

'SKIMPOLE'S CRUSADE.' A Tale of Tom Merry & Co.

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(NEW SERIES.)

GRAND SCHOOL TALE.

A
GRAND
TALE OF
TOM MERRY

BY
MARTIN
CLIFFORD.

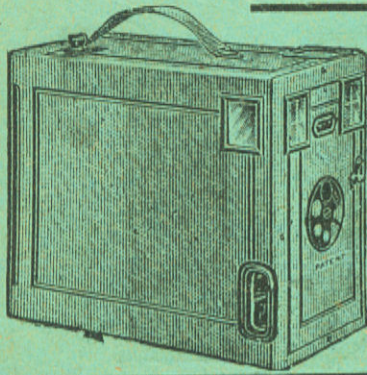


NO. 18.

VOL. 1.

"Orf 'is blessed rocker!" was the comment of William George Bilker, as he blinked at Skimpole in the June sunshine.

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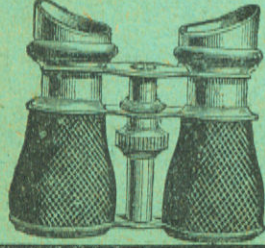
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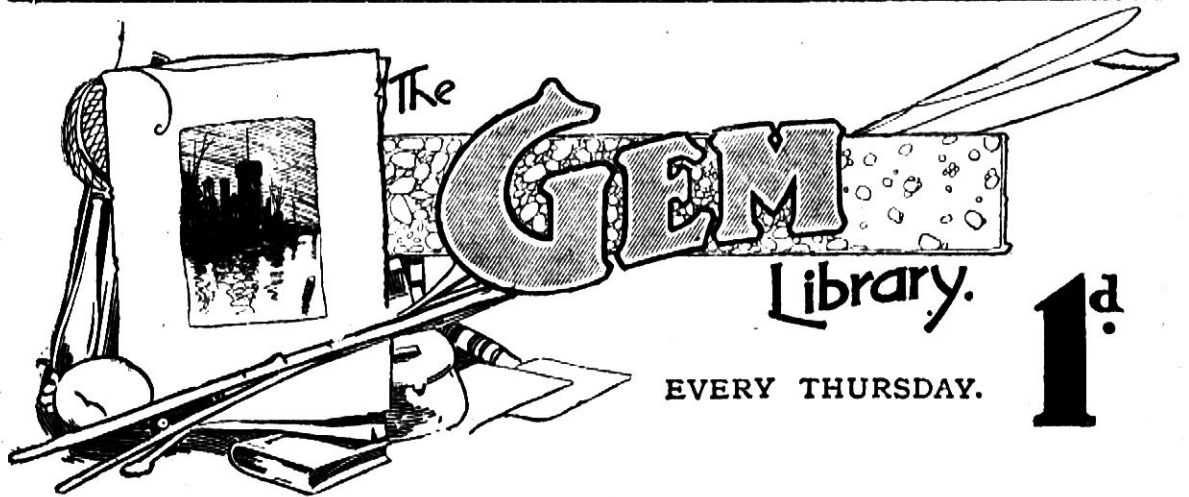


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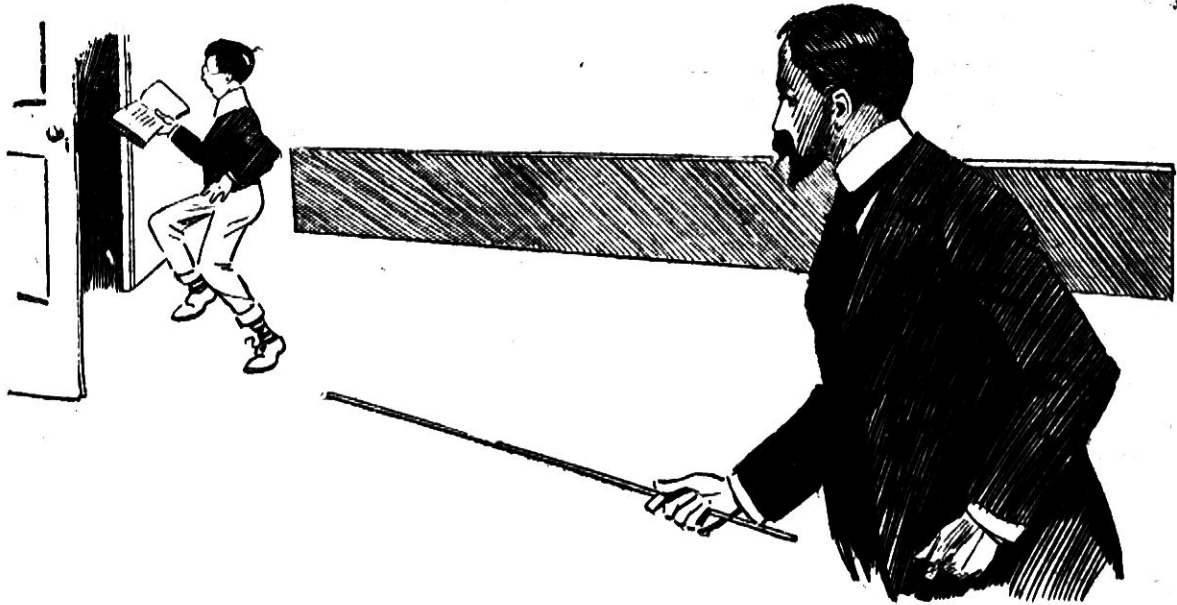
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SKIMPOLE'S CRUSADE.

A Splendid Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER I.

Skimpole is Too Generous.

BUMP!
Bump!
"My hat!" murmured Tom Merry, as he looked up from the imposition he was busy writing out in his study in the School House at St. Jim's. "What on earth is that?"

Bump!
Tom Merry was alone in the study. His chums were on

the cricket field, but Tom was detained indoors by a German imposition which he had to hand in to Herr Schneider by six o'clock. He was working away at express speed when the sudden violent bumping on the wall of his study startled him from his work.

Bump!
The next study to Tom Merry's was occupied by Gore and Skimpole, of the same Form—the Shell. Gore and Skimpole did not agree very well, and the sounds of trouble were often heard from their study.

Bump!

A DOUBLE-LENGTH TALE OF TOM MERRY NEXT THURSDAY.

No. 15 (New Series)

Tom Merry rose to his feet.

"What on earth are they up to?" he muttered. "How the dickens can I work off this rotten impot with those chaps bumping on the wall?"

Bump!

Tom Merry crossed the study, and tapped on the wall that separated the room from Gore's. It was a gentle hint to his neighbours to be quieter, but it had no effect, for the tap was followed by a louder bump than ever.

Tom Merry looked round the study, and picked up a cricket-stump. Then he left the room, and went along the passage to the next door.

A faint voice could be heard within.

"Really, Gore—"

"You howling ass—"

"Really, this violence is—"

"I'll teach you to—"

"Really—"

Tom Merry kicked open the door. A strange sight met his gaze. Gore, the bully of the Shell, had Skimpole by the collar, and was bumping his head against the wall. Skimpole had his hands behind his head to save it as much as possible from the hard contact, but he looked as if he were getting hurt.

Skimpole, the brainy man of the School House at St. Jim's, was somewhat trying at times to his Form-fellows. He had taken up Socialism and several other "isms," and he imparted information on the subject in season and out of season. Nature had endowed Skimpole with a very large head and a big brain, but had been rather niggardly otherwise, his body being very weedy and his legs extremely thin. He wore glasses and tufts of hair over a high forehead, and frequently had a pen behind his ear and a notebook of large dimensions protruding from one of his pockets.

"Hallo!" said Tom Merry.

Bump!

Skimpole gave a yell.

"Really, Gore— Ah, is that you, Tom Merry? I should be glad if you would make Gore leave off! He is hurting me!"

Tom Merry laughed.

"Well, he looks like it! What are you up to, Gore? What are you bumping Skimpole's napper against the wall for?"

"Mind your own business!" growled Gore.

"I fancy it is my business, when it's my wall you're bumping his cocoon at!" said Tom Merry. "You're interrupting my work! Let him alone!"

"Sha'n't!"

Tom Merry made a couple of strides to the bully of the Shell, and laid his hand on his shoulder. A single jerk of the athletic junior's powerful arm, and Gore was swung away from his victim.

"Chuck it!" said Tom Merry briefly.

Gore glared at him. For a moment he seemed about to spring upon the hero of the Shell. But he did not. He had tried that before, more than once, and he had never been able to successfully deal with Tom Merry.

"Look here, Tom Merry—"

"I'm looking," said Tom Merry cheerfully. "and I can see an ill-conditioned bully, if you want my opinion! What has Skimpy done?"

"I have simply been doing what should gain the commendation of every right-minded person," said Skimpole, recovering himself a little, but still ruefully rubbing the back of his head; "I have been carrying out my principles—"

"He's been boning my grub!"

"Nothing of the sort! If I had taken your pork-pies to consume myself, you might justly characterise the action as boning—"

"You—"

"But as a matter of fact I handed them to a tramp at the gate, who assured me that he had had nothing to eat for four days, excepting a raw turnip!"

"You confounded—"

"As a Socialist, I was bound to help the poor from the superfluities of the rich," said Skimpole, "and as a humanitarian, I could not possibly see a fellow-being starve to death when it was possible to save his life by handing him your pork-pies."

"Why didn't you give him something yourself?"

"I had nothing to give, or I should certainly have done so. I will replace your pork-pies when I am in funds again. I am afraid that will not be for some time, but I shall not forget the debt."

"And I sha'n't, either!" howled Gore. "I'll remember it, you lunatic ass! I'll make this study too hot to hold you if you don't turn over a new leaf!"

"I turned over a new leaf in taking up Socialism, Gore. I hope yet to convert you to the glorious cause—"

"Oh, shut up!"

"As a sincere Socialist, I cannot possibly shut up! A real Socialist is never known to shut up! It is my duty to preach the glorious truths of—"

"Then I'm off!" said Tom Merry. "Gore is welcome to the glorious truths, and I hope he will enjoy them!"

"If he opens his silly head again," said Gore, "I'll brain him with a ruler! I've had enough of his gas!"

"If you regard the great truths of Socialism as gas, Gore—"

"Shut up!"

"Are you going, Merry?"

"Yes, rather!"

"Then I will come with you," said Skimpole. "Gore is in an unreasonable mood. Some fellows would not have admitted having taken the pork-pies, but prevarication is impossible to a sincere Socialist! I have tried to reason with Gore—"

"Where are my pork-pies, you rotter?"

"You really make a great fuss about a few pork-pies, Gore. When Socialism comes in we are going to nationalise the land and the coal-mines and the railways. Beside that, your pork-pies fade into insignificance!"

"You utter ass—"

"Wait a moment for me, Tom Merry! I shall not remain here with Gore. A Socialist is bound never to use violence, but, really, Gore would provoke a saint! He has made my head ache!"

Skimpole quitted the study with the hero of the Shell.

"You deserved all you got," said Tom Merry, in his candid way. "Gore was going too far, that was why I chipped in. You are an ass!"

Skimpole blinked at Tom Merry through his spectacles in a tolerating way.

"I do not blame you for your rudeness, Tom Merry. It is undoubtedly owing to your early training. Vicious training in the sordid surroundings of a filthy slum cannot fail to turn out degenerate wretches—"

"Eh?"

"I was speaking in a general sense," said Skimpole, catching the glint in Tom Merry's eye. "Don't shut the door of your study, Merry; I am coming in!"

"Are you?" said Tom Merry, with his hand on the door. "You may be right, Skimpole, but my impression is that you are not coming in!"

"Really, Tom Merry—"

"You see, I've got an impot to finish; and, besides, life is short, and there's not time to hear all you have to say on the subject of Socialism!"

"I have a rather important matter to speak about."

"It will keep."

"Well, perhaps so; but it's rather important, Merry! When will you be able to listen to me?"

"Oh, say, the thirty-first of June," said Tom Merry, reflecting. "or perhaps the thirty-second of July!"

"I wish you would take this matter more seriously, Merry! It is one of huge and far-reaching importance. I have a feeling that I have failed in my duty. I have been thinking very seriously about it. No, don't shut the door; I have only a few words to say. I feel that I have not done all that I could—"

"Move your foot out of the doorway!"

"Just a minute! My great ability as an amateur detective has led me to take up that subject, and I have allowed the more important cause of Socialism to fall somewhat into abeyance. This was not right—"

"Good-bye!"

"I have reflected, and I can see that I ought to devote my whole energies to the great cause of righting the wrongs under which humanity labours. Tom Merry, have you never thought of righting the—"

"Yes, I've thought of writing my impot, if you'll leave me in peace."

"It is no subject for jokes. The cry of the toiling millions has been ringing in my ears, and I have resolved that the hand of the oppressor shall be arrested and nipped in the bud!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I have thought the matter out carefully, and have decided that the only way to really enlighten the mass of the people is to write a book—"

"To what a what?"

"To write a book on the subject. I have already sketched out the book, and written up some of the chapters. I should be willing to bring it in here this evening, and read it out to you and Manners and Lowther, if you wished. It could be done between tea-time and bed-time, if we did not wait a minute."

"If you bring that book here," said Tom Merry darkly, "we'll tie you in a chair, and make you eat it—every page!"

"Really, Tom Merry—"

The quarter rang out from the clock-tower. Tom Merry gave a start.

"By Jove, a quarter to six! I've got thirty lines to do yet, and show up to old Schneider before six! Get out!"

"But—"

"Travel!"

"I want your assistance in bringing out my book—"

"Bunk!"

"You shall share the glory—"

"Will you go?"

"To say nothing of the profit—"

"You villain! If you don't shift I shall massacre you!"

shouted Tom Merry.

"Yes, but—"

Tom Merry took Skimpole by the shoulders, twisted him round, and gave him a shove with his foot which sent the amateur Socialist along the passage at a staggering run. Then the hero of the Shell withdrew into the study, locked the door, and set to work to finish his imposition.

CHAPTER 2.

A Question of Royalty.

SKIMPOLE stopped and gasped for breath. He glanced back at Tom Merry's door, and heard the key turn in the lock.

"Dear me!" murmured Skimpole. "I receive very small encouragement, I must say, in my propaganda work. Merry is a boy of unusual intelligence, and yet he seems to grow tired of my conversation. It is remarkable. I have noticed the same thing about many of the fellows."

Skimpole shook his head sadly, and went down the passage. He turned into the next corridor on his way to the stairs, and passed the doors of the Fourth Form studies. Four Fourth-Formers were coming along the passage from the staircase, and their ruddy faces and white flannels showed that they had just come off the cricket-field. They were Blake, Digby, Herries, and D'Arcy, the chums of Study No. 6.

Skimpole's face brightened, as if a new idea had come into his mind, and he quickened his pace. He met the four juniors at the door of the study, and stopped them.

"I want to speak to you, Blake."

Jack Blake looked at him.

"Do you?" he remarked. "The want is all on your side, then."

And he went into the study. Skimpole took Herries by the button-hole.

"I say, Herries, old fellow—"

"Do you?" said Herries, jerking himself away and following Blake into Study No. 6. Skimpole sighed, and turned to Digby.

"Digby, I should like to tell you—"

"Rats!" said Digby cheerfully, going into the study Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was following, when Skimpole caught him by the arm.

"I want to speak to you, D'Arcy."

"Do you, weally?" said D'Arcy, adjusting his eyeglass and regarding the amateur Socialist through it. "I am afraid I am in wathah a huwvy, Skimpole."

"It's rather important—"

"If it is anothah amateur detective wheeze, Skimpole, I warn you that I don't want to hear anythin' about it," said D'Arcy. "I weceived a canin' fwom Mr. Walton for the last adventure, deah boy, and I have had enough of it. Upon reflection, I am convinced that you are an ass."

"It is quite another matter—"

"Oh, if it is quite anothah mattah, I do not mind listenin' to you for a few minutes," said Arthur Augustus graciously. "You are a fearful bore, but a fellow is bound to be polite. Pway go on!"

"Guassy!" rang Blake's voice from within the study.

"Yaas, deah boy?"

"Fill the kettle!"

"Bowwy, but I am engaged at the pwsent moment. Go on, Skimpole!"

"I have reflected upon the means of converting, not only this school, but the whole country, to Socialism."

"Have you, weally?"

"Yes, and I have decided that the only sure and swift means is to write a book on the subject."

"Bai Jove!"

"Of course, there are many books written on the subject already, but they do not seem to have had the desired effect, for it cannot be denied that there are people who have never even heard of Socialism, and the great mass of the people have foolish and mistaken ideas about it."

"Weally!"

"What is really wanted, I am convinced, is a book by a master-mind on the subject, one that is really capable of dealing with the matter in all its aspects."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There is nothing amusing in the idea, D'Arcy."

"Where are you goin' to get the mastah mind fwom?"

"My own," said Skimpole modestly. "A sincere Socialist is never troubled by such folly as false modesty. I cannot be ignorant of the fact that I have an extraordinary brain."

D'Arcy turned his eyeglass upon Skimpole's towering, bumpy forehead, and nodded assent.

"Yaas, wathah! You certainly have an extwaordinawy bwain, Skimpole; at least, it looks extwaordinawy on the outside."

"That is why I know that I am capable of dealing with this subject in a way that it has never been dealt with before," said Skimpole eagerly. "I am already engaged in writing this book."

"D'Arcy!"

"Yaas, deah boy!"

"Are you going to fill that kettle?"

"I am talkin' to Skimpole—or, to be more cowwect, Skimpole is talkin' to me. You can fill the kettle, deah boy."

"You see, D'Arcy, that the book is bound to be a success. I am thinking of selling it in a sixpenny edition, and I shall demand a royalty—"

"A what?"

"A royalty—that is a commission on the sale, you know."

"But I thought that Socialism was opposed to Woyalty in ewevy shape and form," said the swell of the School House.

Skimpole smiled patiently.

"You don't understand, D'Arcy. When Socialism comes in, we shall certainly abolish Royalty, and all other meaningless survivals of the barbarism of the Dark Ages. But the royalty I was speaking of is simply a term meaning a commission."

"I don't care! Socialism is opposed to Woyalty in ewevy shape and form, as I have heard you say yourself."

"But in this case—"

"I am afraid you are a humbug, Skimpole. You can back up Woyalty when it suits you to do so," said D'Arcy severely.

"But I tell you a royalty is—"

"I weally do not care what it is," said D'Arcy. "You are a humbug. I wefuse to hear any more on the subject." And D'Arcy went into the study. Skimpole put his head in at the door.

"I say, D'Arcy—"

"Pway wetire, deah boy. I will fill the kettle now, Blake, if you like."

"You'd better buck up, too, if you don't want me to dot you on the nose," said Blake.

"I should absolutely wefuse to be dotted on the nose," said D'Arcy frigidly.

"Buck up, aas!"

"I wefuse to be called an ass."

"Will you go and fill that kettle?" roared Blake.

"Yaas, wathah, deah boy! Anythin' to oblige."

D'Arcy folded up a duster and carefully took hold of the handle of the kettle with it; then he went along the passage to the tap. Skimpole followed him.

"If you will allow me to explain, D'Arcy—"

"I wefuse to hear any more, deah boy. I must wefuse to listen to a humbug."

"But I tell you—"

D'Arcy turned on the tap and filled the kettle. He returned with it to Study No. 6, Skimpole keeping pace with him and pouring frantic explanations into his ear, which the swell of the School House deigned to make no reply.

"I believe you are only rotting," said Skimpole wrathfully. "You know jolly well the difference between a royalty and Royalty."

D'Arcy grinned.

"Pewwaps I do, deah boy; but I have had enough of your wot. Will you oblige me by gettin' out of the way?"

"You see—"

"Pway bunk, deah boy!"

"It is like this— Ow! You are pouring that wator over me!"

"Bai Jove, so I am!" said D'Arcy. "That is wathah wemakable."

"Well, stop it, you idiot!"

"I'm afraid I can't till you get out of the way. Thank you, deah boy. Good-bye!"

And D'Arcy entered Study No. 6 and closed the door. He jammed the kettle upon the fire of sticks that Blake had just lighted, and beamed upon his chums.

"I have been wottin' that ass Skimpole," he said. "It was wathah funnawy. I have spilt some wator on his twousahs."

"And on your own, too," said Blake.

D'Arcy looked down at his immaculate, beautifully-creased

nether garments with a startled expression. He had certainly splashed them with the water from the kettle.

"Bai Jove! Lend me your handkerchief, Dig."

"Rats!"

"Lend me yours, Blake."

"More rats!"

"Then I shall have to use my own," said D'Arcy. "You fellows are weally wathah inconsiderate." He mopped the damp off his trousers. "It is all that ass Skimpole's fault, the wottah! If he starts talkin' any more of his wot to me, I shall give him a fearful thwashin'."

The door of the study opened, and Skimpole put his head in.

"If you chaps like, I'll have tea with you, and explain about—"

Skimpole popped out just in time to escape a cushion that biffed on the door. Blake chuckled. The amateur Socialist was gone!

CHAPTER 3.

Figgys' Fun.

FIGGINS, of the New House, stood near the cricket pavilion, with his bat under his arm. Figgins's long limbs were clad in cricketing flannels, and his face was the hue of a boiled beetroot. He had just come off from practice, and he was holding forth on the subject of his batting, and of cricket generally, to Kerr and Wynn, the famous Co.

"They think they can play cricket in the School House," said Figgins, jerking a contemptuous thumb towards that ancient building.

"Rot!" said Fatty Wynn.

"Mere rot!" said Kerr, the Scottish partner in the Co.

"You've hit it!" said Figgins, nodding. "It's rot, that's what it is! Mind you, there are some of the School House juniors who can put up a respectable figure at the wicket; Tom Merry and Blake can bat after a fashion. But when the House match comes round, we shall knock the School House sky-high."

"Or higher," said Kerr.

"Or higher," agreed Figgins. "Look at the way D'Arcy was batting. You didn't know whether he thought he was handling a bat or a scythe."

"Or an Indian club."

"He made a cut like this," said Figgins, swinging round his bat in illustration. "He brought it back with a swing like this—"

"Ow!"

"Hallo, Skimpole! Did it hit you?" said Figgins, turning round, as the bat met with some resistance, and seeing Skimpole rubbing his leg.

The amateur Socialist of St. Jim's grunted.

"Yes, Figgins, it did hit me, and I believe Kerr and Wynn saw me coming, and did not warn you."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the Co.

"It is no laughing matter," said Skimpole. "I came to speak to you fellows on a most important matter—"

"I was just talking about cricket," said Figgins. "I was saying that D'Arcy's batting—"

"Never mind D'Arcy's batting—"

"That it was enough to make a cat weep! He swings his bat round like this—"

Skimpole skipped on one side.

"Look out, Figgins!"

"Or else like this—"

Skimpole skipped back again.

"Figgins! You nearly—"

"And if he's making a late cut, he jerks it like this—"

"Ow!"

"And in playing forward, he goes lunging like this—"

"Ow—wow!"

"I wish you wouldn't keep on getting in the way of my bat, Skimpole, when I'm giving illustrations of D'Arcy's style of playing cricket!"

"Really, Figgins—"

"About time we got into tea," said Figgins, looking up at the dial on the clock-tower; "I'm hungry!"

"I've been thinking so for some time," said Fatty Wynn involuntarily; "only I didn't like to interrupt you, Figgy."

"You greedy young rotter!"

"Of course, all you've been saying about cricket is awfully interesting; but, really, I'm fearfully peckish! I always get fearfully hungry in this June weather!" said Fatty Wynn. "Let's get along; we've got to take the things in for tea, you know!"

"I want to speak to you chaps," said Skimpole.

"Can't be did," said Fatty Wynn; "I've got some shopping to do. I'll get the things and take them in, Figgy, and you chaps can go in and get the fire lighted."

And Fatty Wynn promptly walked off.

"Figgins!"

"What is it, Skimmy?" said Figgins good-naturedly. "Don't start talking your usual rot, old chap; it's too hot."

"It's a rather important matter. You see, I have come to the conclusion that the only way to do really effective propaganda work in Socialism is to write a book on the subject—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I have therefore devoted myself to the task. I have written out some chapters—"

"Go and bury them, then!"

"I should like to read some out to you when you have time—"

"I'll tell you when I have time to listen to them, Skimmy. It won't be just yet, I think. Perhaps when I'm an old, old man."

"But what I want to speak about is the book. I want some assistance in bringing it out. I am afraid it will cost money."

"Expensive things cost money, as a rule," said Figgins, with the air of an oracle.

"If you fellows like to join me in the enterprise, I am willing to share the honour and the glory with you."

"Not taking any, thank you."

"You can have it all, Skimmy," said Kerr generously; "we are not looking round for any honour and glory at present."

"And the profits?"

"The what?"

"There will certainly be an immense profit! I am thinking of publishing a sixpenny edition, and I shall receive—a royalty of a penny a copy. If I only sell five million copies—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That is really a moderate estimate, as my book will be a masterpiece, and will deal with the subject in a thoroughgoing manner. I intend to point out to my readers all their common faults and failings. For instance, there will be a chapter on the subject of athletics."

Figgins sniffed.

"A fat lot you know about athletics!" he remarked.

"I will read you my notes on the subject," said Skimpole, jerking out a huge notebook and opening it. "Here it is—Chapter Fifty-two. On the Pernicious Effects of the Modern Craze for Athletics."

"On the what?" roared Figgins.

"The Pernicious Effects of the Modern Craze for Athletics." Let me see— I point out that the undue development of the body tends to the stunting of the mind; which can be proved by pointing to any fellow who goes in a great deal for cricket and football."

Figgins and Kerr exchanged a significant glance, and Figgins took a tighter grip on the cane handle of his bat.

"Go on," he said, with ominous quietness.

Skimpole, quite unaware of the danger-signal in Figgins's tone, went on, in blissful unconsciousness of the storm that was about to burst.

"Take any fellow who is always playing cricket, and you see that he usually talks a lot of piffle about sports and so forth, and never touches upon the deeper questions of the origin of species, the progress of the human race, and the mysteries of psychology."

"My hat, they're jolly good words!" said Kerr. "I suppose you have just looked them out in the dictionary?"

"Nothing of the sort," said Skimpole. "I assure you that I know what all those words mean, and I will explain them to you at full length if you like."

"I'll brain you with this bat if you do."

"Well, to resume. Whenever you find a fellow with a bat under his arm, you may be sure that he is of a some-

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what asinine nature—ow! What are you poking me with that bat for, Figgins?"

"Because I'm of a somewhat asinine nature, I expect," said Figgins, prodding Skimpole on the chest with the end of the bat, and forcing the amazed Socialist backwards step by step. "I'm a fellow with a bat under my arm, you know."

"I was speaking generally, of course!"

"And I am speaking particularly," said Figgins, prodding industriously. And Skimpole retreated, step by step, till his foot caught in a rope and he sat down suddenly.

"Ow!"

Figgins and Kerr grasped him and rolled him over in the grass and stuffed his notebook down the back of his neck. Then they walked away, laughing, leaving the amateur Socialist in a state of utter bewilderment.

"Dear me!" gasped Skimpole. "Where is my notebook? I feel quite confused. The idea of helping me with my publication does not seem to be very popular with the fellows. I wonder where my notebook is, and what it is that is hurting my back? Well, I declare, they have put my notebook down my back! I really am unable to recover it. I shall have to take off my jacket and shirt, I am afraid."

Skimpole wriggled after the notebook in vain. He could not reach it. The boys were all gone in to tea, and there was no one near to help him in his predicament; and Skimpole, looking round, caught sight of only one figure—a tall, thin, weedy one—that of Mr. Ratcliff, the housemaster of the New House.

Mr. Ratcliff was walking under the elms, a rather sour expression upon his face; he was a sour-natured man.

"I suppose I may venture to ask a small favour, even of a housemaster," murmured Skimpole. "This book feels most uncomfortable down my back. He cannot refuse to extract it for me."

And the amateur Socialist started towards the housemaster.

CHAPTER 4.

Mr. Ratcliff is Annoyed.

"EXCUSE me, sir—"
Mr. Ratcliff looked down at the amateur Socialist and stopped his jerky walk.

"Well, Skimpole?"

"Pray excuse me, sir, but would you mind—"

"What do you want?"

"Would you mind putting your hand down the back of my neck—"

"What?"

"Would you mind putting your hand down the back of my neck—"

"Skimpole!"

"Yes, sir. Would you mind putting—"

"Silence, sir!" roared Mr. Ratcliff.

Skimpole was silent from astonishment. He could see that the housemaster was angry, but he had not the faintest idea why.

Mr. Ratcliff was very angry indeed. He was a man of a sour, suspicious nature, and was always discovering offences where none were meant. He was not popular in his own House and he was generally detested by the School House boys. He continually fancied that the School House youngsters intended impertinence when nothing was really farther from their thoughts. But Skimpole's request, which the housemaster would not let him finish, was certainly a peculiar one.

"Skimpole!"

"Yes, sir. You see—"

"Silence!"

"Yes, sir."

"I can only imagine, Skimpole, that you intend to be guilty of deliberate and unparalleled impertinence!" thundered Mr. Ratcliff.

"Oh, no, sir," said the dismayed Skimpole; "not at all, sir! I was simply asking you if you would mind putting your hand down the back of my neck, because—"

Mr. Ratcliff turned crimson.

"Silence! How dare you speak to me in such a ridiculous way? I shall report this to your housemaster!"

"But, really, sir—"

"Come with me."

"Certainly, sir; but really—"

"Not a word, Skimpole; come with me!"

And Mr. Ratcliff dropped his hand heavily upon Skimpole's shoulder and marched him off directly to the School House.

In spite of his anger, there was a certain grim satisfaction in Mr. Ratcliff's sour countenance.

His ideas were very dissimilar from Mr. Railton's, and

he was always glad of a chance of catching a School House boy in a fault for the sake of a dig at the other housemaster. Mr. Ratcliff believed in ruling boys with a rod of iron; while the School House master—who remembered that he had been a boy himself once—was of a lenient and genial nature, and very popular with his boys.

The Terrible Three were in the hall as Mr. Ratcliff entered with his victim. They looked at Skimpole and Mr. Ratcliff.

"Hallo, what's up?" murmured Manners.

"I really do not know," said Skimpole. "Mr. Ratcliff appears to be angry, but the cause I cannot imagine."

Tom Merry grinned. He knew that the amateur Socialist of St. Jim's frequently succeeded in making people angry without being aware of the cause.

Mr. Ratcliff marched Skimpole to the door of Mr. Railton's study and knocked. The deep voice of the School House master bade him enter.

Mr. Railton looked surprised as the New House master entered with his hand upon Skimpole's shoulder, and he looked slightly worried, too. It was his aim to live without friction with the master of the New House, but Mr. Ratcliff seemed to be always looking for trouble.

"Nothing wrong, I hope?" said the School House master.

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Ratcliff. "As I have no authority over the boys of your House, Mr. Railton, I have brought this lad to you, to report to you in person his gross and unparalleled insolence to me."

"I am sorry if a boy of my House has been insolent," said Mr. Railton quietly. "What has Skimpole been doing?"

"He had the unheard-of audacity to come to me in the quadrangle, sir, and ask me to put my hand down the back of his neck."

Mr. Railton looked astounded.

"Is it possible?"

"I do not think he will deny it."

"Did you make this ridiculous request to Mr. Ratcliff, Skimpole?"

"I can't see that it was ridiculous, sir," said Skimpole. "I suppose it was if you say it was, but I can't see it myself."

"You asked Mr. Ratcliff to put his hand down the back of your neck?" said Mr. Railton, as if he could hardly believe his ears. "Are you mad, Skimpole?"

"No, sir. A great many of the fellows have hinted that I am off my rocker, as they rudely term it, since I have taken up Socialism, but they are quite mistaken. A genius is never understood by common people—"

"That will do, Skimpole."

"I was explaining—"

"You will kindly explain why you made this extraordinary and ridiculous request to Mr. Ratcliff," said the housemaster sternly.

"It was very simple, sir. Mr. Ratcliff would not let me finish. I asked him to put his hand down the back of my neck, because one of the fellows had stuffed a book down there, and I could not get it out."

Mr. Railton's face relaxed. Mr. Ratcliff's on the other hand, assumed a thunderous hue, and he bit his thin lips with anger.

"You see, Mr. Ratcliff—"

"I do not believe this, sir," said the New House master.

"It is simply an invention to escape the punishment of his impertinence."

"I do not think Skimpole would tell an untruth," said Mr. Railton drily. "But—"

"Quite right, sir," said Skimpole. "A sincere Socialist could not possibly be guilty of provarication—"

"But it is easy to put it to the test," said Mr. Railton, signing to Skimpole to be silent. "Turn round, Skimpole."

"Certainly, sir."

Skimpole turned round, and the book, bulging under his jacket and shirt, could be very plainly seen. Mr. Ratcliff could not doubt the evidence of his own eyes, and he had to acknowledge that he had been a little too hasty.

"You see, Mr. Ratcliff," said the School House master, looking at him.

"I see, sir."

Mr. Railton was not the man to show any triumph over a vanquished rival, but he could not help a slight smile creeping to his face. The mortification in the New House master's face was evident.

"It was somewhat presumptuous on Skimpole's part to ask such a service of a master, perhaps," said Mr. Railton. "But that is all there is of it; he intended no impertinence, I am sure—"

"Certainly not, sir," said Skimpole. "I hadn't the faintest idea of being impertinent. I thought Mr. Ratcliff might do me that little favour; I would have done it for him willingly, if anybody had stuffed a book down the back of his neck—"

"That will do, Skimpole! Are you satisfied, Mr. Ratcliff?"

"No," said Mr. Ratcliff; "I am not satisfied. I think this is probably a plot among these juniors, and that Tom Merry is in all probability at the bottom of it. But I do not expect you to think so, so I will take my leave."

And the New House master walked out of the study. Mr. Railton shrugged his shoulders slightly. Mr. Ratcliff was evidently not in a reasonable mood.

"You may go, Skimpole."

"Yes, sir, but—"

"You may go."

"But would you mind putting your hand down the back of my neck, sir," said Skimpole, "and fishing out that book for me?"

Mr. Railton smiled, and fished out the book. Skimpole took it, and gave himself a shake, feeling much more comfortable.

"You may go—"

"If you had a couple of minutes to spare, sir, I should like to speak to you."

"Well, what is it?" asked Mr. Railton patiently. "I can spare you a couple of minutes, Skimpole, but you must not be longer."

Skimpole opened his book, and glanced hastily through it.

"I am writing a book, sir."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. I am tackling the subject of Socialism in a thorough-going manner, and I am fully expecting that the book will make a sensation. I was thinking, sir, that you might be willing to help me to publish it."

Mr. Railton could only stare.

"I should like to read you out a little," said Skimpole, looking through his notebook. "Of course, this is only rough sketching; the book will be quite recast, and put into much longer words."

"Really, Skimpole—"

"Here is something on the subject of public schools, written with an inside knowledge of the subject, of course. I will read it out."

"Really—"

"The whole public school system requires revision. Under the new regime, which will be established when the reign of freedom commences, each housemaster will be elected by the suffrages of the boys of his House, and will be dismissed when he exceeds his authority in any way."

"Skimpole—"

"The present system is degrading to both sides. The housemaster is not responsible to the boys, and cannot be called to account by them, and this naturally leads him to become a tyrant—"

"Skimpole—"

"And then, of course, resistance to his orders becomes a duty incumbent upon every fellow in the House—"

"Skimpole!" thundered Mr. Railton.

The amateur Socialist jumped.

"Yes, sir."

"Leave my study."

"Then you do not care to help me in the publication of my book, sir, and share in the honour and the glory, to say nothing of the profit—"

"Leave the room!"

"Certainly, sir. But—"

Mr. Railton picked up a cane. The amateur Socialist promptly crossed to the door. He opened it, but he turned back.

"If you cared to read my book through, Mr. Railton, you would probably find a great deal of information in it, and your mind would be opened and enlightened—"

The housemaster rose to his feet, grasping the cane. Skimpole skipped out into the corridor and closed the door. Mr. Railton laughed as he sat down again. The amateur Socialist ran along the passage, and bumped into Tom Merry, who seized him by the breast of his jacket and ran him up against the wall.

CHAPTER 5.

More Trouble for Skimpole.

SKIMPOLE gasped for breath.

"Really, Tom Merry, I—I—"

"What do you mean by bumping into me?" demanded Tom Merry.

"I am sorry. I thought Mr. Railton was coming out for me," said Skimpole, glancing back along the passage, and looking greatly relieved to find that the housemaster was not in sight. "He was angry about something."

"Ha, ha! What have you been doing?"

"Only asking him if he would care to join in the work of publishing my great book," said Skimpole. "I read him out a part from Chapter 117. It's the part dealing with the

housemaster system, which we are going to abolish. Mr. Railton did not seem to take it in good part."

"How remarkable!" said Monty Lowther. "The wonder is that he didn't lick you, you young ass!"

"I don't see—"

"You never see anything," said Manners. "Blessed if you aren't a bigger ass as a Socialist than as a detective—and you were simply shrieking in that line!"

Tom Merry released the wriggling Skimpole. The amateur Socialist at once opened his notebook.

"It's all very well for you chaps to laugh," he said. "When my book comes out, and the name of Skimpole rings through the land, you will think rather differently. I should like to read you a little from Chapter 99. It is on the study system at public schools."

"Don't!"

"It goes like this: 'The pernicious study system, which tends to break a school up into small coteries, should be abolished. It leads not only to divisions among boys, but to disorderly feeding in these small rooms at irregular hours, and it is safe to say that all boys who indulge in this reckless and irregular study-feeding are certain to grow greedy and piggish—'"

Skimpole came to a sudden stop. Three pairs of hands seized him simultaneously, and he was lifted off his feet, and bumped down upon the hard linoleum.

He was too dazed for a minute or so to know what had happened, but when his brain cleared, the Terrible Three were gone. He looked round for his precious notebook, but could see no sign of it.

"Dear me!" murmured Skimpole. "That was very rough and rude of Tom Merry. I wonder if he was offended at anything I was reading out of my book. Where is the notebook, by the way? It is not down the back of my neck again, or I should feel it there. Dear me! Where can it be?"

That was a mystery. There was no sign of it in the passage as Skimpole looked round, and yet it seemed hardly likely that Tom Merry had taken it away. Skimpole felt in his pockets, but it had not been put there.

"Tom Merry must have taken it," he muttered. "Dear me! I hope they do not intend to do it any harm. I don't think Tom Merry would be guilty of wanton destruction, but one can never be sure about Lowther."

And Skimpole jumped up and ran off towards Tom Merry's study.

The Terrible Three were getting tea already, and as Skimpole put his head in at the door, Monty Lowther lifted his hand with a loaf in it.

"Get out!" he roared.

"But—"

"Don't say you've come to tea," said Manners sarcastically. "The habit of feeding in a study tends to make a fellow grow greedy and piggish—"

"I was speaking generally—"

"Outside!"

"I have come to see—"

"Get off!"

"You have taken my notebook."

"Your what?"

"My notebook. I was reading you extracts from my notes for the ninety-ninth chapter of my book."

"You dropped it in the passage," said Tom Merry, "and we sat you down upon it."

"Dear me!" said Skimpole. "I never thought of that. I looked everywhere but in the spot where I was sitting. It was an oversight on my part."

Tom Merry laughed.

"You'd better cut back before somebody comes along and bones that valuable notebook," he remarked. "They might collar the ideas and publish them first, and deprive you of your immense profits."

"Yes, better hook it," said Lowther. "To say nothing of the fact that if you don't get outside, I shall shy this loaf at you!"

"Really, Lowther—"

"It's coming!" exclaimed Monty Lowther, swinging his arm.

Skimpole skipped away and ran. In a few seconds he was on the spot where the indignant juniors had bumped him down. He gave a gasp of dismay.

A gentleman in glasses was standing in the passage, looking at the pages of a book in his hand. It was Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell, and it was Skimpole's precious notebook that he had in his hand, and was looking through with a great deal of interest.

Skimpole coughed as he came up, and Mr. Linton glanced from the book to the junior.

"If you please, sir—"

"Well, Skimpole?"

"That is my book, sir."

"Oh," said Mr. Linton, "that is your book, is it? I found it lying in the passage, Skimpole, and I have picked it up, as you see. What do you mean by writing down all this absolute nonsense, Skimpole?"

Skimpole looked amazed.

"That isn't nonsense, sir!" he exclaimed. "That is wisdom and erudition! That is the rough sketch of the book I am writing on Socialism, which I hope will make a sensation throughout the country!"

"What?"

"I should like to read some of it to you, sir," said Skimpole. "You might like to help me in getting it published, sir! It is a very valuable work, and will make the name of Skimpole famous, and I would mention your name in the preface, so as to allow some of the glory to be reflected upon you!"

"Skimpole!"

"I should like to read you an extract from chapter one hundred and thirty-five, sir," said Skimpole. "It is on the subject of the general improvement of morality which will necessarily follow the introduction of Socialism. There will be an altogether higher standard of personal honour. Nobody will dream of reading another fellow's letters, or looking into another chap's pocket-book—"

"Skimpole!" thundered Mr. Linton.

"Of course, I was speaking generally, sir!"

"I shall retain this absurd production for the present, Skimpole," said Mr. Linton. "I have never seen such a farrago of insubordinate nonsense before! I consider it my duty to show it to Dr. Holmes before returning it to you."

"Really, sir—"

"You may go, Skimpole! This book will be returned you at the Head's discretion!"

"But—"

Mr. Linton put the book in his pocket and walked away. The amateur Socialist of St. Jim's gazed after him blankly.

"Dear me!" he murmured. "There goes my notebook! I shall have to start another! All my notes for the first hundred and seventy-five chapters are there, and I may never see them again! It is too bad!"

And the amateur Socialist walked away disconsolate.

CHAPTER 6.

Catching It!

THE next day was a half-holiday at St. Jim's, a fine June afternoon greeting the crowd of boys as they turned out into the quadrangle. Figgins & Co. were soon busy on the cricket-field, and the Terrible Three came downstairs with their bats under their arms early after dinner.

Skimpole was standing by the staircase, and he seemed to be watching the door of Mr. Linton's study. The master of the Shell Form had his quarters in the School House, next to Mr. Railton's.

Tom Merry gave Skimpole a playful dig in the ribs with the end of his bat, and the amateur Socialist started, and looked round.

"Really, Tom Merry—"

"How are you getting on?" said the hero of the Shell affably. "Are you thinking out a new chapter, or composing a poem, or simply off your rocker, Skimmy?"

"What are you mooning about in the passage for?" asked Manners.

"I'm waiting for Mr. Linton to come out," explained Skimpole.

Tom Merry laughed.

"Are you going to ask him to help you publish your book?"

"No; I asked him yesterday, and he declined rather brusquely! The fact is, he picked up my pocket-book yesterday, and has not returned it to me."

"Going to bone the ideas, I suppose?" suggested Monty Lowther.

Skimpole looked startled.

"I never thought of that!" he exclaimed. "Is it possible, do you think, that Mr. Linton would be capable of taking possession of the great ideas in my notebook?"

"Well, it's a strong temptation to any man," said Lowther solemnly. "You know, Mr. Linton is of a literary turn of mind. That's what makes him so irritable. When he finds your wonderful ideas sketched out there, what's to prevent him from collaring them and passing them off to an unsuspecting public as his own?"

"It would be dishonest."

"Would it?" said Lowther reflectively. "But, then, you see, he may be a Determinist, so that wouldn't matter."

"What do you mean?"

"Let me see," said Monty Lowther, with a face as grave as a judge, "I heard you making a speech on Determinism the other day. A chap is what he is from the combined influence of his heredity and his environment—"

"Exactly!"

"And he has no choice about either his heredity or his environment; he cannot be either blamed or praised for the way he turns out—"

"Precisely!"

"Therefore, if he is good he is not deserving of praise, and if he is bad he is not deserving of blame—"

"Ye-es, but—"

"So, if a chap is dishonest, he can shove it on to his heredity or his environment, and feel quite comfy about it—"

"Well, you see—"

"Look here, Skimpole, you can't wriggle out of your own argument! If your ideas are any good, and Mr. Linton happens to be a Determinist, I'm sorry for you!"

Skimpole wrinkled his brows thoughtfully.

"Dear me! I really hope he is not a Determinist!" he murmured.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry. "Why, that's what you were preaching the other day!"

"Yes; but I was speaking generally, you see! Arguments applied to any particular case sometimes require a little— a little reconsideration!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It is not a laughing matter! I could explain this to you at full length, and convince you that—"

"Rats! Come on, you kids; we're due on the ground!" said Tom Merry.

"Really, Tom Merry, I hope you do not place the rough and brutal game of cricket before the attainments of knowledge?"

"Oh, ring off!"

Tom Merry and Manners walked on. Lowther stayed behind for a moment to give the amateur Socialist a parting word of advice.

"Get that book back from Mr. Linton as soon as you can," he said, tapping Skimpole on the chest with his forefinger. "If he won't give it up, you would be quite within your rights as a free and independent lunatic—I mean, free and independent citizen—in dotting him on the nose!"

"Really, Lowther—"

"As a sincere Socialist, it is your duty to dot him on the nose! That's my advice, Skimmy! Don't beat about the bush! Go for his proboscis!"

And Monty Lowther followed his chums, leaving Skimpole wondering vaguely whether he had been in earnest or no. He was still wondering when he received a hearty slap on the shoulder which sent him staggering towards the wall.

"Hallo!" said Jack Blake genially. "If you were standing in the gangway with the idea that you served any ornamental purpose, Skimmy, you were labouring under a great mistake!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I should chawactewise such a notion as a vewy gweat owwah indeed, Skimpole!"

"Really, I wish you wouldn't be so rough, Blake!" said Skimpole, rubbing his shoulder. "You quite startled me!"

"Yaas; I have had to complain of your wuffness myself, Blake. You are wathah a wuff wottah, you know!"

"Oh, you shouldn't stand in the way, you know!" said Blake. "What are you hanging about the passage for, anyway?"

"I am waiting to speak to Mr. Linton. He found my pocket-book yesterday, and Lowther suggests that he may be a Determinist, and in that case my ideas would not be safe in his possession!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I weally thought you were a Determinist, Skimpole, judgin' by the wot I have heard you spoutin' on the subject!" said D'Arcy.

"Yes; but there is no telling exactly how a man takes these new ideas when he gets hold of 'em," said Skimpole doubtfully. "As Lowther said, the temptation is great, when a literary man finds himself in possession of some new, original, and striking ideas, expressed in fine sparkling language!"

"My word!" said Digby. "Blessed is he that bloweth his own trumpet!"

"Oh, let's get along!" said Herries. "The cricket's waiting while we're gassing here! Skimpole's a howling ass!"

"You are quite mistaken, Herries! If I had my book here, I would read you an extract from chapter one hundred and sixty-three, which would enlighten you considerably. It is on this very subject—of a genius being misunderstood by common and stupid people, whose dull brains are—"

"Ow!"

The indignant Herries gave Skimpole a forcible shove, and strode on. Skimpole put his collar straight.

"I hope I have not said anything to offend Herries," he said.

"Then you're the most sanguine chap I know,"—grinned

CHAPTER 7.

The Human Document.

Jack Blake. "Come on, kids; this funny merchant will be the death of me one of these days!"

"Really, Blake—"

"Yaas, watah! I wergard him as a funnay beggah!" said D'Arroy. "Pway wing off, Skimpole, deah boy! We are gettin' watah fed-up with your wot!"

"But I say—"

But the chums of Study No. 6 were gone. Skimpole turned back as he heard a door open along the passage. Mr. Linton came out, and the amateur Socialist of the School House stepped into his path.

"If you please, sir—"

"What is it, Skimpole?"

"Would you mind returning me my book, sir?"

"Your book?" said Mr. Linton, looking puzzled for a moment. "Oh, the pocket-book I picked up yesterday, do you mean?"

"Yes, sir."

"I am sorry, I had forgotten it! I intend to place it in the hands of Dr. Holmes, and he will return it to you if he thinks fit!"

Skimpole simply stared. It seemed to him quite impossible that anybody could really have forgotten his book—the book that contained such new and wonderful ideas, expressed in such well-chosen language. Skimpole remembered Monty Lowther's caution.

Was it possible that Mr. Linton was really borrowing the ideas from the book, and had invented this plausible pretext to gain time? The amateur Socialist of St. Jim's felt that the time had come to be firm.

"If you please, sir—"

"I have no time to waste now, Skimpole!"

"I should really like you to return my book!"

"I have told you my decision on that point, Skimpole!" said Mr. Linton, frowning. "Stand out of my path at once!"

"But, sir—"

"Stand aside instantly! Are you insane, boy?"

"Certainly not! If you would return me my book, sir, I would read you an extract from chapter one hundred and seventy-nine, dealing with the subject of insanity, and proving that all madness is the outcome of present social conditions, and referring especially to the strange fact that people who are more or less insane themselves generally suspect the existence of insanity in others."

Mr. Linton turned crimson.

"Skimpole!"

"I cannot help thinking, sir, that as you are a literary man, the temptation to use some of the ideas in my book may prove too strong for you, and so it would be more satisfactory to all parties if you returned it to me at once."

Mr. Linton dropped his hand upon Skimpole's shoulder and led him to the study, and marched him in. Then he picked up a cane from the table.

"Hold out your hand, Skimpole."

"Before proceeding to this absurd and antiquated method of crushing an opponent, sir, I should like to explain to you—"

"Hold out your hand!"

"That the system of corporal punishment is absurd, pernicious, and, in fact, a useless and brutal survival of the barbarism of ancient times. How can you convince a man's mind by inflicting pain upon his body? The whole thing is hopelessly illogical."

Mr. Linton breathed hard through his nose.

"Will you hold out your hand, Skimpole?"

"Pray allow me first to explain that—"

The Form-master's patience was exhausted. He seized the amateur Socialist by the collar, swung him round, and applied the cane to the rearward. Skimpole yelled in good earnest as the cuts got home, and began to rather regret that he had not held out his hand. Mr. Linton laid on with all the strength of his arm, and it was fortunate for Skimpole that the master of the Shell was not an athlete.

"There!" panted Mr. Linton, releasing the breathless Skimpole at last. "Now you may go, Skimpole, and I hope that will be a lesson to you."

"I hope so, sir," gasped Skimpole, wriggling. "I am always willing as a logical person to receive instruction from all my experiences, even the painful ones. But when you are a little calmer, I should like to point out that corporal punishment is a barbarous survival of the brutality of the Middle Ages."

The cane rose in the air again, and Skimpole skipped out of the study.

"DEAR me! I wonder what that is?"

It was Skimpole who spoke. The amateur Socialist had left the gates of St. Jim's behind, and was strolling through the fields towards the silvery, rippling Ryll. Skimpole's crusade at St. Jim's had not benefited him, or the cause he had at heart, very much so far. He had had his ideas received with mocking and contumely; his book was laughed at, and the voluminous notes he had made for the first hundred and eighty-five chapters had fallen into hostile hands. It was enough to try the patience even of an amateur Socialist; but Skimpole bore up against it. He was walking along now with his straw hat on the back of his head, and his hands in his pockets, thinking out the scheme of the hundred and eighty-sixth chapter of his famous book, when a yawn from a grassy bank close at hand made him look up.

"What is that? Dear me, it is a tramp!" said Skimpole, stopping and looking at the figure stretched on the grass in the sun. "Unfortunate man!"

The tramp did not look as if he considered himself unfortunate. He was a fat fellow, with a broad and rather good-humoured and extremely dirty face, ornamented with two or three days' growth of beard. At his feet was his bundle, tied in a coloured handkerchief and slung on a stick. He sat up as he saw Skimpole looking at him, and yawned again.

"Good afternoon!" said Skimpole, taking off his hat.

As a sincere Socialist, Skimpole was bound to recognise the tramp as a human brother, hence his extreme politeness. The tramp stared at him.

"None of yer gammon!" he said.

"Eh?"

"None of yer gammon! What yer getting at?"

"I said good-afternoon," explained Skimpole, replacing the straw on the back of his head. "It was merely a salutation due from one human creature to another, and I was not getting at you in any way."

The tramp blinked.

"Wot's the little game?"

"Really, you quite misunderstand me!" said Skimpole. "I saluted you because it is a part of my principles to recognise the human brotherhood and equality even of base and degraded wretches."

"Of—of what?"

"The fact that you are in a filthy condition does not prevent me from admitting that you have a right to be considered as a man."

The tramp clicked his teeth. He would have jumped up and jumped on Skimpole on the spot, but for a reason which was a very good one to him. It was a warm afternoon, the grass was pleasant to lie in, and he was too lazy to get up.

"I am a Socialist," Skimpole went on to explain. "If you like I will explain the principles of my belief to you. The subject is one of great interest to you, as a victim of the present social system."

"My heye!"

"You are in a filthy and degraded condition, and look as if you have done no honest work for months, perhaps for years. But do I blame you for this? I say, my friends," went on Skimpole, waving his hand and addressing an imaginary audience, "do I blame this disreputable-looking object for being what he is? Certainly not."

The tramp blinked. He began to imagine that Skimpole was a little loose in the mental line, and he watched the amateur Socialist curiously.

"I do not blame him, my friends," said Skimpole. "And why do I not blame him? Because this wretched specimen of humanity has had no chance. Had he been reared by careful parents in a decent home, would he now be the deplorable object you now behold him? Certainly not. Is it his fault that he did not possess a careful home and a decent parent—I mean a decent parent and a careful home—that is to say, a decent home and a paity parent—a hairy parent—I mean—"

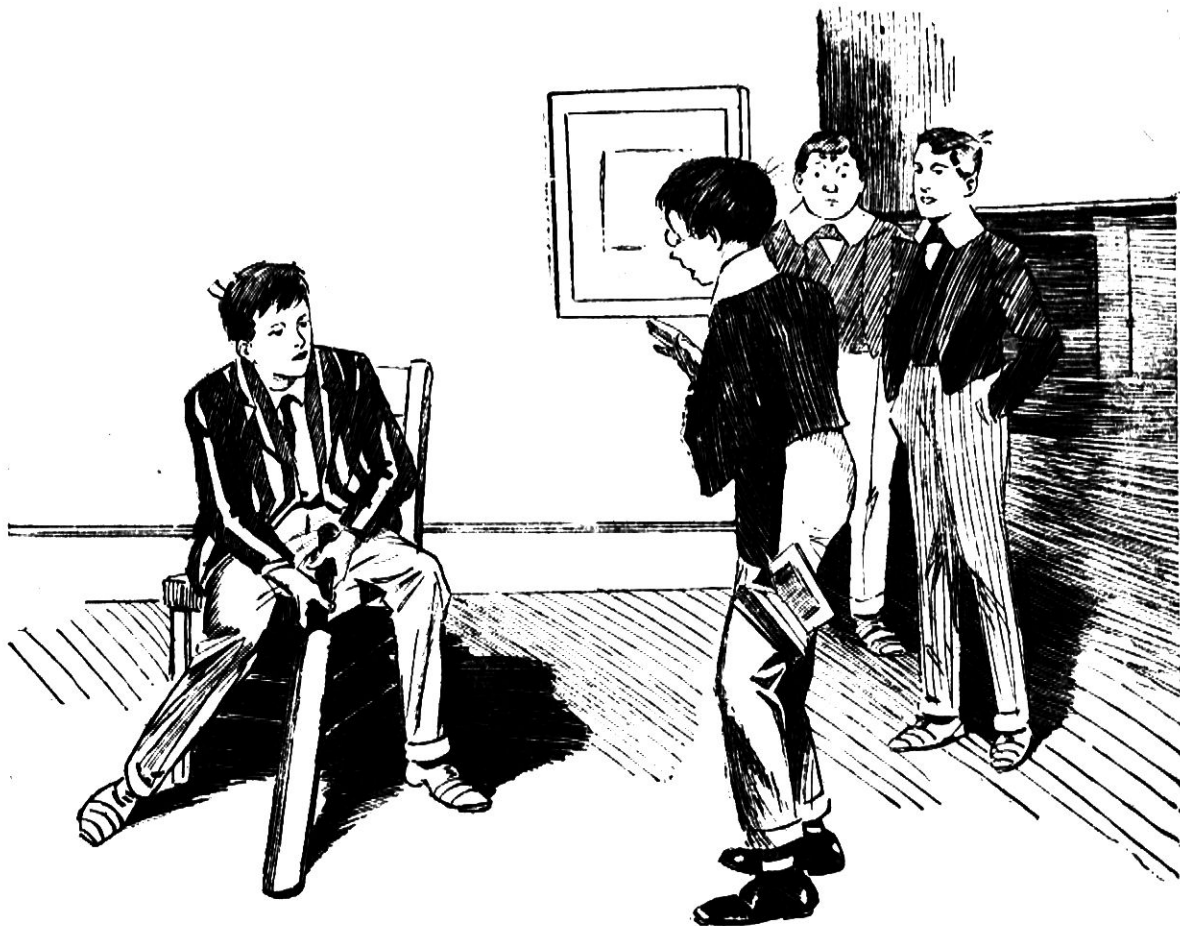
"Orf 'is blessed rocker!" That was the comment of William George Bilker, as he blinked at Skimpole in the June sunshine.

"Doubtless, my unfortunate friend," said Skimpole, changing the topic—"doubtless you have a tale to tell of wrongs suffered, of work sought for in vain, and of the contumely with which the poor are treated by the heartless successful. Probably your tale will be mostly lies, yet it is possible to winnow the truth from the fiction, and then you can be regarded in the light of a human document. I am writing a book on Socialism, and I think that I may be able to work in some evidence from real life as to the working of the present social system. Can you tell me anything that would be likely to be of use to me?"

ANSWERS

NEXT
THURSDAY;

A DOUBLE-LENGTH TALE OF TOM MERRY.



"Take any fellow who is always playing cricket, and you see that he usually talks a lot of piffle about sports and so forth," said Skimpole. Figgins took a tighter grip on the cane handle of his bat.

Out came notebook and pencil.

"My heye!"

"Can you tell me anything that can be used in the crushing indictment I am preparing of the present system of plunder and oppression?" said Skimpole.

"My heye!"

"Ah, I perceive that the miseries you have endured have so blunted your faculties that you are now little more than a fool, my poor fellow!"

"My 'at!"

"But perhaps I can relieve your wants," said Skimpole; "I can help you to regain the position you should hold in the world."

The tramp's eyes glistened.

"Thank you kindly, young gentleman. If you can 'elp a pore fellow—"

"I certainly can. I can help you to food, to clothing, and to work," said Skimpole.

The tramp shuddered. Perhaps the mention of the word work on that pleasant June afternoon gave him a pain somewhere.

"Tell me your story," said Skimpole. "Keep as near the truth as your wretched training and probably degraded nature will permit."

"If you can 'elp—"

"I can certainly help you."

"Thank you!"

"I am sorry," said Skimpole, "that it is not in my power to administer directly to your needs by any immediate pecuniary aid."

"If you could spare a shilling," said the tramp, who probably did not understand half Skimpole's words, "it would 'elp me on my way."

"Unfortunately I have no money. When I spoke of helping you, I meant that I could right your wrongs, and those

of the rest of the submerged tenth, by making them know through the medium of the book I am writing," explained Skimpole. "I expect the advent of Socialism very shortly after the publication of my book. When Socialism comes in you will want no more."

The tramp looked at Skimpole with feelings much too deep for words. He had hoped to obtain at least enough to quench his thirst that warm day, and it was not exactly gratifying to have the much-needed relief put off till the arrival of Socialism.

"I ain't eaten nothin' for three days, sir," said the tramp at last. "I've fallen down on this 'ere bank from weakness."

"Horrible!" said Skimpole, making notes in his book. "Let me see, this will work into a footnote in chapter one hundred and twenty-seven—example of the terrible wrongs suffered under the present rotten system of society—a man who might have been a respectable citizen sinks down from hunger and fatigue in the heart of the richest city in the world, within sound of the rolling wheels of the over-fed, over-pampered aristocracy—h'm! no, that won't do!—within forty miles of the richest city in the world, and within the same distance of the sound of the rolling wheels of the aristocracy. One cannot be too careful in stating facts. You have been without food for three days, my poor fellow?"

"Except a raw potato I dug up with my 'ands, sir," said the tramp, "and a farmer set 'is dog onter me for that."

"Shocking! A tramp, perishing of hunger in the heart of the richest city in the world—h'm! in the heart of the richest county in England—is attacked by a farmer's dog when digging up a raw potato to satisfy the cravings of hunger. Terrible!"

"And if you could 'elp me with a banner—"

"Did the dog bite you, my good man?"

"Tore a great 'ole in my leg, sir," said the tramp pathetically.

"My poor fellow! Will you let me see the wound, please?"

The man on the grassy bank coloured under his dirt.

"I—I've bound it up now, sir, and if I was to open the bandage, I'm afeared I might bleed to death."

"Then pray do not do so!" said Skimpole hastily. "I should probably, in that case, have to attend a coroner's inquest, and I should be caused a great deal of trouble, and lose much of the time I desire to devote to my book. What is your name, my good man?"

"William George Bilker, sir."

"And your address?"

"I hain't one, sir. I sleeps in the hopen hair," said William George Bilker. "But if you could help me to a few coppers, sir, I should be able to get a bed to-night."

"I am extremely sorry that I haven't any cash," said Skimpole. "I should consider it my duty, as a sincere Socialist, to minister to your wants if I had. I should also like to reward you for your services to me as a human document. Come with me, and I will, at least, provide you with a meal."

The tramp blinked at him uncertainly.

As a matter of fact, William George Bilker had lain on that sunny bank to sleep off the effects of a hearty dinner, accompanied by deep draughts of ale, and so the offer of a meal was not a particularly tempting one to him.

"Anything to drink, sir?" he asked.

"Certainly," said Skimpole; "as much pure water as you can possibly consume, my poor fellow!"

"Mad," murmured the tramp—"stark mad! Me drink water! Ugh! 'E's mad!"

"Come with me!" said Skimpole, his eyes flashing. "I will obtain some cash to relieve your needs. I will show all St. Jim's that I have the courage of my opinions, and that I am not ashamed of a brother in distress. I will borrow some money of Tom Merry, and send you on your way with a small sum in your pockets; only a few shillings, perhaps, but the best I can."

The tramp's eyes glistened.

A few shillings meant to him a glorious intoxication in the next public-house, and he jumped up from the bank with an eagerness surprising in a man who had sunk down there from weakness and hunger.

"I'll come, sir!" he said.

"Can you walk?" asked Skimpole anxiously.

"Oh, yes, sir!"

"You are sure you are strong enough? You may lean upon my arm if you wish," said the junior.

"I can walk all right, sir!" said William George Bilker, who had no mind to go along leaning on the arm of a schoolboy.

As a matter of fact, he could have picked Skimpole up with one hand and thrown him over the bank.

"Very well; come with me, and your immediate necessities shall be relieved!" said Skimpole.

And, with the tramp walking at his side, Skimpole set out for St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 8.

Skimpole Brings in a Friend!

"HALLO!"

"Skimpole, old chap—"

"Who's your friend?"

"Bai Jove!"

The chums of Study No. 6 had finished their cricket practice, and were lounging in the gateway of St. Jim's, when Skimpole hove in sight with his new acquaintance, the human document.

They stared at the ill-assorted pair in wonder. They were used to curious freaks on the part of the brainy man of the Shell, but Skimpole seemed to have reached the limit this time.

The tramp blinked at the juniors, and hesitated. But Skimpole the Socialist was fairly riding the high-horse now. He slipped his arm through that of William George Bilker.

"Pray come in, my poor friend!" he said. "Blake, will you kindly stand aside for my friend and myself to pass?"

"His friend!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Pway make woom for Skimpole and his friend, deah boys!"

"My word!" said Digby.

"I am surprised at you," said Skimpole; "I am shocked! It is not only un-Socialistic, but ungentlemanly, to be down on a man because he is poor and needy!"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" said Blake. "Who's down on a man because he's poor and needy? That chap is a tramp, and he hasn't washed himself for months!"

"I wathah think he hasn't washed himself at all, deah boys!"

"You'll get into a row if you bring him into the school!" said Blake. "Don't be a howling ass, Skimmy!"

"I shall consult only my own conscience about that!" said Skimpole loftily. "It is true that the poor fellow is in a filthy condition. Whose fault is that?"

"His own, I suppose! If he can't afford to buy soap, there's plenty of water in the river!"

"Yes; but a degraded victim of the social system feels no desire to wash. Has he been trained in the ways of cleanliness? Certainly not! He is a filthy sort of brute, because he has been trained to be one. Come in with me, my poor friend! I am not surprised to see you looking angry, when you think of the wrongs you have suffered and the state of degradation you have reached in consequence!"

The tramp followed Skimpole into the quadrangle. At the sight of the tall, old buildings he hesitated a little, but he went on. After all, he probably considered that, at the worst, he could only be turned out, while it was quite possible that he might find valuable pickings first.

The chums of Study No. 6 stared blankly after Skimpole and the tramp. Blake burst into a chuckle.

"Well, this beats it all!" he exclaimed. "There will be a row! My hat! What will the fellows say? There's Figgins on the track already!"

Figgins & Co. had soon spotted Skimpole and his companion. They came up grinning, and a crowd of other juniors gathered round.

"Hallo!" said Figgins. "Your father come down to visit the school, Skimpole? Introduce your friends, won't you?"

Skimpole turned red.

"This is not my father," he explained. "It is William George Bilker, an unfortunate victim of the social system!"

William George Bilker grinned.

"Beggin' your pardon, young gentlemen," he said, "I was brought 'ere for a meal, and I 'opes no offence!"

"Certainly not!" said Figgins. "Take your friend into the study, Skimmy, and treat him like a long-lost brother! You cannot kill the fatheaded calf for him, as suicide is not legal!"

"Really, Figgins—"

"Buck up! Nothing like carrying out one's principles!" said Figgins. "Only don't let your housemaster see you carrying them out, or you will want carrying out yourself when he's finished with you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pray come this way, my poor fellow!"

"Right you har, sir!" said William George, who seemed to be entering into the joke of the thing, though Skimpole was as grave as a judge.

The fine June afternoon had tempted the masters as well as the boys out of the House, and Skimpole found it deserted. He went upstairs, followed by the tramp, and as he passed the door of Tom Merry's study it opened. The Terrible Three came out, and they stopped in amazement at the sight of the strange pair.

"My only hat!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Friend of yours?" asked Lowther.

"Yes," said Skimpole; "a brother—"

"I didn't know you had any grown-up brothers."

"You misunderstand me. A brother in the sense that all humanity are brothers—"

"What's your brother's name?" asked Lowther, pretending not to hear.

"I tell you, he is not—"

"Well, it's really good of you, and decent, not to disown your brother, though he's so low-down in the world!" said Manners. "Are you going to feed him in the study?"

"Yes," said Skimpole. "I am, unfortunately, out of funds myself, but Gore has a good supply in the cupboard. I took his pork-pies yesterday to relieve a starving person, but he has a new supply to-day. Can you lend me some money, Tom Merry?"

"How much?"

"Oh, as much as you can spare!"

"What for?"

"I wish to relieve the immediate necessities of this poor fellow."

"Better give him your watch, then!" suggested Monty Lowther. "He can sell it or pawn it in Rylcombe, you know!"

Skimpole shook his head.

"I could not give away my watch, which I require for use—"

"Easier to give away Tom Merry's tin, I suppose?" said Lowther. "Is that one of your principles as a sincere Socialist?"

"You don't understand—"

"No, I don't understand it if Tom Merry hands you any of his cash! Come along, Tom, we've got to go to the tuck-shop yet!"

"I may as well—"

"No, you mayn't!" said Monty Lowther, linking his arm in Tom Merry's and dragging him along. "Come along!"

"I consider that rather mean," said Skimpole. "But come in, my poor friend! This is my study. I will do the best I can for you!"

"Thank you kindly, sir!"

"Please do not call me sir! It is a term which will be abolished when the universal equality of the human species is acknowledged. Pray take the armchair. Now I will get the grub! Dear me, the cupboard is locked! This is really very inconsiderate of Gore! He has locked the grub up so that I should not be able to touch it. As if I should think of taking anything of his! Of course, in a case of relieving the necessities of an unfortunate victim of the social system the case is different. I must aid you, my poor friend! Fortunately, there is a chopper here! It will not take long to break the lock!"

Skimpole was right. One crash of the chopper on the lock smashed it, and the cupboard door flew open.

Gore had apparently been preparing to give a feed to his friends. At all events, the cupboard was well stocked. Skimpole was in a generous mood. He brought out the best he could find, and placed it before the human document.

"Eat and drink!" he exclaimed. "I hope you like currant-wine? It is really very good, and has the great virtue of being non-intoxicating, which, I am sure, you will appreciate."

The tramp grinned.

He did not touch the currant-wine, but he wired into the food with a good will, although, as a matter of fact, it was not a couple of hours since he had had a good meal, though that fact was unknown to the unsuspecting Skimpole.

William George Bilker was a believer, too, in putting things by for a rainy day, for whenever Skimpole's back was turned, he slipped something into his pocket or else into the bundle he had laid upon the table.

The amateur Socialist noted how fast the food went, but as he imagined it all went down the throat of William George, he was convinced that he had indeed rescued a man who was on the very verge of death by starvation.

The tramp had pork-pies, sponge-cakes, buns and biscuits, and bananas in his pockets, and many other little things that he had stowed away when the amateur Socialist was not looking, but whenever Skimpole glanced at him, he was sitting eating with a grave face.

"There," said Skimpole, bringing the last article out of the cupboard, "that is the best I can do for you! I am glad to see you eating so heartily! But are you sure it will not injure you to eat so much after a long fast?"

The tramp chuckled, and then as Skimpole looked at him in surprise, he became grave again at once.

"No, sir," he said; "I think not!"

"You must know best, of course; but I should advise moderation. Dour me! Where is the tin of pineapples I put on the table just now?"

"I've eaten it, sir!"

"Without the tin being opened?" exclaimed Skimpole, in amazement.

The door opening at that moment saved the tramp from a difficult question to answer. Gore walked into the study. Skimpole looked round.

"Hallo! Is that you, Gore?"

"Yes," said Gore. "Why, what the—who the—who the—"

He broke off, dumb from sheer amazement, and stared at Skimpole and his companion.

"I've just brought in a friend," said Skimpole. "I—Pray do not be violent!"

Gore gave a whoop, and rushed right at the amateur Socialist, and the next moment they were rolling on the floor.

CHAPTER 9.

Mr. Bilker Finds Work!

GORE had some reason to be angry. His feed had been "scoffed," and Skimpole was too seldom in funds for him to hope that it would be replaced in a hurry. He simply went for Skimpole, and got him down on the carpet, and pummelled away wildly.

"You villain!" he roared. "I'll teach you to wolf my grub!"

"Really, Gore—"

"All my feed gone! Take that, and that, and that!"

"Help!" gasped Skimpole.

William George Bilker rose to his feet. He stood with his hands in his pockets, heartlessly laughing at the plight of his benefactor. Skimpole could see nothing comical in the matter, but William George could, for he laughed till the tears rolled down his fat cheeks.

"Go it!" he exclaimed encouragingly. "Go it!"

"Help!"

"Take that—and that—and that!"

"Ow! Help! Ow!"

The tramp glanced round the study. He picked up his stick and his parcel, and a fountain-pen, and a silver match-box that happened to be lying on the table. Then he left the study, leaving Gore and Skimpole still rolling on the carpet and pommelling one another.

William George glanced cautiously up and down the passage. There was no one in sight, and he slipped into Tom Merry's study. His eyes roamed round the room greedily. He opened the drawer of the table, and scooped in several silver coins that lay there, and then a set of ivory chessmen belonging to Manners. Those chessmen were the pride of Manners's heart. They had been presented to him years ago by a fond uncle, and he had treasured them carefully since his tenth year. But all was grist that came to William George's mill. He scooped in the chessmen, and they disappeared among his rags.

Then he left the study, and made his way towards the stairs. Sounds within warned him that the other studies he passed were occupied. As a matter of fact, most of the juniors of the School House were in at tea now, and several fellows were passing along the corridor with filled tea-kettles, as the tramp went towards the stairs. They stared at Bilker in amazement.

The tramp hurried downstairs.

"Stop, there! Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

It was Mr. Railton's voice. The housemaster stood in the path of the tramp. Bilker gave a longing glance towards the open quad, visible through the great doorway of the School House, but there was no escape for him.

"If you please, sir, I was starving, and a young gentleman brought me in to give me a meal," he said humbly.

The housemaster looked at him frowningly.

"I approve of charity," he said. "I have no objection to a boy giving you a meal, but you should not have entered here, nor had he a right to bring you in."

"I've been looking for work."

Mr. Railton's eye glimmered for a moment.

"You are looking for work?"

"Yes, sir," said William George uneasily.

"You look a likely fellow. There is some digging want doing here, and you can have the job if you like," said Mr. Railton.

Bilker hesitated. He was fairly caught, and, as a matter of fact, work was about the last thing in the world that he really wanted.

"I—I—"

"You say you are looking for work," said Mr. Railton sternly. "I will pay for your work if you choose to do some. Otherwise, I shall regard you as an impostor, begging under false pretences, and I shall detain you here while I telephone for the police to come from Rylcombe and take you in charge."

William George Bilker's face lengthened. The police and he were on the very worst terms, especially in the village of Rylcombe, where there had lately been a painful misunderstanding about the ownership of some fowls.

"I'm an 'ard-workin' man, sir," he said, at last. "I'm willin' to do anythin' that's not above my strength."

"You look strong enough."

"Appearances is deceptive," said Mr. Bilker pathetically. "I know I looks fat, and it is agin me. You'd 'ardly believe that I hadn't tasted bite nor drop for two days afore the kind young gentleman give me a food upstairs."

"No, I certainly should believe nothing of the kind," said Mr. Railton. "So you can save your breath on that topic."

"I'll take my solemn—"

"Silence! Follow me, and I will show you what work you are to do."

"Certainly, sir, and glad of the chance," said Mr. Bilker, with an effort.

The housemaster strode down the wide steps, the tramp behind him, and turned in the direction of the Head's garden. The tramp cast a longing glance to the left, where the gates of St. Jim's stood wide open. He looked at the broad back of the housemaster, and then at the gates again. Then he walked off very softly.

Mr. Railton turned his head.

"Where are you going?"

William George turned back guiltily.

"I—I was a-follerin' you, sir."

"Follow me a little more closely, then."

"Suttinly, sir!"

The tramp did not venture to make another attempt to escape. He followed the housemaster to the Head's garden. Thompson, the gardener, was at work there, and he looked in astonished inquiry at the tramp.

"You can find an hour's work for this man, Thompson," said Mr. Railton.

The gardener grinned.

"Certainly, sir."

"He has been looking for work for a long time, and is eager to find some," said the housemaster. "It is a very laudable desire, and should be encouraged. Give him some digging to do, and see that he does it, will you?"

"I will so, sir," said Thompson.

Mr. Railton walked away, smiling to himself. Thompson threw a spade towards the unhappy Mr. Bilker.

"That plot wants digging up," he said. "Turn the earth over two feet deep. Wire in, and don't waste my time!"

Mr. Bilker took hold of the spade very gingerly. He was in a very unhappy frame of mind. It was not only that he had a hearty hatred for anything like work. But he had a fear every moment, that the articles he had purloined in the studies might be missed, and that the identity of the purloiner might be guessed.

"Where am I to dig?" asked Mr. Bilker miserably.

"I've told you once!" snapped the gardener. "How many times do you want telling? A hundred times?"

"I don't see why I should—"

"Ain't you going to begin?"

Mr. Bilker looked round, and saw that the stalwart housemaster was gone. He threw down the spade.

"I hain't going to do nothin'!" he declared stoutly.

The gardener looked him up and down.

"I've had my orders," he said. "You're going to do an hour's work, according to instructions. You'll get paid for it. What more do you want?"

"I hain't going to."

Mr. Thompson pushed back his cuffs.

"Say that again," he remarked.

"I hain't going to," repeated Mr. Bilker; but rather slowly and uneasily, as he saw Thompson's warlike preparations.

"Where will you have it?" asked the gardener pleasantly.

Mr. Bilker looked at his fists, and his heart sank. He picked up the spade.

"Of course, I was only joking," he said, inwardly calling down all sorts of anathemas upon the head of Herbert Skimpole.

"I shouldn't advise you to make any more jokes like that," said Thompson. "I might think you were in earnest, and go for you. Now start work, and don't shirk it."

There was no help for it. Mr. Bilker groaned, and set to work with the spade. And on the garden-wall appeared a row of junior heads, watching the curious scene with great interest.

CHAPTER 10.

Skimpole Interviews the Head!

TOM MERRY, Manners, and Lowther came upstairs with various parcels under their arms, after the visit to the school shop. As they came towards the study the sounds of strife from the adjoining room caught their ears, and then Skimpole came flying out. A foot was seen behind him, and explained the suddenness of his exit.

Skimpole staggered along the passage, and Tom Merry caught him by the hair and stopped him.

"Ow! Oh, is that you, Merry? Please let go my hair, will you?"

"I've just saved you from coming a cropper," said Tom Merry. "Lucky I caught you in time, I think."

"I don't think you need have caught me quite so hard," said Skimpole. "I am feeling rather dazed. Have you seen my friend?"

"You mean your brother?" asked Lowther.

"I have explained that he is only my brother in the sense that—"

"Haven't seen him," said Manners. "Have you mislaid him? Why don't you take more care of your brothers?"

"Gore came into the study just now," said Skimpole. "I have had quite a quarrel with Gore, owing to his bad temper."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I am afraid that the tramp has got alarmed, and has gone away without the money I intended to raise to help the unfortunate fellow on his way," said Skimpole.

"He may have raised some without your assistance," said Lowther.

"It is wrong to cast reflections upon a man because he's down in the world," said Skimpole. "Under Socialism he would be a valuable citizen—"

"Well," said Lowther, "I should imagine by his looks that he did more stealing than working; but I may be mistaken. Did you give him your watch?"

"Certainly not!"

"Then what have you done with it? Your chain's hanging loose."

Skimpole glanced down at his waistcoat. His silver

watch-chain certainly was hanging loose from his pocket, and there was no watch on it.

"Dear me! It must have come off in my struggle with Gore."

"Rats! It might have broken, but it couldn't come off the chain."

"Then what has become of it?"

"Ask your friend the tramp," grinned Lowther.

Skimpole shook his head.

"Where has he got to?" gripped Manners. "Find the tramp, and you'll hear your watch ticking. Come in, kids, and let's get tea."

"Just a minute, Tom Merry—"

"What is it?" asked Tom Merry, pausing good-naturedly as his claims went into the study to commence preparations for tea.

"I am in some doubt as to what to do to recover my—"

"Watch?"

"Oh, no. The watch is all right. It must have come off during my struggle with Gore, and is in the study somewhere—"

"I'd advise you to look—"

"I don't think I had better enter the study while Gore is in his present unreasonable mood," said Skimpole. "I am not anxious about the watch. I was thinking of my book."

"Oh!" said Tom Merry, yawning.

"You know that Mr. Linton took it. He tells me that he is going to give it to the Head, and leave it to him whether to give it back to me. Shall I go and ask the Head for it, do you think?"

Tom Merry laughed.

"Well, he wouldn't eat you," he said.

"Yes, and I am nervous about my ideas. Mr. Linton might even unconsciously plagiarise after reading my notes. Such things have happened. I think upon the whole it would be safer to get the book back as soon as possible."

"Then ask the Head for it, if Mr. Linton has given it to him. But if you want my advice—"

"I do, Merry; I am always glad to have advice when it—"

"When it agrees with what you have already decided to do?"

"Well, not exactly, but—"

"My advice is to let the Head burn the book, and think no more about it," said Tom Merry. "You're not old enough to think about that sort of thing. Take on something more suitable to a youngster—photography, for example."

Skimpole gave him a withering look.

"I suppose you are joking, Tom Merry. I am not likely to take on photography instead of the reformation of society. As for my youth, that is nothing. Many great men have distinguished themselves in their youth. Macaulay, and Mozart, and Leopardi, and—"

"Oh, never mind the rest!"



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"There is no reason why one of still greater powers should not equally distinguish himself."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"A sincere reformer is always prepared to face ribald laughter," said Skimpole. "I do not blame you for this. I attribute it to some mental defect, accentuated by a bad training."

"Are you looking for a thick ear?"

"Certainly not. I think——"

"Are you coming in to cook these herrings, Tom Merry?" shouted Monty Lowther.

"Yes, rather!" said Tom; and he entered the study.

Skimpole stood reflecting for a moment or two, and then he slowly made his way to the Head's study. Dr. Holmes was not there, but the amateur Socialist was not to be baffled. He made his way to the Head's private house, and was shown up into the drawing-room, where the doctor sat with his wife. Mrs. Holmes looked rather curiously at the junior as he came in, cap in hand.

The Head glanced at Skimpole over his gold-rimmed pince-nez.

"What can I do for you, Skimpole? I hope you have an adequate reason for disturbing me?"

There was a hint in the Head's voice that if Skimpole hadn't an adequate reason, he would be sorry for himself shortly. But the amateur Socialist was blind to that.

"I am sorry to disturb you, sir," he said. "I should like you to return me my book, if you don't mind."

"Your—or—book?" said the Head.

"Yes, sir. Mr. Linton has handed you my pocket book, I think," said Skimpole. "It contains the notes for the first hundred and eighty-five chapters of the volume I am engaged in writing."

Mrs. Holmes turned her face away to hide a smile. The Head coughed.

"Skimpole, I do not quite——"

"I hope you will return it, sir," said Skimpole. "This book, when I publish it, will bring great credit upon St. Jim's. As a Socialist, sir, I cannot allow false modesty to stand in the way of properly estimating myself and my work. I sincerely believe that the book will be of great value, and will make this school famous as having been the place where I was educated."

"Skimpole——"

"It has taken me a long time to get those notes together, sir, and I have some more now to add to them."

"Listen to me, Skimpole. Mr. Linton has handed me your book. I attach less importance to it than your Form-master. What he regards as insolence I am inclined to look upon as mere folly and absurdity."

Skimpole gasped.

"That is quite a mistake, sir. There is no folly in my book. I should like you to read an extract from chapter one hundred and eighty-four. It is on the subject of youthful geniuses being frequently misunderstood and derided by grown-up people who ought to know better, and whose hard judgments are really caused by their own ignorance and stupidity."

"Skimpole!" thundered the Head.

"Of course, sir, I was speaking generally."

The Head picked up the precious notebook, which was lying on the table, and held it out to Skimpole.

"You may take this, Skimpole."

"Thank you, sir," said Skimpole, eagerly receiving his treasure and stowing it away in an inside pocket. "If you like, sir, I would mention your name in my preface and make you famous, too."

"Nonsense, Skimpole! My advice to you is to give up the study of these subjects till you are older," said the Head. "I shall have a further talk with you on this subject, however. You may go now."

"If you would care to help me in the publication of my book, sir, I should be willing to allow you a half-share in the royalties."

"You may go, Skimpole."

"Certainly, sir!" said Skimpole, catching a dangerous

glint in the doctor's eye. And he went. When the door had closed, the Head turned to his wife with a smile.

"A very curious youth," he said. "His heart is in the right place, which leads me to deal more gently with him than I should otherwise."

Skimpole went his way rejoicing, with his precious book in his inside pocket. He entered the School House, and there was a shout:

"Here he is!"

The next moment the Terrible Three rushed upon him.

CHAPTER 11.

Exit Mr. Bilker.

TOM MERRY seized the amateur Socialist by the collar. Manners and Lowther closed in one on either side of him. Skimpole did not attempt to escape.

"What—what is the matter?" he gasped.

"Where's your tramp?" demanded Tom Merry.

"Eh? What?"

"Where's your tramp?"

"The tramp! I suppose he has left St. Jim's. I have not seen him since Gore came into the study half an hour ago."

"You young villain!" roared Monty Lowther. "You'll have to make it good, then."

"He can't make my chess good," said Manners, who was looking too miserable to be angry. "They're gone."

"Cheer up, old chap!" said Tom Merry. "We'll have them back."

"Wh—what is the matter?" gasped Skimpole. "I don't understand. Has anything happened to Manners's chess?"

"They've been taken from the study."

"Dear me! Who can have taken them?"

"Who?" hooted Lowther. "Your precious tramp, of course!"

"The tramp! Oh, no! He would be too grateful for the assistance I gave him to think of stealing anything here," said Skimpole.

"You young ass!" said Tom Merry. "There's some money, about four shillings, gone from the drawer, and Manners's ivory chess. They're worth eight guineas."

"It isn't the money," said Manners, "though that's a lot, but I've had them since I was ten years old, and they were a present."

"I am sure the tramp did not take them."

"Do you know where he is?"

"No, I haven't the faintest idea, but I suppose he has left St. Jim's."

There was a sound of rapid footsteps on the stairs. Gore came down three at a time, and rushed at Skimpole. He seized the amateur Socialist and dragged him down in a twinkling, and sat on his chest.

"Now, then," he roared, "where's that tramp?"

"I—I—I——"

Gore gripped Skimpole's hair and proceeded to bump his head on the floor.

"Where's that tramp?"

"I—I—I——"

Tom Merry seized Gore and jerked him off his victim. The bully of the Shell turned upon him furiously.

"Are you going to back that rotter up in this?" he hooted.

"That tramp has stolen my fountain-pen and a silver matchbox, unless Skimpole gave them to him."

"I certainly did nothing of the sort."

"Then he has stolen them. Where is he?"

"I suppose he has left St. Jim's."

Gore gave a howl.

"Then the things are lost. My hat, if you don't pay for them I'll go to the Head! I'll complain! I'll show you——"

"Oh, shut up!" said Tom Merry. "We've lost more than you, and we're not making such a row about it. The tramp had the things, there's no doubt about that. It may not be too late to get hold of him. We can ask the fellows if they've seen anything of him, anyway. I say, Gussy!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had just entered the School House. He was grinning, as if over a good joke.

"Hallo, deah boy!" he said. "If you want to see somethin' weally funnay, you had better go to the Head's garden. Ha, ha, ha!"

"I want to ask you——"

"It is weally extremely comical. The fellow doesn't want to do it, you know, but Thompson is watchin' him like a beastly cat, you know."

"What fellow?" said Tom Merry testily. "What on earth are you talking about, Gussy?"

"The twamp, you know."

Tom Merry gave a jump.

"The tramp!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Is he still at St. Jim's?"

"Mr. Wailton offered him work," chuckled D'Arcy, "and



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he had to accept. He's got to do an hour's work undah the eye of Thompson, and Thompson is watchin' him like anythin'. It is vewy funny."

Tom Merry's eye glittered.

"Then he's still here," he said. "We'll jolly soon see whether he has the things about him, kids. Follow your uncle."

"Bai Jove, what is that?" asked D'Arcy. "Has the boundah taken anythin' belongin' to you fellows?"

"We've missed some things, and we missed the tramp, too," said Monty Lowther. "It's pretty certain that he's got them."

"Bai Jove, we'll soon see! There are a lot of fellows sittin' on the wall watchin' him," said D'Arcy; "Blake and Howwies and Digby are there. We'll collah the wotah, and search through his beastly clothes, you know, and see whethah he has the stolen wproperty on him."

The juniors left the School House. There was little doubt that the tramp had stolen the missing articles, and the youngsters were in a grim mood. They arrived at the low wall of the doctor's garden, and found a row of juniors sitting on it, watching the tramp at work on the other side, under the supervision of Thompson.

Mr. Bilker was perspiring under the effects of honest labour, a very unusual thing with him, and he seemed to feel it very keenly.

He rested very frequently on his spade, and the voice of the gardener continually rapped out orders to proceed, which the tramp unwillingly obeyed.

Blake grinned at Tom Merry as he came up.

"Get on the wall here," he said, making room; "this is worth watching, old son. You ought to get your camera, Manners. Hallo, what are you looking so jolly rotten about, old chap?"

"Somebody has been raiding in the study," said Tom Merry. "He's collared Manners's ivory chessmen, among other things."

Blake whistled.

"By Jove, that's serious! I see; you suspect Skimpole's find the tramp."

"Exactly!"

"We'll jolly soon see if he's got them," said Blake, slipping off the wall. "We'll go in and surround the rotter, and make him own up."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Tom Merry opened the gate. The juniors crowded through, and Thompson waved his hand warningly at them. "Outside, there!" he shouted. "You ain't allowed in here."

"It's all right," said Tom Merry; "we only want to speak to the tramp."

Mr. Bilker looked up suspiciously, a good deal like a hunted animal. There was something in the juniors' looks that betrayed their intentions. The tramp dropped the spade and ran.

"Come back there!" roared Thompson. "Stop him!"

"After him!" panted Tom Merry.

He was after the tramp in a twinkling. But fear lent Mr. Bilker wings. He doubled among the rhododendrons, and cut back to the wall, and a single leap carried him over it. The juniors poured over it headlong in pursuit. Mr. Bilker was streaking for the open gates of St. Jim's like a fox with the hounds close on the scent.

Tom Merry dashed in pursuit at top speed. But even the best runner in the junior forms at St. Jim's was not quite up to Mr. Bilker's form at that moment. The distance between them increased, and the fleeing tramp was drawing closer to the open gates. Tom Merry set his teeth and put on a spurt. A lanky figure loomed up in the shadow of the gateway, and Tom Merry recognised Figgins of the New House. He gave a breathless yell:

"Stop thief!"

Figgins did not need warning twice. He gave one look at the flying tramp and at Tom Merry panting in pursuit, and understood the position of affairs at a glance.

He stopped directly in Mr. Bilker's path, standing ready to receive him, and the tramp paused for a moment in his dash. But as he paused the footsteps of Tom Merry rang closer behind, and, with a howl of mingled fear and rage, Mr. Bilker put on speed again, and dashed right at Figgins. It was his only chance, and, after all, he had little doubt of being able to clear a mere boy out of his path by the force of his rush.

But Figgins was a tough customer at close quarters. As the tramp bore down upon him, Figgins sprang right at him like a cat and gripped him, and the next moment they were rolling on the ground together.

"Figgys got him!" gasped Tom Merry, in delight.

He panted on. Figgins could not have held the powerful tramp long, but only a few seconds were needed for Tom Merry to arrive on the scene.

Bilker was still endeavouring to tear himself loose from Figgins's tenacious grip when Tom Merry came up and gripped the tramp by the collar. A moment more and Blake was at his side, and his grip, too, was fastened upon the tramp, and Mr. Bilker was dragged off Figgins.

The rascal struggled desperately.

He saw the prison gates wide open, in his mind's eye, and he fought furiously for his freedom. And in the wild struggle all sorts of things rolled out of his ragged garments.

Cakes and biscuits and apples, mingled with chessmen and coins and a silver matchbox, and a fountain pen and a watch, and several other articles.

"My hat!" gasped Tom Merry, as he pinned the tramp down at last with a knee on his chest. "He's been having a regular raid, I suppose!"

"That's my grub," exclaimed Gore; "he collared it out of my study!"

"And my chess!" exclaimed Manners, anxiously gathering up his precious pieces from the ground, where they were in danger of being trodden underfoot.

"And my watch," said Skimpole, picking it up.

"And my matchbox," growled Gore, "and my fountain pen! Let me catch you bringing any of your friends into my study again, that's all, you howling ass!"

"Really, Gore—"

"Well, we've got the thief!" said Tom Merry.

There were a crowd of juniors round the captured rascal now. He had no chance against so many, and he ceased to struggle.

They made a thorough search of his person, and two or three other small articles were brought to light. Mr. Bilker's mood had changed from ferocity to meek and mild submission.

"Please lemme go, young gentlemen," he said. "I'm a 'ard-working man, and—"

"Yes, you'll have a chance to do some hard work now; on the treadmill!" Monty Lowther remarked. "We'd better take him to Mr. Railton— Hallo!"

Mr. Railton, whose attention had been attracted by the struggle in the quad, had just come up. He looked at the boys and their prisoner.

"What does this mean, Merry?"

Tom Merry stood up. Lowther and Blake, and Figgins and Herries were holding Mr. Bilker, and there was no danger of his escape.

"This rotter has been stealing, sir," said Tom Merry. "We've got the things back, though, and we've just searched him."

"Ah!" said Mr. Railton, looking down at the wriggling wretch. "You are sure he has no more about him?"

"Yes, sir."

"I won't do so no more!" whined Mr. Bilker. "If you lets me off this time, I'll take my solemn hoath to turn over a new leaf! I'm a 'ard-working man!"

"Skimpole is really to blame, for bringing the wretched man into the school and placing temptation in his way," said Mr. Railton, darting a severe glance at the amateur Socialist. "I shall therefore not have this man arrested. If he is ducked in the fountain, as a warning to keep clear of evil courses, I think that will meet the case."

And the housemaster walked away.

And ducked in the fountain Mr. Bilker was, and then ejected with ignominy from the gates of St. Jim's, with three or four boots behind to help him off. Mr. Bilker did not stand upon the order of his going; he was only too glad to get outside the gates of St. Jim's at any price. He picked himself up and ran, and disappeared down the road in the gathering dusk.

"Skimmy, you ass," said Tom Merry, "you had better let that be a lesson to you!"

"Really, Tom Merry—"

"If I had lost my chess," said Manners darkly, "there would have been a dead ass found lying about shortly afterwards!"

"Yaas, wathah! I wegard Skimpole as a howlin' lunatic, and he certainly owes Mannahs an apology!"

"As a sincere Socialist, I regard all you say as piffle," said Skimpole. "I am bound to follow out my principles, and I should not allow a trifling regard for ivory chessmen and silver matchboxes to stand in the way. In the hundred and eighty-fifth chapter of my book—"

"Bai Jove! I weally think that we ought to duck Skimpole in the fountain now, deah boys! He needs a lesson quite as much as the twamp!"

"Good wheeze! Collar him!"

But Skimpole was gone!

THE END.

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ALAN'S FOE ::

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ALAN WAYWARD'S ADVENTURES.

CHAPTER 1.

On the Road to Bagdad.

THE old prophet of Bagdad was in a happy mood. Half an hour ago he had, from seventy yards distant, hurled his staff at a fat, browsing goat, which was now broiling before an excellent fire. He had also met a devout merchant-traveller, who had conscientiously hedged with Allah for his many trickeries by bestowing on the prophet some really choice snuff, that had the delicate aroma of not having paid any fees on its rout from Egypt. And healthy, hungry, with no vows of fast, moulting his perspective of the succulent broil before him, he was enjoying the rare flavour of a retrospect of a really good comprehensive six months' work.

Moreover, from the balmy altitude of the 2,000 feet which his camping-place enjoyed above the swift-rolling stream of the Eastern Euphrates, as it tumbled towards the plains of Mush, the sheikh could see the sun-rays embroidering with coral lace-work the various distant peaks that had witnessed the results of his wisdom. And since it is not given to every man to enjoy at once the prospect of a succulent meal and the retrospect of wisdom accomplished in triumphs, the sheikh, though by no means unvaniteux, was in a state of tranquil blissfulness, that betrayed itself by the leisurely and lingering way in which he flirted with his snuff.

For if, when worried, the sheikh fairly scooped his snuff into his hawk-like nose, yet, in his more serene moments, no courtier of the days of Louis Seize could have outmatched the airy grace with which the prophet of Bagdad blessed Allah for the gift of sifted tobacco.

"It seems, my son," he said, turning to Alan Wayward, "that having effectually wiped the road with the enemies of justice, we may proceed in peace towards Bagdad."

"I have noticed," said Alan musingly, as he collected in an old sardine-tin the grease that dripped from the broiling loin and carefully basted the joint, "that whenever, O wisdom, thou rejoicest in the thought of jogging to Bagdad, Allah finds something else for us to do in the sweeping-up line among these ranges haunted with robbers."

"We have wiped them all out," said the sheikh complacently.

"Yet we have never caught Black Mourad," rejoined Alan, leaving the fire and standing erect. "Thou hast not forgotten, that when we rescued my Lady Mirame from his band at Mahmudieh, a month ago, Mourad himself was not among the captives the old chieftain of the Haideranlis caused to be hung. And Mourad is not a man to lie idle long."

"I am not troubled for Mourad," said the sheikh calmly. "His destiny is written, and I have read it in the sand and in the water and in the stars. From the day in which he bound me, his star sickened. No enterprise he undertakes shall succeed, and he shall know no grave; for verily, it is ordained that he shall wander, among dead fires in the unsatisfied bellies of many bears."

"Pek ala!" (all right) said Alan, with a grin. "This is done to a turn, so plunge in thy thumb, O prophet, and eat!"

But the sheikh remained deaf to the invitation. He was looking fixedly down the wild gorge that ran to the borders of the Murad Chai, where its racing torrent sped past Changeri.

"Verily, my son; it seems that thou art right," he said, with a wave of his hand towards the gorge; "and that Allah hath still something for us to do!"

Alan joined him and looked downwards. Up the steep and broken gorge two men were pushing afoot, evidently exerting every muscle to outdistance a party of five, who were toiling doggedly up three hundred yards behind them.

"They are surely Ingeliz," said the sheikh; "for none but the absurd people of thy land wear such little caps and such big boots, with thick stockings, and the breeches that manacle the knee."

"They're Englishmen right enough," said Alan; "and if I'm not very much mistaken, I know one of them. What's more, it looks as if some of Mourad's gang were after them. For the pursuers are neither zaptichs (gendarmes) nor nizams (regulars)."

"Moreover they are black," said the sheikh, whose desert-trained gaze was sure and long-sighted as an eagle's. "Go a little to the left, my son, and when the fugitives have passed the bend which they are now approaching, throw an armful of rocks in the way of the pursuers. If they are

honest men they will parley. But if they are brigands, they will fear and flee."

"Of a certainty they are brigands, and our work is not yet done," muttered the sheikh, as the men, startled by the fall of rock, after one glance at Alan's great form silhouetted against the sky on the edge of the cliff, turned and fled down the gorge at full speed.

Nor did the fugitives leave them in any doubt on the matter when they arrived ten minutes later, panting and grateful.

"I don't know who you are," said one of them, a tall, dark man, with a ruddy face and black, fierce eyes, deep-set beneath bushy-grey eyebrows, "but you've done us an uncommonly good turn in choking off those scoundrels of bandits. They've been at our heels since we quitted Changeri. There were twenty of them at first; but we showed a good pair of heels till our horses got bogged on the other side of the Euphrates, there."

"You were lucky to escape," said Alan. "For that morass is a veritable grave-yard."

"Fortunately, we only struck the edge of it," replied the stranger, "and had time to get to solid land and take a header in the flood before the others came up."

"You are strangers in these parts," said the sheikh. "You are also doubtless hungry. Behold our dinner waits, and ye are welcome!"

"It's uncommonly good of you," said the stranger. "I'm Joe Carlton, British Consul at Trebizond, on three months' special leave, and this is my secretary and friend, Jack Dawson, lately out from England; and a square meal is just about what we can do full justice to."

The sheikh led the way, and they grouped round the waiting joint.

Manin, who had from the first recognised in Dawson his fellow-clerk of a year ago, when he had been articled to Messrs. Damit & Claw, solicitors of Lincoln's Inn Fields, was chuckling to himself over Dawson's frequent puzzled glances in his direction. For in his Arab dress and turban, bronzed to a deep tan by wind and weather, and with lip and chin adorned with a well-grown beard, the colour of ripe corn, it would have been difficult for even his most intimate friend to have recognised in the disciple of Jelaluddin the fresh-faced, clean-shaven, town-garbed Alan of a year ago.

"You have doubtless come here to hunt," said the sheikh, as he dug his thumb in the joint, and, handing out a tender, juicy lump, passed it ceremoniously to his guest.

"Not the kind of hunt you mean," replied Carlton.

"We're after a scoundrel called Claw, a London solicitor, who some years ago sent an Englishman, named Eyre, his wife and son and daughter, out here, and, in conjunction with a villain, named Idrin, of Changeri, and Saponyadi, a Greek merchant, got the whole family trapped and sold into slavery."

"Idrin was hung for his crimes," said the sheikh, "and Saponyadi was eaten by wolves."

"I'm delighted to hear it," said Carlton.

"Do you know anything of Eyre's fate?" asked Dawson.

"His wife died," replied Alan; "and Eyre succumbed a year later. I never knew he had children."

"Mustapha, the slave-merchant of Foliat, had two white children in his harem," said the sheikh; "but he is also dead, and Black Mourad, of Bingol Dagh, took over his slaves and goods and harem. So doubtless the children are still there."

"You seem peculiarly well informed about these scoundrels," said Carlton, with a swift, keen glance. "May I ask who you both are?"

"Men call me the Prophet of Bagdad," said the sheikh, "and this young man is my disciple. We are, as you say, well informed, because it was at our hands those evil men met their punishment; and now, if you will, we shall aid you in your search, and root out this man, Black Mourad also; for I perceive that Allah has sent you across our path to that end."

"I'm much obliged to Allah," said Carlton drily. "Perhaps you can tell us also, where we shall find news of the fate of another Englishman, one Alan Wayward, who, also by the machinations of Claw, was sold into slavery to Idrin Pacha?"

"That also I can tell you," replied the sheikh. "Yet first I would know why ye seek him?"

"Oh, he'll be glad to see us!" said Dawson. "I'm a particular friend of his; and, by a stroke of good fortune, I was able to save his heritage from Claw; and there is thirty thousand pounds in cash and securities now waiting for him at the Ottoman Bank in Trebizond."

"And as to the Eyre children," said Carlton; "their fortune has also been recovered from Claw, and considerable property awaits them in England. So you can give both your information and your aid with a clear conscience."

"Riches are most deceitful," said the sheikh; "and ready money is an idolatrous invention of Sheitan. Moreover, it seemeth strange to me that the young man, Dawson, claims to be a particular friend of Alan Wayward, yet knoweth not where he is."

"Lord alive!" cried Dawson. "One can't keep one's friends under one's arm!"

"You might recognise them, when you see them, Jack," said Alan, speaking for the first time in English.

"Well I'm jiggered!" cried Dawson, when he had finished pump-handling Alan's fist. "I couldn't make out who you resembled, and have been puzzling over you ever since I clapped eye on you. What luck! You'll have to come back, old man, and enter into your own!"

"No fear!" replied Alan. "I'm pledged to be the sheikh's disciple for five years, and I wouldn't go back on the chance of it if you were to offer me all Belgravia."

And he recounted to the astonished friends the circumstances in which the sheikh had saved his life when he was flying from slavery and Idrin; how he had chosen, rather than return to England, to remain and learn wisdom as a disciple of Jelaluddin; and all his adventurous life since.

"And, by Jove, sir," commented Carlton, as the recital was finished, "if I was in your shoes I wouldn't swop your lot for anything!"

"Nor I!" sighed Dawson.

"And we may really count on your aid," said Carlton, "to root out Mourad and find the Eyre children and that rascal Claw?"

"For the first two, yes," said the sheikh; "but for the man Claw, I cannot say."

"Oh, the one will go with the other," said Alan. "Claw will be pretty sure to know that the kids were with Mustapha, and anyone would tell him that Mourad made himself universal legatee to that old scoundrel."

"Then we had better get a move on at once," said Carlton. "Have you any plan, sheikh?"

"The advice is good," assented the sheikh. "For when Allah revealeth his will, Sheitan delayeth not to devise obstacles; wherefore the wise man tarrieth not. We will cross the river by the ferryboat, and go to the village of Gelsor above Mush. There we shall find many Armonians, who have suffered much from the marauding of Mourad. These we will send to the lower passes of the Bingol Dagh. Then, gaining Mush, we will see Felut Pacha, and from him obtain a company of nizams, whom we will lead to the pass beyond Melazgherd. So we will take Mourad by surprise, and utterly exterminate him."

They reached the stream after an hour's march, and found the ferryboat on the point of departure and embarking two Syrians, who had debouched from the woods almost at the same moment as themselves.

"Those chaps look uncommonly like some of the ruffians who pursued us," said Carlton.

"It is very probable that they were left to spy on your movements," said the sheikh calmly. "Coming down the gorge, I twice heard the cry of the screech-owl, and divined that your pursuers had left men in the forests to signal the route ye took."

The boat was of the traditional Noah's Ark type used on the Euphrates—a great flat-bottomed hulk, with the prow almost level with the water, and the stern arched up overhead at a height of twelve feet above the stream, and propelled by a pole the size of a poplar-stem. In consequence of the great rapidity of the current, which raced to the rapids beyond, the prow was furnished also with a windlass, worked by two men, who rove in the rope attached to the far bank.

The Syrians, evidently feeling themselves the subject of comment by Alan's party, who were standing amidship, went forward of the windlass, and, sitting on the prow, toyed with the straining rope.

The sheikh and the Englishmen were gazing up the rugged, narrow gorge, and admiring the bold outline of the cliffs on either hand, when a sudden cry from the men at the windlass, and a low growl from Alan's great wolfhound, Clok, drew their attention forward.

They were just in time to see the men spring at the Syrians, and these last leap into the stream, as the boat swirled violently round, and was sweeping down stream in the grip of the current.

"The scoundrels have cut the rope!" cried Carlton, snatching at his revolver.

"And collared on to it, too," said Dawson. "See, there they go; hauling themselves in, hand over hand!"

Carlton's revolver barked as he spoke. But the target was too jumpy, and the boat beneath his feet too much a-way for his aim to be true. And by the time he had fired his second shot, the Syrians were a good fifty yards away, and the ferry-

boat, despite the frenzied efforts of the boatmen, was being carried faster and faster to the brink of the falls.

"It was a very clever and bold ruse," said the sheikh philosophically, as he surveyed the mist of spume that hung above the falls whither they were hurrying.

He took two great scoops of snuff, packed the box away in a caoutchouc bag, which he bestowed in his jerkin, tightened his sash round his long, green robe, and turned to the boatmen.

"Give thy poles to me and to my disciple," he said. "Your arms and backs are not strong enough for this."

They obeyed unhesitatingly, and looked on in wonder, as the sheikh and Alan, instead of trying to stem the force of the current, set themselves to pole the boat with all their force full tilt towards the fall.

"If we go slow," Jelaluddin explained, in answer to Dawson's look of wonder, "we shall be tossed out under the very fall of the water and ground to pieces in the bottom whirlpool among the rocks. Wherefore we will even shoot from the edge far out into the air. So, with the blessing of Allah, we shall strike the water beyond the lower rapids."

The boat fairly raced beneath their lusty poling, till, as they drew near to the brink, and the thundering roar of the water rose clearer and clearer, the old ark seemed to be fairly skimming like a bird's flight over a stream running backward.

"Hold on, all!" yelled Alan, as, with a final mighty shove, he drove the boat clear of the brink, let go his pole, and flung himself, crouching and clapping, on to the gunwale.

Far out into the air the boat shot, hung in the air the fraction of a second, like some great stricken bird; then, with a clap that sent a dozen columns of water spouting ten feet or more upwards, struck the stream, stern up, five feet beyond the line of the tooth-edged ridge below the falls, and, turning turtle, threw the occupants into the flood.

But they were all old river-hands, and they were at it like terriers on a rag, and in less than five minutes had scrambled on to the flat bottom, and drawn Clok aboard. It was anything but a comfortable ten minutes that followed, for the high stern again and again threw them backwards and forwards, Clok yelping crossly at every jerk, as it bumped against a snag, or, catching on a point, whirled the boat round, till the current tore it away, and waltzed it about again.

Yet it was better than nothing, for swimming was out of the question, since, for a good three miles, the rocks fell sheer into the water on either hand, and there was neither beach nor bush nor ledge the strongest swimmer might hope to gain.

To add to their mortification, they could see the Syrians riding some way behind on the top of the ridges overhanging the right bank, and amusing themselves by heaving an occasional rock in their direction.

"Ho, ho!" cried the sheikh, looking ahead, after half an hour had elapsed. "Be ready to spring, my friends, for we must either land in the Devil's Hammock there below, or be ground to pieces in the rapids to the right!"

They made ready, and looked with anxious eyes as the current swept them towards a low-lying ridge of rocks, that, shaped like a loosely-slung hammock, dipped from their high extremities into a deep depression mid-way.

"We shall bump but once," cried the sheikh, "for the backwash will whirl the boat away, if it does not suck it under!"

Straight down towards the boil of water that seethed against the level lips of the rock the boat drove on, broadside, its stern having now been completely wrenched away.

They were a good six feet from the bump when the sheikh, followed by Alan, jumped, and landed on the rock. Carlton and Dawson were close after them, and as the boat crunched against the rock, the three boatmen leapt, the frail barquo splitting to pieces beneath their spurring feet, and the seething eddies whirling its fragments round and round till they were swept into the rapids beyond the western point.

"We've got into a lively sort of a trap, anyhow!" said Dawson.

"Despise not the gifts of Allah!" growled the sheikh, between two rousing pinches of snuff. "If it has pleased Allah to spare thy miserable life at all, it is that thou mayest praise His bounty!"

"Nice cheerful old pot of tea, that friend of yours!" said Dawson, in English, to Alan.

"He's all right!" said Alan shortly. "When he turns on the tap of the preacher, he's generally got a good wheeze up his sleeve."

"Those sons of iniquity and shame think they have bottled us," said the sheikh, pointing up stream. "Behold the men of Mourad, who are floating rafts down on us. That also is a cunning device, for they are binding the lengths of the logs together, so that they may resist the backwash. Nevertheless, their trouble shall avail them nothing. Follow me!"

He led them across the hammock-shaped rock to the far side of the isle, and, skirting a ledge that hung over a black swirl of water and was overtopped by the razor-edged seams of the cliff forming the eastern end of the rocks, he guided them into a large, natural grotto facing the left bank.

"Behold our way of escape!" he said, pointing to the expanse of smoothly-gliding water. "There is but little current here, for all the force of the water flows to the other side of the island, and here is but a banking up the backwash. Nor is it more than eighty yards to the shore. Go gently, then, into the water, and swim beneath for as far as ye may, so that ye shall not be seen by Mourad's men."

The water was numbingly cold, but they reached the shore without accident, and it was not till they were sprinting up the stony beach that a great shout from the stream warned them that they were seen. But Mourad's men were by then all embarked on the rough logs, and were being rapidly borne down towards the deserted island; and it was only when the joined rafts, held together by stout cords, one end of which a runner had attached at the shore end to a stout tree, had brought up against the island, that the enraged Nubians and Syrians were able to regain the beach by clambering along the rafts, and, from the last of these, along the rope anchoring them. By that time, however, Alan and the sheikh had led the pace to the bridge, half a mile distant, and when the brigands started in pursuit the fugitives were astride the horses they had bought in the village of Kizil Agatch, and were riding hard for Gelsor.

CHAPTER 2.

An Unexpected Predicament.

"YOU don't catch me sleeping in that swarming warren!" said Dawson, with a shudder, as the headman at Gelsor led them hospitably to an ancient stable, dug deep in the earth, and protected by walls which, rising some eight feet from the ground, supported a flat roof, where two or three holes, adorned with drain-pipes, served as chimneys or ventilators.

"Bah! What difference do two or three bugs or fleas make?" said the sheikh contemptuously.

"I might put up with sharing the attentions of two or three," said Dawson; "but I draw the line at squadrons!"

"You must, then, sleep on the roofs," said the sheikh.

"And, in truth, I am myself inclined to find the rock of that abode somewhat over pungent."

So on to the flat roof they climbed, and, wrapped in blankets, slept the sleep of tired men—that is, the sheikh and Alan and Carlton slept, being seasoned to the visitants of the East. But Dawson did not sleep. It seemed to him that the roof was alive with all the fleas in Asia, and he writhed from one spot to another in a perfect nightmare of unrest till, towards midnight, unable to stand it any longer, he jumped to his feet, and made for the edge of the roof, bent on seeking some friendly stream. But he was all unacquainted with the simplicity of structure that distinguished the Gelsor habitations, and at his second step his leg went flying down an open chimney, and, with a wild yell of alarm, he plunged forward, pitching into Alan's stomach, and receiving a startled cuff from that outraged youth that nearly knocked his head off.

But they had no time for explanations, let alone argument, for Dawson's yell had seemed to let loose pandemonium on them, and from each end of the long, straggling street, and from the vineyards and orchards, climbing the hillside southward, yells and shrieks rose in the night, followed by a fierce fusillade, and the sound of many horses galloping.

"By Jove, it's Mourad's lot on a marauding lay!" cried Alan, whom long experience of night travelling had endowed with an almost catlike capacity for seeing in the dark. "Stick close to the sheikh and me, Jack, and you, too, Mr. Carlton! We must bolt for the headman's house in the centre of the village! That's the general place of rendezvous at tea-parties of this kind!"

"Hoo!" granted the sheikh, as he leisurely scooped at his snuff. "I knew something was astir round us, for I dreamt that my snuff was full of flies! Lead on, thou strong-limbed son of vanity!"

Dawson's yell had, indeed, been a timely warning, for Mourad's men, mistaking it for an alarm, had rushed in long before they had intended, and when they were yet five hundred yards from the village. The Armenians had, therefore, time to seize their weapons, and, herding their women and children and cattle in the great compound near the headman's house, prepared to make such a stand as a hundred men may when fighting for their little all against brigands outnumbering them four times over.

And the attack was savage and concentrated. After the first volley, the bandits rushed in with cold steel, feeling sure of their prey, and fearing to fire because of the cattle herded behind the defenders. But the Armenians fought like wounded panthers. Even when a man went down, he

creaked forward, hacking his life out among the legs of the marauders till he was stamped to death. Though the most part of them were armed only with muzzle-loaders, scythes, flails, reaping-hooks, and pitchforks, yet they did terrible execution, and three times drove the robbers back.

"Come on!" said Alan, as Mourad's men reformed for a fourth onslaught.

He touched a hulking Armenian on the shoulder as he spoke, and with the sheikh, Dawson, and Carlton, glided through the defenders, picking out a man here and there, till he mustered a round dozen in all.

"We'll shin up the back of a house," he said, "and sneak along on our stomachs over the roof till we get to the rear of that lot gathering for a charge. When they get home, we'll give 'em a shout, and rustle them up in the rear."

And rustle them they did. Alan had especially selected the men armed with long-pronged pitchforks. Carlton and Dawson had procured short-handled axes; the sheikh was enjoying himself with his staff, and Alan was keeping his battle-axe ahum like a hive of bees. Now, to be taken in the rear unexpectedly and very violently by eight pitchforks, two choppers, a staff like a windmill, and a battle-axe like a mowing-machine is a moving experience for even a well-trained troop, supported by a consciousness of patriotism and duty; to the desperadoes and ruffians who formed Mourad's band it was a devastating experience.

Alan and the sheikh had the moral worth of twenty men apiece, for their great height, the science of their blows, their indomitable energy, and the extreme rapidity with which they jumped to right and left, now charged slashing, and now stood circling their irresistible weapons, made them seem like some giants of legend to friend and foe alike, till the very aspect of Alan's great battle-axe, flashing under the reek of the red flame-tongues that leapt from the fired helves, seemed like an enchanted thing, terrible and invincible.

"The prophet and his devil!" yelled an Arab, as the sheikh and Alan stood back to back in a sudden pause.

And as if the words had been a signal, Mourad's men suddenly scattered and fled, darting in among the houses, and racing for their horses, left tethered among the orchards. Nor was their haste lessened by the sound that came floating down the road to Mush—the sound of the long, steady clatter and jingle of trained cavalry riding at the double.

Mourad's men vanished as by enchantment, fleeing, as was their wont when disturbed, in every direction, to make a common rendezvous later, yet leaving on the ground a good seventy men, killed or hopelessly disabled.

It was five minutes later when two hundred nizams,* with Felut, the Pacha of Mush, at their head, clattered down the long street of blazing ruins, and came to a halt at the head-man's house.

Felut was evidently in a bad temper. The quarrels between Kurds and Armenians in his district had of late secured him one of those strident, rousing letters from Yildiz which bespeak the activity of European consuls in heckling the Padiashah. And Felut hated Armenians as he hated Kurds. As he knew nothing of what had occurred, he exercised the procedure usual to the Turkish official, when in doubt—he went baldheaded for the person nearest to hand.

"Dogs, and sons of dogs," he stormed at the sweating headman, "I find ye at your old tricks—stirring up strife and defying the law!"

"May it please your Excellency—" stuttered the headman.

"No, it mayn't!" howled Felut. "Long enough have I been troubled with you! To prison you shall all go! And the bowstring and the bastinado shall teach you the lesson you need!"

"Art thou here to do justice," said the sheikh, in his grave, ironical voice, as he forced his way to the front and faced the wali, "or art thou here to make an exhibition of a little man's rage?"

For a moment the wali gaped at him, his face purple with resentment and surprise.

"Thou firebrand! Is it thou?" he blurted at last.

"Even so!" said the sheikh placidly, as he flipped a little snuff from his capacious sleeve.

Felut Pacha's eyes roamed over the faces of Alan and Dawson and Carlton, who had ranged themselves alongside the sheikh.

"Ingeliz!" he snorted. "I might have known it! Wherever you find an Ingeliz, you find him stirring up rebellion among these Armenian dogs!"

"Your Excellency will have a jaundice," said Carlton drily, "if he let his bile enter so into the veins of truth! I am Carlton, his British Majesty's Consul at Trobizond, and I have some letters for yourself, and a special recommendation from Yildiz to you to forward my mission in this district."

"Have you?" snapped Felut. "Then I will verify its signatures later. But—"

"But," said Carlton, with a sudden restrained vibration in his tone that made Felut pale, and sit very erect—"but you will apologise at once for that insult, or I will thrash you before your own men, and have you degraded afterwards!"

"I really do apologise! It was unworthy!" said Felut, with a profound bow and that air of turncoat grace that none but a Turk can command at a moment's notice. "But I am so irritated—"

"Then calm thyself, O justice of the Padiashah, and hear the truth!" said the sheikh.

And, despite Felut's furious gesture, the sheikh recounted the tale of the assault and its defeat.

"And I'll testify that's exact," said Carlton.

"Two of Mourad's men, dying, confirm it," said a lieutenant, saluting.

Felut smiled so expansively that the sheikh regarded him with a distinctly suspicious look.

"Hast thou not a proverb that a man may smile and be a villain?" he whispered to Alan, in an aside, audible for ten yards around.

Alan nodded, and looked anxiously at the circle of soldiers, who, on a gesture from Felut, had edged round to envelop the little group.

"Doubtless you have your papers, Mr. Carlton?" said the pacha sweetly.

"Rather!" replied Carlton, and, producing his passport and special letter of introduction, he handed them to Felut, Dawson following his example.

"In perfect order!" purred the pacha, after scanning them under the torchlight. "And you, Jelaluddin, and the young man at thy side, ye have your permits?"

"I? A permit!" shrieked the sheikh. "I, who have wandered from Bagdad to Thibet, and from Mecca to Stambul unquestioned and honoured! I? A permit! Moreover, the young man is my disciple!"

"Alas," purred Felut, "I am only a poor functionary manacled by the laws! I fear ye must come with me and be my guests a little till I am further informed of thee. Lieutenant, an escort of honour! Eight men for the prophet and twelve for his disciple. They may retain their arms, but at the first movement to escape shoot them down! You, offendi, and your companion, Mr. Dawson, are free. I shall be honoured if you will breakfast with me at Mush. Fall in your men, captain, and don't spare the horses!"

Protest was useless. Indeed Felut left no chance for it, but, spurring to the head of his troop, set the pace at a round gallop, which the sheikh and Alan and their friends, supplied with horses, were obliged to follow, raging in silence.

An hour's ride brought them to Mush, perched on the spur of the hills, and gleaming under the first grey touch of dawn. Here, as they clattered into the town, Alan and the sheikh were, without ceremony, serried in between their guards, and hustled quickly forward, Alan shouting to Dawson to look after Clok. The troop dashed into the pacha's courtyard, dismounted before the horses had fairly halted, and hurried the two prisoners across the inner courtyard, and into a room beyond a spacious library, wherein the wali was already seated.

"I trust ye will find your quarters comfortable," he said graciously, as they passed. "Four men to guard that door!" he snapped, as Alan and the sheikh were hustled in and the door was locked on them.

The two faced each other for a long minute after a swift survey of the chamber had assured them that it was very effectually designed against escape. It was innocent of chimney. There was but one window, ten feet from the ground, three feet high by about eight inches wide, and protected by a double grille of iron bars.

"The beast may keep us here for a month," growled Alan.

"It is not that which troubles me," said the sheikh, "for I do not think I shall stay here longer than I wish. But I read some design of far-reaching craft in the eye of Felut, and I would know wherefore he hath had resort to so stupid a ruse. For though he hath the letter of the law in detaining me, yet he knoweth that, as sheikh and prophet, I am free to wander where I will with my disciple, wherefore he called us guests."

"If I get a chance of a smack at him," growled Alan, "he'll remember his hospitality as long as he lives. Didst thou hear that talk of the soldiers on the march?"

"That Hassoim had led the whole fighting force of the Haideranli against the Persians," replied the sheikh. "Yea, I heard it, and was not surprised. For a week ago it was reported that the Persian cats had removed the boundary stones and were encamped on Turkish soil, levying taxes and eating the land. And the Grey Falcon of Ala Dagh is not one to tamely endure such a cuckoo in his nest."

* Regulars.

"I would I had known," said Alan; "we might have ridden with him."

"Not without his invitation," said the sheikh. "Moreover, I wondered that he sent thee no word."

Their conversation was interrupted by the sudden opening of the door as two guards appeared, accompanying a servant who bore a tray laden with food.

Through the open door the vali could be seen talking earnestly to two runners, covered with dust, and evidently just arrived.

"Thou art sure of this?" Felut was saying, his clear, rather pleasant voice distinctly audible to the prisoners.

"Quite sure, Excellency," replied one of the runners. "We picked up their trail at the rendezvous thou didst surmise. A few of the men bore their wounded towards Melazgherd. Four went down towards Kotni, on the road to Bitlis, but Black Mourad himself, with some four or five hundred men, held through the valley, towards Sipan Dagh."

"Moreover," interrupted the other runner, "as I lay behind a rock, I heard two of them saying that since Hassein had gone to the wars, the time was ripe to find his—"

A gesture of Felut's, who had suddenly realised the fact that his prisoners had their ears stretched, silenced the runner, and the next moment the door was shut.

Alan had become very pale, and the sheikh—usually the most philosophical of beings—was evidently much moved, for in his agitation he was strewing snuff over a poached egg with one hand, while with the other he took an agitated, violent sniff at a huge pinch of pepper. When he had finished sneezing and coughing, he shook his head gravely at Alan, who, despite his anxiety, was rocking with laughter.

"This is most grave news," he said, "and renders our immediate departure imperative. Now I perceive the craftiness of Felut and the wickedness of him. For many years there has been feud between him and Hassein, since the chieftain of the Haideranli spurned his suit for the hand of Mirame and mocked him from his gates. Nor is it to be doubted, after what we heard, that Mourad rides to Ala Dagh; for ye will not forget the tale of the prisoners we took when we came to the aid of the Lady Mirame at Mahnudieh, and how they said that Mourad had sworn all his band to destroy Hassein and his daughter, and root out his house."

"I don't forget," said Alan gloomily. "But that won't help us to get out."

"Ho, ho," jeered the sheikh; "thou art easily cast down! Yet a good cause hath broken many locks. Grip tight thy axe, and wait on me. Moreover, take the dish of eggs yonder, and empty thereon all the pepper—so. Not mine, though; that I will reserve for Felut."

He slipped the slithering, snuff-laden poached egg into the hollow of his left hand, and striding to the door beat on it a rousing tattoo with his staff.

"Stand thou ready and move not till I cry 'By Allah,' said the sheikh, as Felut's voice was heard shrilly bidding the guards see what meaning there was in such an infernal racket.

The door was swung back, showing the four guards with drawn swords blocking the entry.

"I would speak with the pacha," said the sheikh, his keen eyes taking in Felut's angry face, and the still angrier faces of Carlton and Dawson.

"I tell your Excellency he is an Englishman, and I answer for him," Carlton was saying.

"Moreover," said Dawson, "we cannot wait. Our horses are waiting saddled in the courtyard, and the horses of our friends also. They must come at once."

"Must to me?" screamed Felut, in sudden anger.

"Must, by Allah!" shrilled the sheikh. And with a deft sweep of his staff to right and left, he caught two of the guards such a smash across the wrists that they dropped their swords and shouted with pain and fury.

At the same moment Alan hurled his dish of poached eggs and piled pepper in the faces of the other two guards, and rapping them right and left on the skulls with the back of his heavy axe, sprang upon them, clasped them in his arms, and throwing them headfirst into the room, turned on the other two and drove them in, too. Then, with a bound, he was on Felut, who, dancing with fury, was striving to clean his eyes of the snuff-laden egg the sheikh had dexterously planted there. And before the outraged vali knew what was happening to him, he found himself pitched into the faces of his guards, who had scrambled to their feet, and the door of his "guest-chamber" shut and locked on him.

"You take the cake!" gasped Carlton. While Dawson, shaking with laughter, held on to the table.

"To saddle—to saddle!" said the sheikh. "Yet without undue haste, lest those children of perdition without be stirred to suspicion."

And so to saddle they went, with calm demeanour and hearts pumping hard, and, followed by many a questioning glance, rode out unmolested and at an easy pace till they gained the road.

"Spur and spare not!" said the sheikh, as the sound of a sudden tumult in the palace they had quitted reached their ears.

And when the soldiers rode out a few minutes later, the sheikh, the best part of a mile ahead, waved his staff ironically, took a great pinch of snuff, and grunted derisively:

"Hoo! Shall a little, purring man like that think to shut up the prophet of Bagdad?"

But Dawson, rocking in his saddle, only gurgled:

"Oh, that poached egg!"



A shout from below caught Sifaz's stunned senses, and, looking down, she saw Mirame, and heard again the proud ring of the words, "I trust thee!"

CHAPTER 3.

Through the Jaws of Death.

IN a room on the first floor of the great caravanserai, a couple of miles northward of Bitlis, Alan and the sheikh were standing face to face; the prophet cold, calm, and commanding, Alan flushed, furious, and near to mutiny.

The party of four had arrived towards sundown, and, riding leisurely down the picturesque cleft where the Bitlis Sea leaps and plunges between the narrow, rocky walls, had stabled their tired horses and themselves retired early to their rooms.

The interior of the inn was unlike anything suggested by the word to an English ear, resembling rather one of the

abodes in which a paternal government lodges the gentry who prey on society. A great courtyard, flagged and cool, filled the centre space, and round it, tier on tier, rose galleries, four feet wide, with iron trellis-work railings on the one side and numbered doors on the other.

Carlton and Dawson, heedless of the sheikh's advice, had taken an after-dinner stroll towards Bitlis, after vainly urging Alan to accompany them.

But Alan was in no mood for "chewing the post-prandial rag." He was fuming with wrath and impatience at the sheikh's resolve to rest the night, for his heart was afire with the thought of the peril in which Mirame, the daughter of Hasein stood; alone with a scant garrison in the castle on the Ala Dagh, while her father, with the full force of the Haideranli, was far away, and Mourad with his ruthless outlaws drawing near. The fever of his discontent had reached boiling point when, an hour after dinner, a runner had brought him in a letter from Hasein, dated five days previously.

The old chieftain's epistle was of characteristic terseness.

"I go against the pole-cats of Persia," he wrote. "See thou no vultures hover too close to the Grey Falcon's chick. "HASEIN."

"I ride to Ala Dagh," had said Alan decisively, when a vain search had revealed the fact that the messenger, after leaving his letter, had sped off on the road to Mush.

"Not yet, my son," the sheikh had replied as decisively.

"And why not?" cried Alan. "To what end tarry here, while Mourad swoops on Hasein's emptied castle?"

"Hoo! The fine heroics!" jeered the sheikh. "Wilt thou go singlehanded against four hundred and gladden the eyes of thy lady with the sight of thy foolhardy death?"

"None the less will I go," Alan retorted, with a stubborn set of the jaw.

The sheikh chuckled gently and had resort to his snuff-box.

"Go thou shalt," he said, "but not forsworn to thy pledged word of obedience to me."

"Then wherefore tarry?" cried Alan passionately.

"He goeth not the fastest who entombs himself with hurry," said the sheikh gently. "Thou, who thinkest thou lovest the Lady Mirame, yet know her not; otherwise, thou hadst more trust in her father's daughter. No puling, fainting maid is she. Nor can Mourad reach the Ala Dagh before to-morrow's dawn. Hast thou not always gained great honour in following my counsel? Follow it, then, now. Let sleep a little while repose thy limbs and cool the fever in thy head. By dawn we must be at the Bingol Dagh, yet the next dawn shall see thee in the hall of Hasein. Wilt thou obey, or wilt thou be forsworn?"

"I will obey," said Alan, with a sudden, frank smile, and a quick outstretching of the hand.

"That is well," said the sheikh gravely, his hand gripping Alan's. "And therein thou growest in wisdom, and in the day of emergency thy head shall be clear and thy eye bright, and thy feet in the way of the path Allah would have thee take."

"I'm staking all on my faith in you," replied Alan, "so I'll take your tip and go to my room for a nap."

"Nay, but take thy sleep here," said the sheikh. "And while thou sleepest for two hours, I and Clok will watch; then thou shalt watch while I sleep."

"Why? Is anything on?" asked Alan.

"I know not," said the sheikh, "but my soul bids me to listen and be vigilant."

"Seems as though that soul of yours had been doing you a jape, sheikh," was Alan's comment, when Jelaluddin roused him two hours later.

But as the prophet only snored in reply, Alan amused himself, after leaving Clok on guard near the door, by leaning out of the windows and looking down on the stables, where, under the flare of innumerable horn lanterns, there was a ceaseless stream of horses and mules, asses, camels, and carts coming and going; the caravanserai being one of the favourite resting-places of the merchants trading from Bagdad and Ispahan to Syria and the Levant.

He had been gazing on the scene for about half an hour, when a mule-cart, piled high with empty fruit-cases, was driven at a gallop into the yard, and, barely avoiding a collision with a camel-train going out, brought up sharply under the window of the room to the right of that at which Alan stood.

"Is it right?"

"Pek ala; couldn't be better!"

"When is it for?"

"Maygar will give the signal. Hoo; thou didst manage well! Behold the face of Maygar at the window! Pile up the boxes, so that they may not see us from the yard."

Alan, listening to the conversation, looked on wondering

as the two men, whose faces were in the dark, began rearranging the boxes, so that presently a great screen rose round the three sides of the cart, high enough to block any view a person in the yard might have of the window on the first floor, below which the cart was halted. Then, in reply to a low whistle, he heard the window at the side open and a whistle in reply.

"Some love intrigue," he murmured to himself, only to suddenly stand very alert as he saw a sack, evidently containing a human body, pushed gently out from the lattice and lowered quickly into the cart.

"Good!" came in a guttural whisper from below. "The other?"

"Drank not his coffee," was the startling reply. "But in his pillow the drug works, and Ivan, with Peter, are even now stealing on him."

"Resc—!" Loud and startling, the wild cry rang through the night, and stopped with an abruptness even more startling and sinister. In the corridor without, doors opened and heads were poked forth, while waiters came running from all directions, demanding whence the cry came.

The sheikh had leapt to his feet before the first echo of the yell died away, and was just in time to see Alan flinging back the door.

"It was Dawson!" shouted Alan, as, followed by Clok, he bolted into the corridor and flung himself against the door on the left.

But the door was locked and solid withal, and resisted his first two efforts. Standing back, he hurled his shoulders at it the third time, and, as it flew open, he bounded staggering into the room, to stand suddenly still, feeling very foolish, before the curious group without; for the room was empty, the lattice was closed, nor was there the slightest sign of any struggle.

Disregarding the protests of mine host, who was chanting the value of his splintered door, Alan hurried back to the sheikh's room. But that, also, was empty. He raced to Carlton's room, to find that empty, too. But there he suddenly halted, and a red flush dyed his cheeks as he realised that, in his dreamy absorption of half an hour ago, it had never once struck him that the window from which the sack had been lowered into the mule-cart was the very window at which he had been gazing. In two bounds he was back in the sheikh's room and leaning out of the window, in time to see the cart, with its team of six mules at full gallop, rocking and swaying through the great archway that gave on to the Mush road; and on the tailboard of the cart the figure of the sheikh, rocking unconcernedly to the jolting of the cart. He caught sight of Alan, as the latter leant through the window, and the abashed disciple had just time to see the ironical smile on the prophet's face, and to catch the beckoning gesture of his staff, before the cart disappeared beyond the gateway.

But if Alan was apt in his more dreamy moments to be slow of intuition, he was remarkably alert and unhesitating in action when an emergency had fairly slapped him in the face. It was a twelve-foot drop from the window to the courtyard, but he lowered himself on the instant, hung for a moment by one hand, while he swung Clok by the collar outwards, and then dropped almost at the feet of an astonished groom, who was walking a splendid horse, ready saddled, up and down the yard.

"Whose is that horse?" asked Alan, seizing the groom by the shoulder with one hand, while his left fastened on the bridle.

"It belongs to Maygar, the Tartar," said the groom, squirming under the grip. "And behold he comes!"

"Then he comes too late," said Alan, measuring the distance as there strode towards them a giant Tartar, in whom Alan at the first glance had recognised the man who had lowered the sack from Carlton's window.

He waited till Maygar was within three paces, then, swinging the howling groom aloft, he dashed him full into the Tartar's face, vaulted across the horse, and was well through the gateway before the enraged Maygar had picked his sore head from the cobbles, where his catapulted groom had thrown him.

"It was the Ingeliz devil who accompanies the Prophet of Bagdad!" said the groom, as he rose.

And Maygar, who had been inclined to make an uproar, grew suddenly silent, and, followed by his groom, stole away along the road to Bitlis.

Nor did Alan entertain any doubt that the Tartar would be far too concerned for his own safety to provoke inquiries by raising an alarm; and, in any case, the mettle of the good horse between his knees made him careless of pursuit.

Far up the winding road of the gorge he could see the mule-cart swinging along, and the driver wielding his long lash mercilessly. He put his horse up the hill, and, calling on it for all it was worth, laughed aloud in his exultation

when, after a quarter of an hour's gallop, he debouched on to the Melazgherd road, not a hundred yards behind the cart, and was greeted by a triumphant wave of the sheikh's staff.

But at the same moment he uttered a yell of warning, for above the piled cases the head of a Nubian had suddenly appeared, followed by a shoulder and an uplifted spear. The sheikh looked up, and squirmed aside just in time to evade the descending blow.

At the same moment he darted upwards his steel-shod staff. Full under the chin it caught the Nubian, driving resistlessly through his mouth and into the brain. Smitten to death, he lurched forward to the jolting of the cart, somersaulted through the air, and, landing clear into the road, dragged the sheikh rolling after him.

"Stay not!" yelled the sheikh, picking himself up, and releasing his weapon, as Alan drew rein at his side. "On, on! Overtake them, and cut the traces of their mules!"

He seized Alan's stirrup-leather, and, with great, loping strides, kept easy pace with the racing horse. Hand over hand they drew on the cart, passed the tailboard, hung level with the front wheel, and with a sudden spurt forged ahead of the great hood.

"Is it thou, Maygar?" called a voice, while a face peered round the hood into the black night.

For all answer, Alan's battle-axe swung hissing through the air an inch from the peering face, and crashed its way clean through the pole. The broken wood, careering amid the legs of the wheel-mules, brought them with a crash to the ground, flinging the two figures beneath the hood into the road, where they lay senseless beneath the flying, splintering cases.

"Secure thou the men," cried the sheikh, "and the mules, while I look to the prisoners!"

To quiet the rearing, frightened mules was easier said than done; and by the time Alan had safely tethered them and turned his attention to the drivers, he found those gentry being lashed together by the sheikh, while Dawson and Carlton, still looking rather dazed, were clamouring for an explanation of what had occurred.

"Ho, ho!" laughed the sheikh. "Fine children ye are to trust abroad! And well it was for you that my spirit warned me to be vigilant. Yet would I first know how ye came so easily to be captured?"

"Faith, I know nothing of it," said Carlton. "On getting back from my walk with Dawson, I had a cup of coffee brought to my room, turned in, and remember nothing more till I woke to the jolting of the cart a few minutes before the spill."

"Drugged!" snapped the sheikh.

"As for me," said Dawson, "I only drank a sip of my coffee, and an hour after I turned in I woke suddenly, to find a huge, yellow-skinned beast of a Tartar half throttling me. I yelled, but he jammed something in my mouth; two other fellows piled on to me, and I was tied up, shoved in a sack, and lowered into that beastly cart. And I never want such another rib-rattling as long as I live."

"Ye are Mourad's men!" snapped the sheikh, turning to his prisoners, who had recovered.

"Even so," replied one.

"Why seeks he those Ingeliz?" asked the sheikh.

"Ransom!" replied the Nubian, with a shrug. "Moreover, he hath an Ingeliz with him who has offered much gold if they are caught, since they are his enemies, and have writings that he desires. Wherefore for three days we have tracked them, and save for thee they were now in the mountains."

"Yet Mourad is not in the Bingol Dagh," said the sheikh.

"Nay, he, with his band, hunts Hassein's daughter," grinned the Nubian, "while the old hawk is away."

"What men hath he left at Bingol?" asked the sheikh.

The two prisoners exchanged glances, and remained silent. The sheikh drew a dagger from his bosom, and pressed its point against the throat of one of them.

"The truth, or death!" he said grimly.

"He hath left but the eunuchs and some wounded," was the sullen reply.

"Hoo! That is good news!" said the sheikh, drawing Alan, with Carlton and Dawson, aside. "Allah delivers them into our hands," he said. "We will take these men up to the mountains, and leave them in secure retreat. Then by a path I know will we surprise Mourad's stronghold, and take all his goods and slaves and harem and prisoners down to Melazgherd. There we will obtain fresh horses and stout men, and, raising the villages as we go, march to the relief of Hassein's daughter on the Ala Dagh."

"Will she be able to hold out that long?" asked Alan gloomily.

"Thou makest my heart tired with the empty braying of thy love-sickness!" growled the sheikh. "The Lady Mirame

is no fledgling of the hedges to be taken in her nest. Moreover, hast thou not heard that a boy and a maid of thy own race lie prisoners with Mourad, and a prey to the greed of the man Claw, who seeks their heritage? Wherefore, swallow thy moans, and do the duty Allah places before thee. So shalt thou have the All-Powerful on thy side, and thy speed shall be as the lightning, and the hour of thy coming as the earthquake."

Under the sheikh's rapid directions, they threw the cart down the precipitous slope southward, lashed a prisoner to each of the wheel-mules, and, mounting three of the others, left the road, and, skirting Melazgherd, crossed the Euphrates by the bridge below that village.

An hour later they had bestowed their prisoners, safely lashed, in a cave in the lower spurs of Bingol Dagh, turned loose the mules, and, led by the sheikh, were toiling up a goat-track that wound round and round the face of a great precipice, above which towered again the snow-clad crater of the central peak.

By an hour after midnight they were standing on the borders of a lower crater, looking down on the lake in the cup-like basin.

"Here," said the sheikh, "we must go warily. Mourad's stronghold lies on a plateau beneath the crest on the other side. We must descend the slope before us, cross by the borders of the lake, and mount the other side. Moreover, we must go quickly, for in the rocks and caves on the right and the left below are very many bears; and it is not good to tarry with the Syrian bear in his winter quarters."

They followed him from rock to rock down the treacherous descent, choosing their footing so that not so much as a stone rolled. Tip-toe and noiseless as ghosts they flitted along the borders of the lake, and reached the ascent to the crest beyond, apparently unobserved by any of the brown blotches that lay to right and left of them.

But here the ascent was slippery with iced lava-stones, and the noise of their progress drew a chorus of disturbed grunts from below, and a sudden shuffling of many padding feet. But they had a good start, and were three-quarters of the way to the top, when half a dozen bears came clawing up behind them.

"Hoo!" shouted the sheikh, suddenly halting half-way over a rock, and, smiting with all his force, lashed his staff over the nose of a great brown bear who had thrust his snout inquiringly forward. Bruin retreated with a snort of rage and surprise, and next moment Alan, leaping to the sheikh's side, had crushed his mighty battle-axe deep into its brain.

"Jove, that was a good stroke!" gasped Carlton, as he scrambled up with Dawson.

"Get a move on!" cried Alan, gripping at the dead bear's great paws. "We'll hurl him down on his pals, for they're climbing uncomfortably quick."

The manoeuvre succeeded, and by the time the raging brutes below had got over their curiosity about their comrade's irruption amongst them, the party had gained the crest, and were hastening in the track of the sheikh's great strides towards a ledge, where the overflow from the lake they had just quitted burst from a tunnel, and shot in a great cascade to a gorge a good thirty feet beneath.

To the left of them the hill ran down steeply through forest and broken rocks. To the right a great pile of precipices towered to the topmost peak of the Bingol Dagh. Alan and the Englishmen viewed the scene with consternation, for behind them four bears were shambling in pursuit, waking the echoes with their short, savage grunts.

The sheikh chuckled at their dismay, and unslung from his shoulders the looped reins of the mules they had left behind, and which, to his companions' amusement, he had insisted on bringing.

"The disciple of wisdom is permitted to correct his errors," he jeered, "but the wise man anticipates his wants."

He strapped the reins together, with a leisurely glance at the approaching bears; then, seizing Clok by the ears, strapped one end first under his chest.

"Thou goest first, faithful one," he said; and, leaning over the ledge, he paid out the rope till Clok found footing on the slippery ground at the base of the rock below.

Then he looped the other end firmly round a great boulder.

"Behold," he said, "the good dog could not climb down with his hind-legs while holding the rope with his fore-paws! But beneath the sheet of the waterfall and between it and the cliff is a good ten feet of space. Moreover, the face of the cliff is very rugged. Wherefore, a man may find easy footing, while his hands steady his descent by the rope."

"Thou and I," he went on, turning to Alan, "will go the last, in case the bears approach too near."

He drove Carlton and Dawson over, despite their protests

and followed himself as they reached the bottom, Alan gliding over the face of the cliff after him, and hanging on to the rocks with one hand, and resting with his feet on a solid ledge eight feet below, and amusing himself by pricking with his battle-axe at the inquiring snouts of the bruisers, whose heads were awaying, baffled and inquisitive, over the mysterious disappearance of their prey. Two minutes later he had swung down the rope, and joined his companions.

"If that's what you call learning wisdom," said Dawson, wiping the sweat from his brow, "I'd sooner be an apprentice to a fool!"

"Thou wouldst need no master!" grunted the sheikh, as he led the way down the gorge. "Behold Mourad's encampment!" he said two minutes later, pausing on a ledge six feet above a broad plateau, spread with tents and roughly-constructed hovels. "Let loose the battle-ory of the Haideranli, my son! We also will take it up. Then, rushing down, we will smite, if any rest to be smitten, for I think that when they hear the cry of Hasein's men fear will grip the vitals of the eunuchs, and, deeming their master beaten, they will flee."

And as Alan bellowed out the "Hi-hoo! Hoo, ha-hai!" and the others took it up till the echoes rocked with it, the sheikh's prediction proved right. Mourad's guards fled for their lives, and as the four leapt down, nothing but the wailing of frightened women and the howls of wounded men begging for mercy greeted them.

"Those are the Eyre children all right," said Dawson, as an hour later they stood round a group of women, and he pointed out a boy of nine and a girl of five. "They're as like their poor father as two pence."

"Then take thou charge of them," said the sheikh. "And thou, Carlton Effendi, take thou charge of the women and slaves, while my disciple and I ride on and guard against surprises."

There was no lack of horses and pack-mules in the caves round Mourad's retreat, and when it had been stripped clean of loot, the train pushed on rapidly after the sheikh, and reached the borders of the Euphrates a few miles above Melazgherd as dawn was breaking.

Here the sheikh called a halt.

"Thou and the effendi," he said to Dawson, "will follow the bank to the bridge at Melazgherd. I and Alan will cross the stream and ride ahead to the town, and send men to meet thee and take possession of the prisoners and loot till we have word of the Bey of Bitlis concerning their disposition. Come, my son!" he added impatiently to Alan. "What regardest thou in the mist on yonder hills?"

"Look, oh, thou of the eagle-eyes!" cried Alan excitedly. "There is a woman there spurring a spent horse, and men pursuing her!"

They all stood, fascinated, watching the scene revealed by a slowly-lifting mist on the cliff which towered forty feet sheer above the opposite bank.

A woman it certainly was, her black hair streaming in the wind, her cloak, in ribands, flapping behind her, and not twenty paces in the rear three Nubians slashing at their horses and straining every nerve to overtake the fugitive.

"Jove," cried Carlton, "is she mad? She'll be over the cliff in a minute!"

And over the cliff she came, lashing her horse to a wild effort up to its very brink, then gathering it up, and leaping wide and far into the gulf beneath, her face thrown wildly back as the waters closed round her, and the pursuers wheeled their horses at the brink and pelted away into the mist.

"It's Sifaze!" gasped Alan, wiping the cold beads of sweat from his forehead.

CHAPTER 4.

The Chick of the Grey Falcon.

SINCE the day on which the stern chieftain of the Haideranli had done grim justice on the band Black Mourad had led into his territory in aid of a plot against the liberty of Alan Wayward and the sheikh, the bandit of the Bingol Dagh had known but the one thought, and lived for but the one idea of planning a vengeance final and irretrievable. Sixty of his best men had fallen to the sword or swung on the gallows, as a result of that foray, and for a month Mourad had wandered far afield, collecting in the bazaars of a hundred towns the riff-raff and scum of a population ever lawless. He had no difficulty in finding recruits, and in the course of his pilgrimage he had drafted on to a place of rendezvous above Changeri a collection of five hundred cut-throats that it would have been difficult to match in all Asia. Tartars, Nubians, Syrians, Druses, all was good fish that came to his net, providing its record was desperately evil.

And as, with the last of his recruits, he had joined the

rendezvous, he had been met by Claw, with a ready provision of gold to further his need of villainous help. For Claw, the once respected solicitor of Lincoln's Inn Fields, had come to the end of his tether. The mask of his respectability had been ruthlessly stripped off, thanks to the efforts of Carlton Effendi and Jack Dawson, who, enlightened by the information sent to them by Alan Wayward, had been able to bring home to the covetous lawyer his embezzlement of the fortunes left in his trust for Eyre and Wayward, and his unforgivable crime of covering his own villainy by selling his victims into slavery in the far East. But warned in time, Claw had fled, bent on finding Eyre's children and Alan, and by removing such inconvenient existences baffling his accusers, and regaining his hold on their property. He had long known, as Alan had divined, that the Eyre children had been held by Mustapha, and it had been easy for him to trace them to Mourad's stronghold. His cold-blooded, far-reaching craft appealed to Mourad, who had promptly fallen in with his plans, and sent out patrols to rope in Carlton and Dawson, of whose presence on his trail Claw was quite aware. And it was while tracking down Claw's pursuers that Mourad had received the information of Hasein's absence, and swooped on the village of Gelsor on his way to Ala Dagh.

It was in vain that the ferret-hearted little solicitor had begged to be left behind. Black Mourad, though willing enough to aid him in any villainy, was far too cutely hospitable to let out of his sight a visitor at once so wily and endowed with such a prospective plumage. He detached his lieutenant Maygar to follow up the tracks of Carlton and Dawson, and taking Claw with his own party, rattled that worthy's ribs in a cross-country ride in a fashion that made him think longingly of the comparative peace of Pentonville.

After their rout at Gelsor, Mourad and his gang had gathered in a gorge north of Mush, and following the banks of the river along the valley land north-east, had swept without drawing bridle as far as the lower spurs where Ala Dagh lunges a reclining limb above the hamlet of Arjish, at the head of Lake Van. Here, at sundown, and at the moment when Alan and the sheikh and their new friends were eating in the caravanserai outside Bitlis, Mourad halted, off-saddled, and fed his troop with the rough fare of dried goat-flesh, washed down by water from snow-fed brooks.

Two hours' breathing they took there, then loped to saddle again, and went winding through the scattered dwarf-oaks, and under great canopies of terebinth, with their clusters of pink berries, into the solemn, hushed avenues of pines that mile after mile guarded the cancelled silence of the Ala Dagh.

The moon was racing in a scud of slatey, coal-edged cloud, and the sheikh was thrusting upward at the jaw of the Nubian in the mule-cart on the Melazgherd road, when Mourad halted his men at the base of the slope on which the high walls of Hasein's castle frowned.

Night birds they all were in Mourad's gang, with the eyes and hearts of wild-cats, and tireless while their prey was unreachd.

The castle faced westward, its great arched gateway giving by a drawbridge on to a gentle slope of some four hundred yards to the valleyland beneath. To right and left an octagonal tower flanked the free sweep of the battlemented eight-foot wall, towering twenty feet above the centre-stone of the arched gateway. On the right, fleeing from the southern tower, a stone wing pushed to the wall of the precipice, which sprang sheer and bluff three hundred feet above the great courtyard. In front of the gate ran a deep ravine, its sides bristling with stakes planted crosswise, its bed, thirty feet below, covered with six feet of water. To the right of this ravine the cliff fell away for fifty yards in a plumb-drop of a hundred feet, but from the brink of this drop, running on to the slope leading from the gateway, all the uneven, broken ground was planted with vineyards and orchards.

The castle was guarded on the north by the impassable, towering peaks of the Ertish Dagh, which seemed like a congeries of serrated penholders piled one on the other from earth to clouds. It was a stronghold the Haideranli had held for generation after generation, and of which they boasted that none but Haideranli, guest or prisoner, had ever planted foot in courtyard or on battlement. Far eastward, indeed, it was impregnable, its back built in a line with the fall of the precipice, two thousand feet into the plain. Its one vulnerable point was the western front, with its great gateway in the centre wall, and its postern-gate in the northern tower; and before these yawned the ravine, a good forty feet wide and thirty feet deep, with its sides a-bristle with the burnt ends of pointed stakes.

On the face of it, it was not an easy place to take by

assault. But Black Mourad had not been captain of the forces of Mustapha, the old slave merchant of Foliat, for many long years on any leasehold of inefficiency. Traitor, blackguard, murderer though he was, he was none the less a captain of parts, boxing in his evil cranium a fairly devilish compendium of artful devices, of tricks and knowing dodges that were worth a dozen trains of artillery against a place unmanured by any batteries. Scaling-ladders, for him, existed in the forest. And two minutes after he had called a halt, fifty men were weaving boughs with creepers and making cunning ropes to negotiate the ravine, and cunning ladders to grapple the walls beyond.

For him, too, a ravine was a thing to be bridged; and pines were plentiful—pines of all lengths, from ten to eighty feet. A squad of his men went off into the needle-shaped ranges of the Ertish Dagh, and hewing down all sorts and sizes of pine-trees, dragged them to the borders of the ravine, laying them, at his discretion, opposite the postern-door in the northern tower. Other squads, too, hacked down the soft trees of the orchard on the right, and, following Mourad's gesture, bore the trunks, with their spreading boughs, opposite the northern tower. For two hours they laboured like demons, covered by the darkness from the eyes of any chance guards. But none observed them. Immunity had rendered vigilance a negligible quantity among the Haideranli. The guards in watch-tower and wall slept on their two ears, and if here and there one roused and cursed the zeal of the castle wood-choppers, none left his bed to look westward and keep watch and ward over a domain that none had dared approach since the Padsichah's troops, two hundred years before, had sought terms beneath their impregnable walls, and signed the treaty recognising the independence of the clan.

The moon, lifting its crescent above the western wall, looked on a work achieved. Mourad's men had justified his choice of them. Before the postern-door in the northern tower eight great pine trunks lay, lashed together, bridging the ravine; and on the far side there rose a tunnel, a hundred yards long, formed of fruit-trees, staged by beams—like a gallery in a coal-mine—and roofed with a network, crossed and recrossed and heaped high, of young boles of fir and larch and poplar. And in the tunnel two hundred men were lined up in two columns, swaying beneath their straining muscles a giant pine-trunk.

Down in the orchard to the left two hundred more, all chosen sharpshooters, lay hid among the undergrowth, taking their sights for the wall above the central gateway, ready to pick off any enfilading firing party. In the ravine itself ten men were swinging over the bristling cheval-de-frise, guided by their ropes, and working their way stubbornly up the other side, along the bridge of ladders they had lurchd across to the ready points.

Black Mourad, standing at the entrance to the tunnel, surveyed the whole scene with an exultant eye, and turned to the shivering London solicitor at his side.

"Thou see'st," he said, "that when Black Mourad puts his nails on to anything, that anything is good as doomed."

"I—I s-see!" chattered Mr. Claw, of the firm of Damit & Claw of Lincoln's Inn Fields. "Al-l-s-so, I s-see a m-man l-loo-k-king at us from the top there," babbled Mr. Claw, whose eyes turned heavenward for aid under the urgency of the hell of fear which was grilling his very marrow had spotted what was hidden from Mourad's gaze of complacency.

Claw's remark was punctuated by a sudden report, and a bullet that ploughed through the flesh of his arm. Next moment Mourad had dragged him back into cover, and the battlements of the lengthy facade were suddenly alive with men. A salvo from the orchards drove the Haideranlis into retreat, and Mourad, grinning, made a sign to the waiting column in the tunnel.

At the slow, with feet beating time, they advanced, the great pine-trunk swinging to the swaying of their arms. Then, little by little, their pace quickened, their arms raised the heavy log higher, their stride broke to the double, and at the double they raced across the log bridge, and hurled their battering-ram against the postern-door. The stout oak splintered like matchwood beneath the shock, leaning half outward from its upper part, and gaping through a ragged fretwork of frayed ends in its lower part.

"Back!" cried Mourad, too late, as a volley rattled among the beam-bearers, and the great log fell to the bridge, while the bearers scuttled back to the shelter of the tunnel. For at the warning shot of the guard whom Claw had seen, the laggard watch-dogs of the Haideranli had sprung to their posts, and into the moonlit yard, regal and beautiful, Mirame had come, her eyes wide with startled awakening, albeit fringed with lids dream-laden. She had mounted the turret above the gate that led to the seven-foot gallery running inside the battlements, and surveyed the scene with a gaze calm and calculating as any old Hasein could have

bestowed. One glance of her woman's eye had sufficed to distinguish for her the well-knit, giant frame of the brigand chief.

"It is Black Mourad!" she said, turning to Fedrov, the captain whom Hasein had left in command of the garrison. She stood motionless amid the hail of bullets poured from the firing-party in the orchards, till Fedrov, risking her wrath, lifted her bodily into shelter.

She ignored his action, facing him with brows knit.

"How many men have we?" she asked.

"Fifty-three, all told," replied Fedrov laconically.

"Let thirty remain here in cover," she said, "and onflad! those men that have bridged the way to the postern-door. Collect thou twenty good swordsmen, and follow me."

She led down the turret steps and across the courtyard, straight to a narrow staircase that ran along the eastern wing, and plunged into the bowels of the earth.

"Thou knowest the way," said Mirame. "Take thy men on to the needle-points of the Ertish Dagh to the top of the steps hewn in the rock. There wait till ye hear my voice. Then charge down, and taking that cunning tunnel of Mourad's in the rear, sweep it clear."

"Farewell!" said Fedrov, as he waved his troop on.

"To our meeting, my friend!" cried Mirame after him, choking back the sob in her throat.

And, in truth, the attack was developing in a way like to make a proud woman hold her throat in hostage to her wit. For Mourad's men had escalated the ravine, and, under cover of the great archway, had hewn through the chains holding the drawbridge. And as Mirame gained the look-out above the wall, it was to see three hundred men swinging battering-rams against the great iron-bound doors, with Mourad himself urging them on, while to her right a hundred men carried on the charge against the postern.

And even as she looked the postern-door toppled crashing, at the same moment as the great gate swung awry before the lunge of the two huge beams converged on its central posts.

"Leave the gate below to care for itself!" commanded Mirame, to the crouching sharpshooters lined before her. "The outside door has jammed against the girth of iron within. And a good half-hour awaits those who would clean the wreck. Concentrate your fire on the bridge-work facing the fortress."

"Hi-hoo! Hoo-ha-hai!"

The raucous shout seemed like an answer to her command as Fedrov and his gallant twenty swept round the angle of the northern tower, and dashed into the tunnel. In the postern but five men, kneeling, held the circular stairway against Mourad's snipers. On the frail, rounded top the bandits were grouped, witless, and hanging back from the deadly guns in front, and the enfilading volleys from the battlement above the gate.

"To cover and volley fire!" yelled Mourad from beneath the central archway. "Riddle the staircase, then charge!"

But even as he spoke, Fedrov and his band swept like an avalanche through the tunnel, wielding the terrible, long, two-handed sword dear to the mountaineers. The herd on the bridge went under beneath the shock like cattle slain by lightning, vanishing, legs upmost, into the ravine below. Of Mourad's hundred that had stood on that bridge, not one remained, as Fedrov, reeking blood from a dozen gashes, led his veterans into the postern, and built up and stayed the door with rocks and timber torn from the inner walls, and iron cast down from the torn stairway, as they wrecked it on their course upward, and swept triumphant into the yard.

"Hoo, lady!" chanted Fedrov. "It is done; and I greet thee!"

"And I thee!" sighed Mirame, as he pitched dead on his face, and rolled into a patch of moonlight; and she knelt and laid her lips on his grey brow. "Write Fedrov senior captain of the Haideranli for ever!" she cried, as she sprang erect, and dashed the tears from her angry eyes. "Get hence, ye dogs of war! Fetch me to the battlements two barrels of gunpowder, and make good speed."

The great iron grille that rose ten feet behind the wrecked oak of the doors was creaking and groaning to the blows of the ram as Mourad's men, retreating by the drawbridge, advanced again and again at the men. Mirame clenched her pearly teeth, raging in impatience, and lamenting the proud frieze of sculptured work that, overhanging the archway, shielded the invaders.

"What doest thou, lady?" asked an old, grizzled captain, as half a dozen men climbed up with two small barrels of gunpowder; and Mirame, with kindled torch, hung herself on the meshes that trailed from the closed bungaloes.

"I destroy the bridge!" she cried; "for without a run they may batter for days and never break the gate. Hurl!" she commanded, as the meshes fizzled nearer and nearer the terrible powder. "Hurl true and straight, dogs of Hasein!"

Straight and true the men hurled their flaming brands on to the wide bridge beneath; and almost before the casks touched, the spout of flame and the roar of the explosion blasted the men of Mourad from the bridge, and sent the wooden structure hurling into the ravine below. Yet, in her fury, Mirame had lacked the measure of the moment. And though the bridge was wrecked, but few of Mourad's men went down with it, the most of them being gathered on the platform under the great archway. And Black Mourad himself had been using his eye, and, accustomed now to the darkness, had followed with his sight the coping at the base of the castle walls—a coping broad enough for a man to walk on, and leading past the southern tower, to mount zig-zagging in a track fit for goats up the western face of the precipice overhanging the castle.

With a gesture he pointed out the path to his men, and, thrusting Claw before him, took the perilous path, followed by two hundred of his desperadoes.

"Ah, how Sheitan aids them!" cried Mirame, conning their movements. "If they gain the heights, who shall save us now?"

"Even I, O lady of my lord Alan!" said a soft voice at her side; and, turning, Mirame looked into the glowing, unfathomable eyes of Sifaze, the sister of Selim and Abdullah, who had sought her service when Hamilton of Van led Mrs. Adair as bride to Europe.

"How thou?" snapped Mirame, frowning at her forwardness.

"Be not angry," said Sifaze. "Hast thou not shown me the tunnel inside the face of the precipice, and the dizzy path that zig-zags on the lips of the cliff up to the top? Let me now go. I will glide through the sentinels, and, seizing a horse, will ride to my lord Alan, and bring him hither."

"Thy lord Alan, girl!" cried Mirame, a scarlet spot on either cheek. "Get thee to the kitchen!"

"The maid speaks well!" growled a captain at her side. "Let her go. Is not the lord Alan captain of the Haideranlis? Let her go! What is woman's spite to Hassan's honour?"

"I am rightly corrected!" said Mirame, with a sudden consciousness that brought the grizzled old veteran to his eyes, bowing over her garment's hem.

She took a chain of gold, clustered with cunning work in pearls, from her neck, and threw it over the neck of Sifaze.

"Go, my sister!" she said; "and Allah guard thee!"

CHAPTER 5.

The Temptation of Sifaze.

ACCOMPANIED only by Mirame, the Bokharian girl traversed the wide courtyard, to the angle in the south-eastern corner, and at a gesture from Hassan's daughter, halted before a low iron doorway.

Mirame took a key from her girdle and passed it to the girl.

"My woman's heart mistrusts thee," she said, with disconcerting directness, "for I have seen that thy eyes turn after my lord Alan. Yet lo, here is the key of the way into our citadel. If thou failest me, I shall surely die. I give thee my trust. Lock the door behind thee. I await thy return."

She turned the key in the lock as she spoke, drew open the door, and passed the key to Sifaze.

Above them loomed a dark way, silhouetted with steps that seemed to hang down from the bowels of the cliff. Sifaze shuddered, and clung a moment to Mirame's outstretched hand.

Then, next moment, she was gone, the door was shut and locked, and Mirame realised, too late, that she had cut off at least one line of retreat.

"It is Kismet!" she cried, her pale face staring blankly at the stars. "Ay, and anyhow, I am glad, for the girl is beautiful beyond the ordinary beauty of women. And if my lord prefer her, he may make his betrothal round the pyre of Hassan's house and his perjured faith."

And furiously jealous, yet serene of countenance, Mirame regained the battlements and her vigilant guards.

Meanwhile, in the inky darkness, Sifaze wound her way upwards, beating off the nauseous flight of startled bats, till, after a hundred and fifty counted steps, she came to a tiny ledge in the open, beneath the stars. Along this she passed, the treacherous moonlight inviting in vain her sure footsteps. For true daughter of the mountains, eye and foot and all her supple body worked in as perfect rhythm, unconscious of its grace, as any old grey father of goats that ever browsed on dizzy brinks. Up and up, zig-zagging by barely perceptible ledges, she wound her way, till a great cavern yawned before her. Into this, faithful to her instructions, she plunged, traversed its length, and, sinking to hands and

knees, crept along a short tunnel, till she came to a group of close-planted shrubs, through which the starlight glinted.

Gliding, softly as any snake, she pushed her way through to the plateau. Below her, she could see the courtyard of the castle, and its defenders outlined in the moonlight. To her left the cliffs dived two thousand feet plainwards. To the right was the perilous descent leading to the ravine before the castle. Her way was frontwards, where the shoulder of the peak lunged sloping into gorges like great limbs, whose feet splayed like a bird's claw into the valley beneath.

She crept forward warily, breathing in in large gasps the crisp freshness of the air, and feeling the mountain like a padded live thing, a spring beneath her sandalled feet. But she had not gone four paces, when a vice-like grip seized her by the ankle, and, with a scream, she pitched forward into the brawny arms of Black Mourad.

"A pigeon from the hawk's nest!" muttered Mourad, as, with one hand on her slender, throbbing throat, he lifted her face into the light of the moon, and chuckled evilly over the recognition.

"Sifaze!" he jeered. "Sister to Selim of Kasim's dispersed band!"

"Then hands off!" growled in chorus four stalwart rogues at his back, and emphasised their remarks by a powerful twist that laid the Ethiopian on his back, and left Sifaze free to regain her feet.

In a second Black Mourad, speechless with rage, was afoot again, and, with pistols levelled, was facing the rescuers of Sifaze.

"Thou art overmatched, chief," said one of them coolly, conscious of the four gleaming barrels covering Mourad's chest. "We, all four, are Bokharians, sworn brothers to Selim. The girl is sacred."

Mourad lowered the pistols and laughed.

"Ye are fools!" he sneered. "No girl is sacred when she is the means to an end. Yet, have thy way now. Nevertheless, sacred or not sacred, she must show us the way by which she came hither."

"And she will," said the leader of the Bokharians.

"Hearken, sister of Selim!" he went on, turning to Sifaze. "Thou art safe with us. But we have business to settle with Hassan's chick down there. Show us, then, the road. Moreover, a word in thy ear." He drew the girl aside, and whispered low to her: "Alan, the Ingeliz, who thy brother Abdullah loves, is riding here. Abdullah tells me thou lovest that Ingeliz devil. That is thy affair. But if the Lady Mirame down below there be taken to Mourad's nest, the heart of him thou lovest shall be free to turn to thee. Wherefore show us the way."

The man, while speaking, had drawn Sifaze to the brink of the precipice overlooking the courtyard of the castle. Beneath the subtle, strong, temptation of his words Sifaze rocked like a reed in the swirl of a cataract. In her savage way she worshipped the young Ingeliz giant, and her eyes swam in vague wild dreams, tossed on the tempest the tempter had stirred in her. To right and left she looked, and saw only the creeping forms of Mourad's men slinking up to the growing circle round their chief. Then a shout from below caught her stunned senses, and, looking down, she saw Mirame outlined against the sky, looking upward, and heard again the proud ring of the words "I trust thee!"

"Lean thy head near to me," she whispered, her black eyes glowing with a strange, sudden fire.

The tempter obeyed. And on the instant Sifaze fastened her hands in his thick hair and slung him clean over the cliff.

"Hi-hoo! Hoo-ha-hai!" she shrielled, standing like a carved statue on the brink, above the upstaring faces far below. "Mourad's men are above thee! Guard!"

Then, swift as an antelope, she leapt from the sudden rush that hurled towards her, and darted through the trees, having in either hand a dagger plucked from her girdle. Again and again black hands clutched at her as she sped through the shadowed aisles of the trees, black hands that shredded her raiment to ribands, and fell away to wolf-like howls as her daggers slashed through their clasping fingers. No man nor maid in Asia could catch Sifaze with a yard start. Down the steep slope of the hill she bounded from rock to rock, from leap to leap, mocking the moonlight, heedless of risk, sure-footed as a goat. The pursuit grew into a murmur behind her, and as she reached the gut of the plain, where Mourad's horse-guard drowsed around their charges, she laughed softly and freely in her soul, as, slipping in and out between the horses, she selected one built for speed and staying, and shook off the last slime of the tempting Bokharian's words.

She was aback and away before the straggling pursuit had awakened the guard, and sent half a dozen men on her tracks. But she rode free as a bird, and saw the lower slopes of the Erlish Dagh drift past her into the following moonlight. The snow peaks of the Sipan Dagh seemed to bend over her as, looking back, she counted but three

pursuers on her trail, and noted another troop riding hard along the lower ridge to head her off from the road to Arjish, with its fork that led to Van or Bitlis and certain aid.

"To Melazgherd—Mel-mel-melazgherd!" The hoofs of her horse beat out the rhythm of the word, and she urged the tireless animal on, riding as one rocked in a dream of inevitable doing, till the mists of morning grew around her, and her horse, stumbling from the beaten track, breasted unknown hills, and drifted out of the mist on to the brink above the Euphrates, and behind her was the clamour of the pursuit, and before her the face of Alan on the further bank, with an unknown drop into the torrent beneath.

But the faith of Mirame was on her like a mantle of fire, and she lashed on the stupefied horse, spurring it with bared dagger-point, to its last leap into the flood.

And as she sank beneath the waters, Alan's cry, "It's Sifaze!" rang in her ears, and for one second she had the vision of him leaping towards her. Then the white waters washed nothingness over her brain, till she awoke to find herself lying on the ground, with her head on the dripping knee of Alan, and the sheikh and two strange Ingeliz men looking down on her with eyes full of admiration.

She struggled to her feet, rosy red in the consciousness of her torn attire, and her hair astream.

The sheikh nodded at her approvingly, and flung around her a silk shawl his provision had secured from one of the whining ladies of the harem.

"Hoo!" he said. "Thou art a worthy child. Drink of this scoured fire-water of the effendi, that the devil in thee, being satisfied, may depart." And he handed her the brandy-flask that Carlton had silently proffered.

Sifaze drank and coughed, and suddenly became shy. "Get ye gone," snarled the sheikh at the Englishmen, "ye good-for-nothing, long-limbed sons of nothingness! Let the maid talk to me in peace!"

"Nay, but my message is to my lord Alan," said Sifaze, with a pertness that discounted the sheikh's paternal attitude quite convincingly, and sent Carlton and Dawson into a rocking fit of laughter.

"Thou art a child of vanity," said the sheikh, taking refuge in his snuffbox, but keeping a cocked ear all the same.

"My Lady Mirame," said Sifaze "is hard set by Mourad's men. They have broken in the postern gate. The great gate hangs by a hinge. They have also gained the cliff above. Ye are to ride to her aid. And I will show thee, my lord, the surest way into the castle."

"Boot and saddle!" said Alan shortly, swinging on his heel and running to his horse.

For a moment the sheikh stood musing. "Inshallah!" (As Allah pleases) he murmured. "The youth must ride!"

"Ho!" he called, halting Alan, who, astride the great roan he had borrowed from Meygar, was leading one of Mourad's clean-limbed Arab mares for Sifaze. "Forget not that hurry is not speed. Ride thou on, my son, with this maid, and strengthen the hand of Mirame. I go to raise the villages, and lead them an hour or two after thee."

Alan nodded, reached down, caught Sifaze's hand, and swung her to the saddle, then headed his horse downstream towards the bridge that gave on to the valley road to Ala Dagh.

Beneath the great height of Ala Dagh's frowning ridge the sun had scarcely warmed the morning mist when Alan and Sifaze rolled, rather than dismounted, from their tottering horses. Sifaze had been careful to warn her cavalier that the orchards to the west of the castle were lined with scouts and sharpshooters. And they had halted in the gorge to the southward, down which Sifaze had escaped.

Hill-woman and runaway slave though she was, even Sifaze blinked in amazement at the way Alan wormed his huge bulk up the hill, stealthily and noiseless as a tiger. Half a dozen times they passed within arms-length of whispering videttes, till they gained the angle made by the base of the southern tower and the precipice to the right, and Sifaze showed the way by which Mourad's men had mounted.

"We will follow their tracks," said Alan, "for they will never dream that any could pass their sentinels below, unheard and unchallenged."

The daylight struggled but feebly with the white cloud of blankety mist that canopied the mountain ridge, and it was impossible for some time to see what Mourad's men were doing, though their presence was audible enough. Sifaze's hand closed warningly on Alan's as, leading him along the brink of the precipice, she paused beside a great blasted pine. Through the mist they could just distinguish the forms of many men lying in a wide half circle between them and the point Sifaze indicated, the most part of them engaged in weaving rope-ladders. From the other side of the tree Claw's voice suddenly rose:

"But they will see us climbing down, and shoot us like rats in a trap!"

"Not in this mist," said Mourad. "In half an hour we shall be on them, and thou shalt see a looting and a—"

The words died in his throat as Alan's right hand closed like a vice round his gizzard, while his left seized the half-throttled Claw, and he brought the two scoundrel's heads together with a crack that effectually stunned them, and flung them, face foremost into the midst of the encircling troop. Then, taking advantage of the tumult, he swung his battle-axe, and dashed through the startled brigands, to vanish with Sifaze in a screen of larches. "It was in vain that Mourad's men ran to and fro, beating the bush on every side, for the mist lay like a mantle before the mouth of the cavern that ran through the ridge to the face of the bluff overlooking the courtyard of Hassein.

It was a perilous descent, and they gained the refuge of the tunnel only just in time, for Mourad, guessing that they had fled by some secret way down the face of the cliff, spread his men along the brink and hurled down stones on them, and Greek fire, whose sudden blinding glare would inevitably have exposed them to a rattling volley of bullets.

But though the tunnelled stairway shielded them during the rest of the descent, by the time they had reached the courtyard they found that the explosion of the fireballs had dispersed the fog, and it was through a veritable hail of rocks and bullets that the two bolted across the open space to the shelter of the great hall that formed the northern side of the castle.

The doors flew open before them, and Mirame, standing forward from the ring of her veterans, stretched out glad hands of welcome.

CHAPTER 6.

At Bay.

AFTER the first greetings were over, it was with something like consternation that Alan looked round the little band of defenders, who, powder-blackened and bloodstained, numbered now barely twenty.

"They are all that are left," said Mirame. "When Mourad's men gained the ridge, half my men fell, for the mist had not then fallen, and as Sifaze shouted to us her warning, the brigands fired at us as we stood exposed on the battlements above the gate. And now I fear that thou hast come but to die with us, my lord Alan."

"I'll take a lot of killing," said Alan grimly. "Yet there is no use denying that the situation is serious. Mourad's men make ladders to descend the cliff, and though we may pick off a few, his rifles will command too well the windows here for our riflemen to show themselves, and if he lands his two hundred men and rushes us, I see not how we may hope to stand him off till the sheikh arrive with his villagers."

"The sheikh then bringeth aid!" cried Mirame. "It is for that he stayed," replied Alan. "He raises the villages, and will be here in half an hour."

"Then," said Mirame, "we will yet baffle those men of Mourad. Thou seest," she went on to Alan, "how the flagged courtyard is runken two feet below the level of the steps that lead to the gate, and how at intervals in the cliff opposite are small sluices, designed to carry off the rain-water? In the great barn to the left there a thousand barrels of oil are stored. Let now two men brave the fusillade from above, and, taking cotton-waste, stop the sluices, while another two gain the barn, and empty the oil-casks into the yard. So when Mourad's men come, we will throw fire on to the oil, and all the courtyard shall be a lake of flame, and Mourad's men shall perish."

"And thy castle also," said Alan grimly. "Yet it is good advice, if the worst come to the worst, and Jelaluddin arrive not in time. Nevertheless, I would counsel thee to keep it in hand till the issue be desperate. And, meanwhile, we will heap timber soaked in oil beneath the face of the cliff, so when Mourad's men are well on the way down their many ladders we will light the bonfires beneath them, and they shall perish."

"Hoo! A wise counsel indeed!" grunted a chorus of clansmen.

"Then follow me!" cried Alan, and with a bound he dashed into the yard and gained the storehouses of dried timber that were hewn in the base of the cliff, down the face of which a score of ladders were now hanging, black with descending bandits. A dozen of the Haidaranli had followed him, and in a few seconds great piles of brushwood and logs were laid along the cliff's base, and a cask of oil tapped and emptied over the heaps.

The bulging of the cliff hid the manoeuvre from those above, and it was not till the invaders were within twelve feet, that at a word from Alan a man ran along with a blazing torch and put a light to the pyres. With a crackle like a volley of musketry the fire ran through the rotten

brushwood, caught the logs, and a great sheet of roaring flame leapt upwards licking the shrieking men from the awaying, parting ropes like shrivelled flies. It was a grim holocaust, and a good hundred of Mourad's men fell backward, howling to be calmed in the roaring furnace beneath.

But the rest, warned in time, swarmed back to the cliff above, save Mourad, who had gained by chance the little plateau where debouched the tunnel leading into the courtyard. His yell of triumph drew his infuriated followers swarming to his side, and, like a pack of wolves they swarmed down the tunnel and hurled themselves on the locked door beneath.

The yell, however, had been heard by the defenders as well, and while they regained the hall, Alan and two men raced to the barn, and backed in cask after cask of the oil, till a veritable river of yellow petroleum poured into the yard and spread from wall to wall, creeping every moment nearer the burning timber.

"Roll out the other barrels!" cried Alan. "Heave them out anyhow. They will catch soon enough! Quick, or we shall never gain the hall."

They tossed the remainder of the barrels into the yard, and dashed across to the hall, as Mourad and his men crashed down the door of the tunnel, and burst into the court.

"Forward! Forward!" yelled Mourad, urging his men on, no inkling reaching his mind of the significance of the oily lake spreading about their rushing feet.

A hundred and fifty men howled exultantly to his command, and, pouring across the courtyard, heedless of the steady volleys fired from the windows, threw themselves against the great iron gate that closed the hall, while Mourad, Claw, and some forty others sprang to the western battlement, and directed a withering fire on the defenders of the windows.

But the majority had hardly reached the door, when the spreading oil touched the blazing logs beneath the cliff, and in the twinkling of an eye the courtyard was changed to a livid, seething lake of flame. In vain the shrieking invaders flung themselves up the steps under the archway to the gate, or fled screaming to the battlements. Their woollen garments had soaked up the oil as they had made their first charge through it, and at the first touch of the flame, they had one and all been transferred into living torches. Mirame's face blanched as she shrank back moaning from the dread delirium of the sight. In a minute it was all over, as man after man writhed back unconscious into the lake, and barrel after barrel exploded and roared into flame above their calcining corpses.

On the battlements Claw was leaning deathly sick, and Mourad and his forty survivors, staring at each other with livid faces and jabbering, inarticulate words, stood stupefied and aghast. For twenty minutes the lake burnt, till the wad that stopped the sluices caught fire, and the oil was sucked down into the bowels of the earth.

Meanwhile, the defenders had paid dearly for their victory, and but ten Haideranli stood with Alan to defend Mirame and the honour of Hassen's home, and still no sound of the sheikh's coming arose to cheer their heart. Yet their straits were growing perilous. Mourad, stunned for the moment by the awful disaster that had swallowed up his band, was as one mad and drunk with the lust of vengeance. Signalling to the fifty sharpshooters he had left in the orchards to cross the ravine, he led his men along the battlements, and on to the flat roof of the hall, where they tore and tugged at the great sheets of lead and heavy slabs of stone, striving to win a way in.

In obedience to his signal, the orchard sharpshooters had swarmed down the ravine and up the other side, and were now thundering at the already started bolts and chains that held the great trellis guarding the central doorway.

"If that lot get in," said Alan, "we are doomed. Has Hassen a store of gunpowder?"

"A hundred barrels lie in the attic beneath the roof," said Mirame.

"Good!" said Alan. "If these dogs of Mourad's succeed in breaking through the roof, as they seem likely to do, we shall have at least the wherewithal to send them skyward. And meanwhile, I will prepare a surprise for those scoundrels hammering at the gate.

Taking two men with him, he made his way to the attic, running above the hall, and in a few minutes reappeared, each man bearing a cask of the powder on either shoulder.

The western angle of the great hall was screened by a flying wing of masonry that ran out to within a foot of the central gateway, giving opportunity to defenders to enfilade any rush that a body of invaders might make, once the gate had been gained. Along this Alan and his two men crept, keeping well under cover of the sloping lean-to that protected the inner side of the wing.

"Knock a stave out of one of the barrels," said Alan, "and roll it slowly down to the gate. Then roll the other

four after it, and bear me this barrel back fifty paces, and wait for me."

He waited till they had retired fifty paces, then, bending down, he struck a match, applied it to the train of black powder left by the rolling cask, and fled back.

The sparkling trail ran crackling along with the speed of lightning, and as Alan was half-way to his companions, the roar of the exploding gunpowder sent him hurling to the ground. But he picked himself up, and, with a bound, had seized the other barrel, in which he had already inserted an inch mesh of cotton-waste soaked in saltpetre. Then he ran forward toward the gate, and surveyed the havoc wrought, from the shelter of the protruding wing.

The force of the explosion had blown the iron-trellis-work outward, sweeping half of the sharpshooters into the gulf. But a good thirty of them, warned by the snakey line of powder, had fled in time along the abutting ledges, and returning, infuriated and sure now of entrance, were massed under the ruined archway of the gate.

Alan lit the mesh, and blew it to a flame.

Then, as the thirty, with a wild yell, clambered over the ruined doorway, he stepped forward, and, lifting the barrel high above his head, waited, a grim smile on his face, watching the steady progress of the burning mesh.

The men in the gateway paused, and with terrified howls, flung themselves backward on the urging throng in the rear. But the twisted iron and splintered woodwork tripped them up, and the others, pressing on, fell over them, till in a moment they formed a writhing, howling tangle of arms and legs, each man fighting like a wild beast to crawl over his neighbour into safety.

Then Alan, leaning back, flung the barrel through the air. The mesh, flaming to the sudden draught, caught the powder as the cask fell among the writhing, cursing crowd in the archway. With a roar and a spurt of flame, the dreadful missile swept among the doomed crowd, and the archway, already shaken by the first explosion, rocked and awayed, and, bending inwards, crashed down on the debris of the slain and flying, burying all beneath its huge stones.

At the same moment, from the top of the ridge overlooking the courtyard, a great ringing shout of the Haideranli warcry wakened the echoes, and the defenders, looking up, saw the tall figure of the sheikh, waving his staff, and pointing to the roof. A hundred rifles cracked before the echoes of the cry had died away. But they were a minute too late.

Mourad's men had already gained the shelter of the space that lay between the rafters and the roofing. But as they hacked at the lathwork ceiling, and hewed a great hole, they paused, gasping. For beneath them stood Alan, a burning torch in his hand, and at his feet a trail of powder, leading to a great row of barrels piled on barrels.

"Back!" yelled Mourad. "To the battlements and flee!"

Claw, whom the bandit had driven before him from point to point, was already clambering to the roof, and Mourad followed him, kicking back the man who was dragging in terror at his hanging legs. Gaining the roof, the two slid forward and dropped to the coping of the battlement. Nor were they any too soon. For the bandits on the roof, seeing that they had no time to escape, had leapt through on to the barrels in a wild dash on Alan, who, surprised by the movement, and knowing that once they gained the interior, there would be for Mirame time neither for escape nor for rescue, flung his blazing torch along the trail of gunpowder towards the leaking barrel, and with a prodigious bound, cleared the whole flight of the stairway, and, with outstretched arms, swept Mirame and the guards from the entrance where they stood into the courtyard.

"Fly!" he yelled; and, seizing Mirame's hand, raced across the courtyard as the hall behind them rocked and tottered, and the roof went skyward in a roar of thunder and a fountain of splashing flames.

They gained the shelter of the tunnel only just in time to avoid the hail of debris that scattered into the courtyard, and Mirame looked on aghast as the rain of flaming beams fell on the adjoining roofs of the barns and barrels, and the whole of her homestead spouted into flame.

She swayed for a moment against Alan's shoulder, faint and exhausted by her long vigil, and overcame by the ruin of this home that had defied so many sieges.

"Hoo! Greeting, Princess of the Haideranli!" said the voice of Jelaluddin, at her side.

The sheikh, to whom the way of the tunnel had long been known, had descended, followed by his men; but all too late to avert the devastation of the fire.

"Thou art welcome!" said Mirame, a little coldly. "Yet I would thou hadst been able to arrive somewhat earlier."

"A man may but do his best," said the sheikh, quite unruflled. "The house of Hassen is not built of stone, but of the life and honour of his daughter. And by my staff, I never more admired thee than now, that thou hast shown thyself so true and dauntless a child of that old hawk, thy

father. Nevertheless, though thou hast destroyed the band of Mourad, yet the bandit himself, and the Ingeliz that was with him, escaped the explosion, and fled by the ravine, and even now have gained horse, and ride for the Bingol Dagh."

"He's sure to make a bee-line for his old haunt," said Alan. "And as we have already cleared that out for him, we shall take him on the hop, as he is tearing his hair over his deserted tents and vanished loot."

"I care not," said Mirame frigidly, "what ye have done with his chattels and his women. But never will I look on my father's face, and tell him that the man still lives whose raid has caused the burning and destruction of his home. He is old, and he loves the stones he knows. Nor know I how I shall bear to him the news of this day's work."

"Let us first get to horse," said the sheikh. "Mourad has already a long start."

"Thou ridest not with us," said Alan, as Mirame swung into the saddle, and led the way to the masked door the grooms were hastily unbarring.

"I ride with thee," said Mirame quietly, with a level glance that drew a suppressed chuckle from the sheikh.

"Nay, but—" began Alan, expostulating. But Mirame cut him short, turning on him with flashing eyes and face suddenly flushed.

"If my servant-maid Sifaze could ride with thee, shall I yield her place?" she said, in a tone that so scantily veiled the cold anger of a jealous heart, that Alan instantly subsided, and bowed his head in submissive assent.

Next minute they had quitted the subterranean gloom, and had swept out into the glare of the April sunlight.

"Hoo!" chanted the sheikh, waving his staff towards the far spurs of the lower Sipan Dagh, where two specks seemed to be crawling against the skyline. "Hoo! Hoo! Now for a hunt indeed!"

And like arrows from the bow, the three leapt away, while a rousing cheer from the heights above, thundered out, hailing their flight, and its object divined.

CHAPTER 7.

For the Honour of Hassein.

A STERN chase is proverbially a long one. And despite the splendid mounts they had, Mirame and her cavaliers might well have lost their quarry, had the star of Mourad not fought against his flight. For a time, indeed, it had seemed as if all the efforts of the pursuers could do no more than decrease by the first half-mile's spurt, the half an hour's lead the fugitives had. For Mourad had collected his horses from the best stables a hundred miles around, and when he had perceived that riders were on his track, he had not spared the sturdy beast he was bestriding. The Sipan Dagh lay well behind them, and they were racing hard for the gleaming waters of the Euphrates, when Claw, jerking his mount at a fallen tree, brought its knee on to the obstacle, and it fell, breaking its neck, and pitching Claw himself fairly on to the back of Mourad. Splendid horseman though he was, the unexpected shock drove Mourad reeling from the saddle, and his horse, neighing in terror, stampeded down a gorge.

Purple with wrath, and babbling incoherent blasphemies, the bandit fell on the unhappy cause of the disaster, and the ex-solicitor of Lincoln's Inn Fields received a punching such as he had never dreamed the mortal frame could survive. But he survived it none the less, and though he felt more dead than alive, as Mourad urged him on afoot towards the river, a glance to the rear, where the pursuit had gained a good mile and a half, rendered the prodding of the infuriated bandit's scimitar an altogether superfluous incentive to speed. By the time they had dashed through the shallow ford, and climbed the rocks on the further bank, the pursuit was within a quarter of a mile.

But Mourad little knew the calibre of his pursuers, nor the patient spirit of vengeance that was bracing their muscles. He had not gone two hundred yards before Alan, bearing Mirame in his arms across the river—all three had now relinquished their horses—had gained the further bank, a yard after the sheikh, and putting Mirame ashore, had lugged Clak up the steep bank.

Lightfooted and tireless as an antelope, Mirame ran on, keeping easy pace with the swift leaping strides of Alan and the sheikh, and laughingly disdainful her lover's proffered hand. By the time the fugitives had gained the lower slopes of the Bingol Dagh, the avengers of Hassein's ruined home had decreased the distance between them by sixty yards.

Up the wooded gorges sped Mourad and Claw, now grey with the terror of the recognition one glance at Alan had sufficed to give.

And up after them raced the pursuers, gaining an inch or

two in every yard, silent, tireless, and dogging as the pitiless glare of the midday sun.

From a trot, the pace of pursued and pursuers dropped to a quick walk, and then to a toiling, laboured, broken stride, as the ground became rougher and rougher, and hands had to help feet in surmounting boulders, or dropping to a lower ledge. For an hour they plodded on, till not a hundred yards separated the two parties.

"Behold," said the sheikh, "another five hundred yards up the path forks to right and left! The left way leads to Mourad's deserted stronghold, but the right mounts to the long slope down which we looked this morn, when we stood above the waterfall, and the bears came down upon us. Wherefore I leave ye now, and climbing by the ravine, here to my left, I will gain the ledge commanding the forking of the ways, and turn Mourad on to the path which his star has written for him."

Lithe and agile as a goat, he leapt away from them, and swung himself from point to point of the ravine, gained the far side, and clambered up, using hand and foot and staff in a way that made even Alan, accustomed though he was to the sheikh's dexterity, gape with wonder, and drew a cry of admiration from Mirame.

"Hoo! The wonderful old man!" she said. "See, he has gained the ledge, and is hurling rocks down to turn Mourad from the path."

Mourad, indeed, swooping round the curve into the pass that led to his stronghold a mile away, had stopped dead, looking up with bloodshot, haggard eyes at the face of this terrible old man, that a glance backwards had revealed, not five minutes ago, a hundred yards in the rear.

"Ow!" he gasped. "Hath he, in truth, a devil, that he has flown hither?"

A flying boulder, hurled by the sheikh's hand, splintered the rock a foot above the bandit's head, and provided all the argument Mourad wanted to beat a hasty retreat, before he should be taken rearward by the relentless upward progress of Alan.

But the detour had lost him a good twenty yards, and as he sped into the long, upward slope, driving the panting, terror-sweated Claw before him, Alan and Mirame rejoined the sheikh not forty yards behind them.

Up and ever up they toiled, and soon but twenty paces divided them.

Suddenly, with a snarl of fear and baffled rage, Claw turned, and flung into the faces of the pursuers a packet of papers he had plucked from his pocket. They scattered wide over the path, and Alan paused and bent to gather them up.

"Nay, leave them," said the sheikh; "we can gather them at our leisure as we return."

Up, ever up; and now the twenty yards dividing them is fifteen. And now it is but ten, and they are on the ice and shale and lava that lies beneath the brim of the great crater Alan and his friends had traversed in their descent that morning on the robbers' stronghold. And now the pursuers are but five yards away, and Mourad and Claw are standing halted, livid of face, with gaping jaws, and eyes staring down into the Lake of Bears, the great, still, sinister sheet of water around which many bears are standing, swaying their outstretched snouts above the cool, mirroring water, to the accompaniment of a low, ceaseless mutter, hungry and more dreadful than the desolate wail of wolves in pack and full cry on a trail. And to right and left of them is nothing but an amphitheatre of precipices and serried, impassable peaks. Before them nothing but the shelving, slippery shale leading to the borders of the lake, where a trail goes to the opposite side, and safety, if they may miss the bears.

Mourad gave a glance round, Alan's battle-axe whistled an inch from his face, and the sheikh, leaning far forward, lurched his staff out, and struck the bandit fairly under the chin. With a scream and a wild oath Mourad leapt backward and round, and, gaining footing, raced, a raving maniac, down on the shambling, shuffling bears, that at first sound of his shriek had gathered towards the slope.

Like one fascinated, Claw, heedless of battle-axe or staff, leaned over the brink, watching the dreadful short struggle of the maniac below. But leaning too far, his feet slipped on the treacherous ledge, and with a wild yelp of terror he began to glide down the sliding shale.

With a bound, Alan reached the brink, and, bending over, picked at him with his battle-axe, and, hooking his garments, began to draw him up. But he was too late, for two bruins who had been drowsing since dawn on a ledge just below the brink rolled down on him, and fighting and snarling over the prey, shambled with him down the slope.

"Hoo!" said the sheikh. "Did I not tell thee that it was written that Mourad should wander amid dead fires in the bellies of many bears? Come, let us return, and gather the

papers strewn by that wicked man who sold the Ingeliz and his wife into infamy and death!"

Over the return journey of Alan and Mirame the golden light of the evening drew a rosy mist, and as if loth to wander out of it, they voyaged slowly, their hearts as un-hurried to part with the sanctuaried moments as were the crocuses along the snow-carpeted way to shut out the lingering warmth of the sun's sinking rays. The sheikh, snorting disdainfully over their entire absorption in each other, had hurried on in front with Clok, and meeting Carlton and Dawson, with a hundred followers, at the river, soothed his impatience by preparing a succulent meal, and sending out in a dozen different directions as many messengers, to each of whom he entrusted a mysterious message.

The moon was rising, when, after a dinner to which they all did justice, Mirame turned a laughing face to Alan.

"Behold, my lord," she said, "I have no home to go to!"

"I have seen to that," said the sheikh hastily, fearing lest Alan, in his lover's eagerness, should propose any such foolhardiness as defying Hassein's ultimatum and marrying forthwith—a proposition, indeed, that was hovering on the young man's lips, and most eloquent in his eyes. "My messenger is already in Van, where I despatched him to tell the Ingeliz Consul there that thou wast riding to lodge with his wife to-night. There thou must rest a week or ten days, till thy father returns from routing the Persians. Then thou shalt meet him at Ala Dagh, and find there, moreover, a home new reared to suit thy dignity and Hassein's honour."

He was as good as his word, though he would satisfy neither the curiosity of Mirame nor the veiled questions of Alan, but bound them both by a solemn promise to stir no foot towards Ala Dagh, nor send messengers there. They indeed were too busy in making hay while the sun shone to trouble their heads over anything, save the art of being alone. Nevertheless, Alan opened his eyes in amazement when the sheikh, on the eighth day after their arrival at Van, calmly asked him for the thirty thousand pounds Dawson had told him were lodged to his order at Trebizond.

"What on earth for?" he asked.

"Art thou not my disciple, and vowed for five years to obedience and poverty?" said the sheikh complacently. "Let not the vanity of riches gnaw thy vitals, my son. Nor seek to question the wisdom of thy friend. But give me now an order for the money, for I have need of it this day, and in thy name have even promised it."

"But it is at Trebizond!" gasped Alan.

"Nay, it is at Van," retorted the sheikh; "for I told thy friend Dawson, of the pimpled nose, that thou didst require it transferred here, and he and the Effendi Carlton telegraphed, and thou mayest have it when thou wilt."

"Well, you take the cake!" said Alan, staring. Nevertheless, though he wondered, he signed, and the sheikh pocketed the order, and took his departure smiling, like a man who had just made a royal gift.

And three days later they rode to Ala Dagh, and a mile from the mountain came on Hassein and his victorious Haidaranlis, standing like men waking from a dream, and incredulous of their own eyesight. For in the place where they had looked to see the blackened ruins messengers had told of there rose the replica of the old castle, beautiful and glistening like veined marble in the sunlight, and over the postern and the great gate modern armoured turrets stood, fresh from Erzingan, and bristling with Maxims and Nordenfelts; and on the cliff above the courtyard a great redoubt throw back the sun's rays, and the mouths of a mountain battery gaped over the approaches, commanding all the valley-land.

"What lying tale was this thy messengers brought me?" Hassein gasped at length, looking angrily from Mirame's stupefied face to the sheikh's complacent visage.

"No lying tale," replied the sheikh. "It was most true that the young lord, Alan, destroyed thy ancient castle with fire, to save thy daughter from the clutches of Mourad. And Black Mourad and all his band he hath destroyed, being also careful of thy honour in that too. Yet as it was not meet that thou shouldst return to a ruin, he hath rebuilt thy castle, to do homage to thy dignity. And now, for a time, farewell; we ride to Bagdad!"

And Alan, who had learned too much wisdom to leave the sweetness of farewells to chance, followed him without a word, saluting the old chief and Mirame as he galloped past; and a great roaring boom of "Hoo, hoo, hoo!" thundered after them, as twenty thousand lances waved aloft their bannerets of crimson, green, and gold.

THE END.

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Joe throws up office work, and, while tramping along a country lane, meets Jim, who is running away from Muerte—a bullying circus proprietor. Joe and Jim chum up, and call on Muerte's rival. Jim knocks at the door of a comfortable-looking caravan.

Jim, the Gymnast.

"Did I tell you that your large booth is on fire, and —" said Jim, as no one answered in response to his knocking.

"Fury!" yelled a voice. The door was flung open, and a little, stout man dashed down the steps with more speed than wisdom, for those steps were wet, and he slipped about half-way down them, then went sprawling face forwards into the mud.

"Murder!" he yelled. "My best hat will be ruined!" "No, here is your topper," exclaimed Jim, picking up the tall hat and brushing it with his sleeve.

"Don't brush it till it's dry, you demented boy! My eyes, what a beastly mess I'm in! Where's the fire?"

"There isn't any fire," observed Jim, coolly entering the caravan, followed by Joe, who was nearly convulsed with laughter. "I merely asked you if I had mentioned such a thing, and you were perfectly correct with your answer. There is no fire, so we won't bother about that. I say, you are jolly comfortable here!"

"It's more than you will be when I get my whip, you young villains. Look at that hat—ruined! I gave a guinea for it—at least, I owe a guinea for it!"

"That will be all right," declared Jim; "it only wants a good brush. Now, we want to see Ruabino particularly."

"You are too young for a writ. Are you a lawyer's letter?"

"No; we are on our own business."

"You pretty, grinning beauties! I have a good mind to throw you to my lions. I am Ruabino."

"But you are not Italian."

"I'm thankful to say I'm not. I have Italianised my name, which is Rubin; only people generally call me Rubby for short. People think Italians can do all sorts of things. Now, what do you want, because I'm busy?"

"You can go on with your tea, and we will join you if you like."

"I wouldn't like anything of the sort. What do you want?"

"We want you to engage us for your circus."

"Then I won't. I have had to sack some of my hands already. Business is shocking!"

"All the more reason why you should engage us."

"Look here; you deserve something for your consummate impertinence—even if it is only a good kicking! Dear me, what a mess I'm in! But if I give you a tea will you go, and never come back to worry me again?"

"No; I'm going to worry you till you give us a job."

"You are, are you? Do you want me to send for my strong man and his lion-taming whip?"

"No, we would rather deal with you, Rubby. You seem to be a decent little chap."

"Thank you for nothing. Well, sit down, and take one of those bloters between you; I'll put some more on the oil-stove. There's plenty of tea in the pot. Condensed milk there—butter, new bread, jam. Help yourselves. You can start worrying if you like, because I sha'n't listen to you. It won't make any difference. I don't want you, and if I did business is too bad to take you on, and you would do more harm than good. I ought to horsewhip the pair of you for making me in this state, instead of giving you a tea."

"Well, never mind about that. Muerte has got a lad."

"I know the brute has. But so have I. Leo is his name, and he can beat Muerte's lad into a cocked hat."

"How do you know that?"

"I'm sure he can. I only give him seven shillings a week and his food."

"Muerte doesn't give his lad anything."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I'm Jim the Gymnast, and I've bolted from him."

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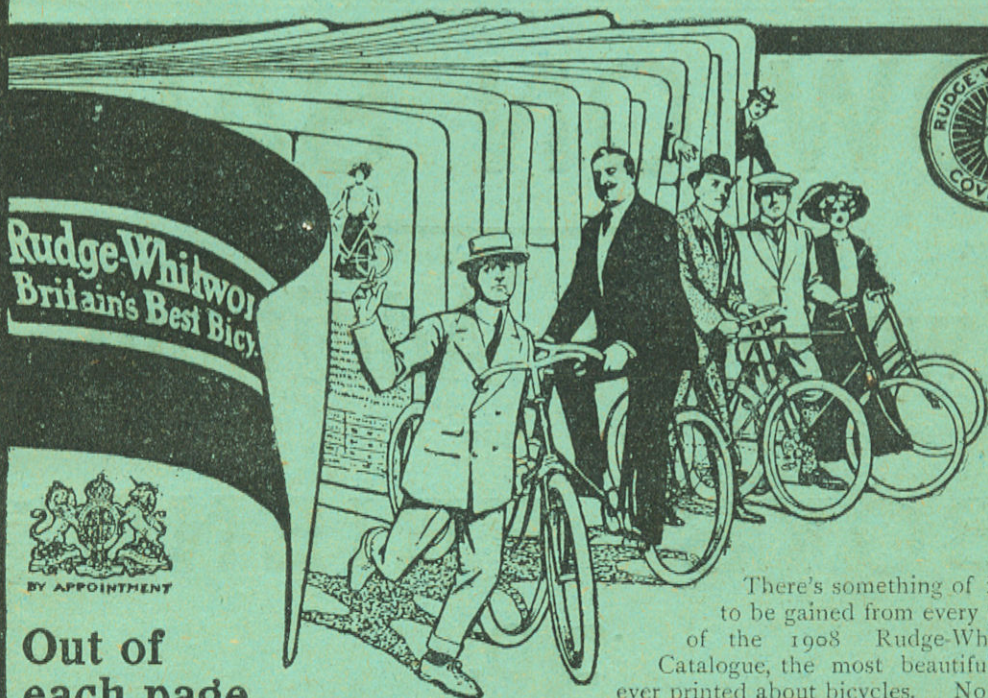
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