above was open. Mr. Chesham stepped into the box-room. It was silent and deserted.

The Form-master looked round with a stern brow. Empty salmon tins and fragments of various kinds of eatables were plain enough traces of what had taken place there. But the culprits were gone, and it was pretty certain that any questioning of the Remove would be met by stony silence, whatever punishment might be inflicted.

Mr. Chesham left the room. He was not, as a matter of fact, thinking of punishment. He was a kind-hearted man in the main, though not a trifle by whims and fancies.

"Foolish and unfortunate lads!" he murmured. "The result of this reckless feeding upon their health may be very serious. The only remedy is to administer medicine to them all to-night in the dormitory. Fortunately, I have a large supply of a very efficacious remedy, and I shall not grudge it to them, in spite of their careless ingratitude."

(Do the Remove take the faddist's medicine? Make sure you don't miss the sensational developments in next week's lively chapters.)



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