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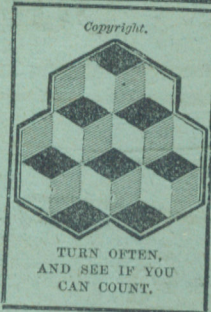
NO. 45. VOL. 2.



TOM MERRY'S CHIVALRY!



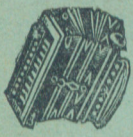
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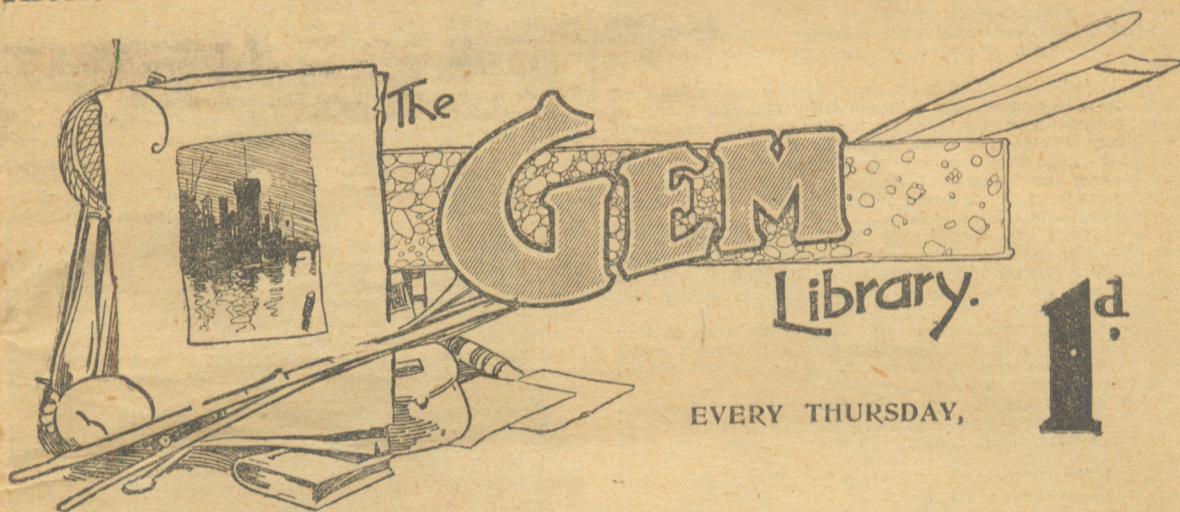
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THURSDAY

"TOM MERRY'S VOYAGE."

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TOM MERRY



SCOUT-LEADER.



Or,

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Boys of St. Jim's.

By Martin Clifford.

CHAPTER 1.

Tom Merry, Scout-Leader.

TOM MERRY looked into his study in the School House at St. Jim's, and found Manners and Lowther there.

He came in, opening a little leather-covered notebook, and wetting the point of a blunt pencil as he did so.

"I suppose I can put your name down?" he remarked.

Manners, who was developing films, grunted. Monty Lowther sat upright in the easy-chair, and gave Tom Merry a lazy glance.

"That depends," he remarked. "If it's for a subscription, no."

Tom Merry laughed.

"It isn't a subscription."

"If it's for a testimonial, good. You can put my name down for a testimonial to anybody," said Lowther generously.

"It isn't a testimonial."

"Well, you can put my name down anyway if you like, whatever it is, only don't bother," said Lowther, yawning.

"I'm reading the 'Magnet.'"

"Bless the 'Magnet'!" Tom Merry wrote down Lowther's name. "What about you, Manners? Leave off winding that rotic thing and attend to me."

"B-r-r-r-r!"

"Listen to me a minute."

"Gr-r-r-r!"

"Can I put your name down?"

"Rats!"

Manners gave the little handle of the daylight developer another wind, and looked up at last with a cheerful grin.

"Now I can give you a minute," he said. "What do you want? What's that about putting my name down?"

"Ass! I've got Lowther's, and I want yours next. I suppose you both want to be in it?"

"In which?"

"The Buffalo Patrol," said Tom Merry impressively.

Manners looked across at Lowther. Lowther laid his "Magnet" down on his knee, and tapped his forehead with an air of deep commiseration.

"It's come at last," he said sadly.

"Oh, don't rot!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "If you don't know what a patrol is, it's time you learned. Don't you remember Colonel Carr-Hilton coming down here, and starting the boy scout idea? Well, we're going to take it up now in proper form, and I think the School House ought to be first, and as this is the top study in the School House we ought to begin."

"Oh!" said Lowther.

"Beginning to comprehend? You know that boy scouts are formed in patrols, I suppose half a dozen at a time, under a leader. Every patrol is named after some beast——"

"Going to call this the Merry Patrol?" asked Lowther innocently.

"No, ass, I'm going to call this the Buffalo Patrol. There's a lot in a good-sounding title, and I think the Buffalo Patrol beats your Wolf Patrols and Rook Patrols and Rat Patrols, and so forth. You fellows have been slacking a great deal

A DOUBLE LENGTH TALE OF TOM MERRY NEXT THURSDAY.

No. 45 (New Series)

lately, and this will buck you up. I suppose you are prepared to die for your King and country?"

"Ye-e-es," said Lowther. "I'd rather put it off a bit, though, if you don't mind. Suppose you ask me again in seventy years?"

"Oh, don't be funny! It's the duty of every young Britisher to become a boy scout, and learn to track and shoot, and so forth. Suppose an enemy landed in England to-day," exclaimed Tom Merry severely, "what would he find? A silly ass developing rotten films, and another silly ass sitting in an easy-chair reading the 'Magnet'! I am going to buck you up. Now I've got your names down, and I want four more to make up the Buffalo Patrol."

"Go and find 'em, then," said Lowther, apparently undisturbed by the terrible picture of a foreign foe landing in England and finding him sitting in an easy-chair. At all events, he did not rise from it. "Go and find 'em, my son, and give us a rest."

"Look here, it's time to buck up. Figgins & Co. are getting up something over in the New House, and I haven't much doubt that it's a patrol of boy scouts. We want the School House to be the first in the field."

"Well, go and find the rest of the patrol," yawned Lowther. "Go and preach the strenuous life to those chaps in Study No. 6. Go and rouse the whole House. Go and eat coke. Go, anyway!"

"Yes, do," said Manners. "I know I shall spoil these films if you stay here talking, old chap."

"Slackers!" sniffed Tom Merry; and he closed his notebook with a snap and walked out of the study. Manners grinned, and turned his attention again to his daylight developer; and Monty Lowther chuckled, and went on with the "Magnet."

Tom Merry walked down the passage towards the Fourth Form studies. The sound of voices in altercation from Study No. 6 showed that the occupants of that famous apartment were at home.

"I object—I object most stwongly!" It was the voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of the School House. "In fact, Hewwies, I must say that I absolutely wefuse to gwant my permish for anythin' of the sort!"

"Oh, rats!" grunted Herries. "I must say I buck up Gussy in this," said Jack Blake. "I'm not particular, but I bar mangy bulldogs in a small study."

"He's not mangy."

"Well, I don't care whether it's mangle or distemper—"

"It's not distemper."

"Well, whatever it is— Hallo, you Shell-fish, what are you grinning at?"

Tom Merry looked in cheerfully. Herries, with a red face, was looking annoyed. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was pink and excited. Blake and Digby looked warm, too.

"You kids quarrelling," said Tom Merry, in a chiding tone.

"Oh, don't be funny," said Blake. "What do you think, Herries' bulldog has caught the measles."

"He hasn't!" roared Herries.

"Well, the small-pox, then."

"You utter ass!"

"Well, he's caught something; and Herries wants to bring him into the study to nurse him," said Blake. "What do you think of that?"

"Yaas, wathah! The bwute has already torn my twosahs on two distinct occasions, and weally—"

"He's gnawed up my Latin Grammar," growled Digby. "I rescued it from him before he had finished, but all the deponent verbs are gone."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's nothing to laugh at, Tom Merry! Fancy a silly ass wanting to bring a mangy bulldog into a Christian study."

"If you say my bulldog's mangy I'll punch your head, Dig!" roared Herries.

"Well, I don't care what his disease is, so long as you keep him at a distance."

"You're a set of pigs!" said Herries. "Poor old Towser has got a bit of a cold. He wants nursing up. I ought to have him in the study."

"Of course you ought," said Tom Merry encouragingly.

"Where is there any objection to the presence of a really nice, quiet, tame, and kind-hearted bulldog in any study? That's what I want to know."

"That's what I think," said Herries. "These dummies say they can't do their prep with a bulldog nosing about the room. Why can't they do their prep in the common-room downstairs, then? I don't suppose Towser will be seedy for more than a few days, and we're just on breaking up for the Christmas holidays."

"Good!" said Tom Merry. "You chaps are in the wrong."

"Look here, Tom Merry—"

"I agree with Herries entirely. If Towser wants to bite D'Arcy and gnaw his trousers, why shouldn't he? What are D'Arcy and his trousers for?"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Then as to Latin Grammars, if Towser prefers them to dog biscuits, I don't see why he shouldn't have his way. Latin Grammars are not expensive in plain bindings, and I don't suppose Towser cares much about an expensive binding."

"Oh, go and eat coke!" said Jack Blake. "You can have Towser in your study if you like, but we bar any sort of sick beast in here. It was trouble enough when Gussy had a cold, and I thought then that he ought to go out into the kennel somewhere till he got well."

"Oh, weally Blake—"

"I'll go and have another look at him," said Herries, rising. "If he's not any better he'll have to come into the house somewhere, I warn you."

And Herries quitted the study.

"Bai Jove, you know, I've thought of a good ideal!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remarked. "As Tom Mewwy does not object to the presence of a bulldog in a study, he can have Towser in his study till he gets well."

"Ha, ha, ha! Good wheeze!"

"I weally do not like wefusin' Hewwies, and that will set the mattah wight. He can shove Towser into Tom Merry's study."

"Towser will die a sudden death if he does," said Tom Merry.

"What I mean is, I can't see that it matters if a bulldog is shoved into a Fourth Form study. I couldn't have anything of the sort in my quarters. But I didn't come here to talk about bulldogs. Are you chaps ready to die for your King and country?"

"Is that a conundrum?"

"No, it isn't, ass. If you're ready to die—"

"Well this is rather sudden," said Blake, "I'd rather put it off till after the Christmas holidays, if it's all the same to you."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Don't interrupt me. If you are ready to die for your King and country, like true-born Britons, you ought to enrol yourselves in a corps of boy scouts. I am forming a patrol, the first in the School House, and I want you fellows to join. There can't be any of your usual rotting about the leadership on this occasion, as I was selected by the test proposed by Colonel Carr-Hilton when he was down here. I am the chief scout of the School House, and the leader of the Buffalo Patrol."

"The—the what?"

"The Buffalo Patrol. Every patrol is named after some beast or bird, and the signal of the members to one another is the cry of that beast or bird whatever it is."

"Good! You had better initiate us into imitating the cry of the buffalo," said Jack Blake blandly.

"Er—ahem! What sort of a how does a buffalo make?" murmured Tom Merry, a little puzzled. "H'm! Perhaps we'd better have another name, after all."

"I suggest the Donkey Patrol, as it is only proper for a patrol to be named after its leader."

"Ha, ha, ha!" cackled Digby and D'Arcy.

"And then the signal of the patrol members would be a donkey's bray," said Blake. "You could instruct us—"

"Oh, don't rot!" said Tom Merry. "Suppose we have the Dog Patrol, and then we could have a doggy growl for the signal."

"Is thy servant a dog that he should do this thing?"

"Ha, ha! I wegard that wemark as wathah funny."

"Then you're jolly easy to please, Gussy," said Tom Merry. "We'll have the Dog Patrol. Now, are you fellows coming into it? Figgins & Co. are getting up a patrol over in the New House, I believe, and we want to be first in the field."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Oh, we'll come in!" said Blake. "You can't count on Herries, though. He's too busy looking after his beastly bulldog."

"Then we shall want one more. I'll ask Reilly of the Fourth. I'm to put your names down, then?"

"Oh, yes, rather! We'll help you out."

"You see, when the thing catches on, through our example, all the fellows will take it up," explained Tom Merry. "Then each of us can be the leader of a separate patrol. But one patrol for each House will be enough for the start. I'll go and speak to Reilly, and you fellows turn up in the gym in half an hour for preliminary instruction."

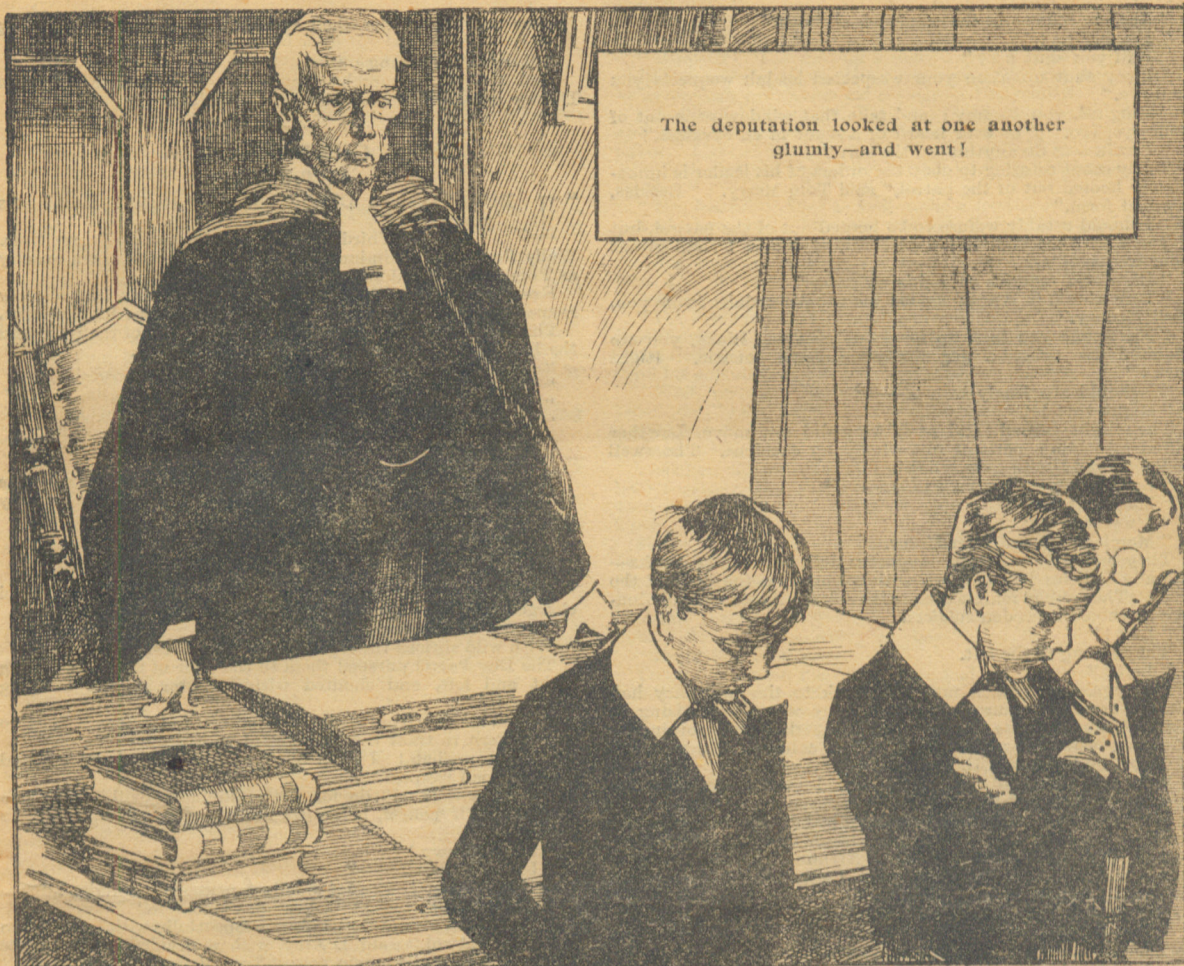
And Tom Merry, full of his new idea, hurried off in search of the last recruit.

CHAPTER 2.

The Dog Patrol.

"G R-R-R-ROOO!" said Jack Blake expressively, as he put his nose out into the cold breeze of the quadrangle, and drew it in again. "Jolly cold weather for scouting."

"Yaas, wathah! You see, the snow's vewy thick on the gwound, and upon the whole it would pewwaps be bettah to put it off till next term."



"Oh, rats!" said Digby. "I'm not afraid of the cold, for one."

"If you infer that I am afraid of the cold, Dig, I shall have no alternative but to administer a fearful thwashin'."

"Rats! Come on."

The chums of Study No. 6 descended the steps. It was a half-holiday, but the usual avocations of a half-holiday could not be followed. There was no footer with a good six inches of snow on the football ground, and nobody felt inclined for a walk in the frosty and foggy woods, and even the village tuck-shop seemed too far off for a visit through the snow-bound lane.

The Fourth-Formers crossed towards the gym, leaving deep tracks in the snow. A few flakes were still falling. It was nearing the end of December, and Christmas was coming with a vengeance. Breaking-up was close at hand, but it was not quite close enough to please the juniors of St. Jim's.

As a matter of fact, the boys had a grievance on that score, Rylcombe Grammar School, the neighbouring scholastic establishment with which the youngsters were generally at war, broke up on the 16th of December, and St. Jim's on the 18th. St. Jim's had broken up for Christmas on the 18th for centuries past, but, as Blake said, that was no reason why they should go on breaking up on the 18th for centuries to come.

If the Grammar School broke up on the 16th, why shouldn't St. Jim's? Why should hard-worked youngsters be heartlessly done out of two days of their vacation? That was how the juniors looked at it, and there had already been talk of a deputation to the Head to remonstrate. But Dr. Holmes, the Head of St. Jim's, was not the kind of person to be easily argued with, and as yet the deputation was only an idea.

"Well, here we are," said Blake, looking into the gym. "Nobody here, of course. Nice ripping sort of a scout leader Tom Merry makes—I don't think. I'm not very well up in the rules of boy scout gangs, but I suppose it's permissible to depose a leader for being unpunctual and elect a new one."

"Yaas, wathah! If you chaps care to elect me——"

"Yes; I can see us doing it," grunted Digby.

"Weally, Digby, what is required for the post is a fellow of

tact and judgment, and undah the cires you couldn't do bettal than elect me."

"Hallo, here's the Shell-Fish!"

Manners and Lowther came in. They looked round the gym, and bore down upon Jack Blake and his companions.

"Where's Tom Merry?"

"Blessed if I know," said Blake. "We're turning up here for preliminary instruction, and this is how we are getting it."

"Undah the cires——"

"Here he is!"

Tom Merry came in with Reilly of the Fourth. Tom Merry's lip was cut, and there was a bruise on his cheek. Reilly's left eye was closing up.

The boy scouts looked at them curiously.

"Been rowing with the New House?" demanded Lowther.

"Oh, no!" said Tom Merry cheerfully. "House rows are off for a bit. Reilly didn't think it a good idea to follow the lead of a Shell fellow, and wanted to be captain. We argued it out."

"Faith, and I was convinced after the third round," grinned Reilly, with perfect good temper. "Sure, I'd follow any chap with an upper cut like Tom Merry's."

"Now we're ready," said Tom Merry. "Let's get to work——"

"Hold on!" said Blake. "We were thinking of deposing you for unpunctuality, and electing a new scout leader——"

"That's not in the rules. You must play the game, you know. Form up. I'm going to drill you a bit first, and teach you where to put your feet, and how to hold your hands, and so on."

"Rats!"

Tom Merry took no notice of that rejoinder. He planted himself before his squad like a drill sergeant, and raised his hand.

"Eyes front!"

"Bai Jove, we all have our eyes in the front, deah boy! I've nevah heard of a chap with eyes in the back of his head, you know."

"Silence in the ranks!"

NEXT
TUESDAY:

"TOM MERRY'S VOYAGE." A Double-length Tale of Tom Merry & Co.
By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

"Good! Silence in the wanks, deah boys."
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Will you shut up?"
 "Pway shut up when your wespected leadah wequests you to do so."
 "Ring off, you dummy; and take that window-pane out of your eye, too. Who ever heard of a scout in an eyeglass."
 "I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort."
 "Any scout refusing to obey the orders of his leader is immediately booted out of the patrol," said Tom Merry. "Besides, it's bad form."
 "I should uttaly wefuse to be booted out of the patwol, but if you assure me that it is bad form, of course I shall gwant your wequest."
 "It's not a request, ass; it's an order."
 "I am afwaid it is not poss for me to take ordahs fwom you, Tom Mewwy."

"Next time you turn up for scout practice, Blake, you are required to bring a gag for your tame lunatic. Right turn!"
 "I should absolutely wefuse——"
 "Right turn!"

They right turned, and as D'Arcy did not move, Lowther biffed into him; perhaps not wholly by accident. The swell of the School House gave a howl.
 "Lowthah, you wotten wufflan——"
 "March!"
 "I wefuse——"
 "March!" yelled Tom Merry.

They marched. Arthur Augustus fell out of the ranks—literally fell, for he sat down with a bump on the floor of the gym. The juniors marched on, with solemn faces as expressionless as those of wooden soldiers.

"Left!"
 They swung to the left.
 "Left!"
 Left again sent them marching back to the spot they had started from. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was slowly rising to his feet, and he was in the way. But that was nothing to Manners, who was at the head of the column. He marched right on, and marched right into Arthur Augustus.

"Ow!" yelled D'Arcy, as he rolled over again from the impact. "You feahful wottah!"
 Manners took no notice. He marched on, treading on the swell of St. Jim's and passing over him. Lowther came next, and his foot left a blotch of mud on Arthur Augustus's immaculate waistcoat. Digby, Blake, and Reilly mercifully stepped over their gasping Form-fellow.

Arthur Augustus sat up and glared.
 "You feahful wottahs!" he exclaimed. "I wefuse to have any hand in these wufflanly pwoccedin's."
 "Halt!"

The column halted.
 "Eyes front!"
 Arthur Augustus staggered to his feet. He rubbed the mud off his waistcoat with his handkerchief; or rather, he rubbed some of the mud on to his handkerchief. A good proportion of it still adhered to the waistcoat.

"Fall into your place, Private D'Arcy!"
 "I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort——"
 "Privates Blake and Lowther will seize the mutineer and yank him into his place."
 "Weally, Tom Mewwy—— Keep off, you wottahs! Hands off! I will give you a feahful thwashin'—ow! Groo! Ugh! Oh!"

Private D'Arcy was yanked into his place. Scout-leader Merry gave him a stern look.

"D'Arcy, I am surprised at you. How do you expect ever to become a scout, and get into a fit state to die for your King and country?"

"As a mattah of fact, Tom Mewwy, this isn't scout twainin', it's militawy twainin', and I wegard it as bosh."

"We have to begin at the beginning with duffers," said Tom Merry. "You don't even know how to keep your place in the ranks yet. I'm going to give you kids some marching exercises that will make your hair curl. Follow-my-leader is a good game for boy scouts, and I can tell you I'm going to put you through it. Now, we'll try that exercise over again and see if D'Arcy can do it without flopping about like a seal at the Zoo."

"I wefuse to be compared to a seal at the beastly Zoo."
 "Left! Right! Left—— Here, clear off, you young monkeys!"

The exercises of the boy scouts had begun to attract spectators to the gym. A number of Third Form fags had crowded in, among them Wally D'Arcy, the younger brother of the one and only Augustus. D'Arcy minor was grinning gleefully.

"Clear off! Do you hear!"
 "Rats!" said D'Arcy minor coolly. "We're allowed in the gym as much as you are, and I suppose we can form a patrol if we like."

Tom Merry deemed it better to take no notice of the fags. A row with a crew of inky Third-Formers was too undignified

for the top boy of the Shell and the Patrol-leader of the Dog Patrol.

"March!" he sang out.
 And the patrol marched, and this time Arthur Augustus D'Arcy managed to keep his place in the file.

CHAPTER 3.

In Training.

"LEFT!" yelled D'Arcy minor. "Right! Left! As you were!"

A dozen Third-Formers had formed up in no time. Wally flourished a diminutive cane, and directed them exactly as Tom Merry was doing with his patrol.

Every order that Tom Merry rapped out was immediately rapped out in turn by Wally, in precisely the same tone of voice.

The Dog Patrol marched off to the upper end of the gym, and the Fag Patrol immediately marched after them.

"Left!" said Tom Merry.

"Left!" said Wally.

"As you were!"

"As you were!"

"Quick march!"

"Quick march!"

Tom Merry's cheeks grew crimson. His own patrol were chuckling, and the fags were yelling with laughter as they obeyed the orders of their leader.

"Double!" shouted Tom Merry.

"Double!" piped Wally.

"Charge!" yelled Tom.

Wally wasn't quite prepared for that. The Dog Patrol charged, and the fags were knocked right and left.

"Jump on the enemy—both feet!"

With wild shrieks the fags fled for their lives.

The Dog Patrol pursued them to the door of the gym, cuffing right and left, and shouted with laughter as the last fag vanished.

"Good!" said Tom Merry. "That settles the fags! They've got to learn to treat the Dog Patrol with proper respect."

"Yaas, wathah! I shall always insist upon bein' tweated with pwopah wespect."

"I think that will do for the preliminary drill," said Tom Merry. "Of course, before we are a proper patrol, I have to swear——"

"Tom Mewwy!"

"I have to swear——"

"Tom Mewwy! Is that weally a necessawy pwelim?"

"Of course it is, ass! I have to swear——"

"Then I am afwaid that I must wespectfully withdwaw fwom the Dog Patwol," said D'Arcy, with a decided shake of the head. "I cannot remain here if Tom Mewwy is goin' to start sweawin'."

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Blake. Tom Merry turned red.

"You unutterable ass——"

"I wefuse to be addressed as an unuttewable ass, and I wefuse to listen to any bad language fwom Tom Mewwy."

"Gag him, somebody! I say I shall have to swear——"

"I shall wefuse to listen."

"——shall have to swear in the patrol."

"Oh, I see. Why didn't you explain that at first, Tom Mewwy?"

"Did you give me a chance?" shrieked the patrol-leader.

"Don't you forget that gag next time, Blake. I shall have to swear in the patrol, but we can do that in the study. At present we'll practise the secret sign and the signal. The signal, of course, is a dog's bark, or growl, as a bark would make too much row, and alarm the enemy——"

"What enemy?"

"Any enemy, fathead. The bark of a dog would be too loud."

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"Besides," said Lowther, "if we were scouting in a wood it might lead to confusion."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, it might get confused with the bark of a tree——"

"Don't forget a gag for Lowther next time, Tom Merry," said Blake.

"He's got too many gags already," grunted Digby, "ancient old moth-eaten gags that have died of old age everywhere else."

"That wasn't a gag," said Lowther indignantly. "It was a new joke. I made it up on the spot."

"Silence in the wanks, deah boys."

"The growl of a dog will be the patrol signal," said Tom Merry. "Do shut up, you maggies. Now, how many of you can imitate the growl of a dog?"

Blake gave a ferocious growl. Digby tried, and coughed violently. Manners and Lowther produced curious sounds, and Reilly seemed to be about to choke.

"You see, you want practice," said Tom Merry. "Now listen to me, and make the same sound that I do."

And Tom Merry imitated the growl of a dog. It wasn't a very successful imitation, however, and the patrol stared at him.

"Well, go on," said Blake. "When you've done clearing your throat, you might begin."

"Ass! That's the growl."

"Is it? I thought you were clearing your throat! Was that like the growl of a dog?"

"Of course it was," shouted Tom Merry excitedly.

"Then it must have been a dog that was expiring of bronchitis. I've never heard a dog give a wheezy grunt like that."

"Faith, and it sounded to me more like a frog."

"Or a pig with a bad cold."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We'll leave the signal over for a bit," said Tom Merry hastily. "Now for the sign. You have to know the secret scout sign, so that you can recognise any other scout when you meet him. Now—clear off, you youngsters."

Some of the fags had returned, and were looking in at the door. As Tom Merry made a motion towards them they scattered, and the patrol leader went on with his instructions. The scouts were practising the secret sign when three juniors came into the gym. They were Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn—otherwise known as Figgins & Co., the chiefs of the New House juniors. Tom Merry turned and waved his hand at them.

"Get out!" he shouted.

"Eh?"

"Get out."

"Sha'n't! Have you bought up the gym?"

"Charge!" shouted the exasperated patrol leader.

The Dog Patrol charged. Figgins & Co. went reeling right and left, and the victorious School House scouts charged over them. Figgins and Kerr were up in a twinkling, but Fatty Wynn lay and gasped.

"Chuck them out!" roared Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! Buck up, deah boys!"

"Hold on," gasped Figgins. "Hold on, you dummies! We came here to——"

"Yes, I know; you came here to chivvy us, and you're going out on your neck."

"I—I—we—you——"

"Outside!"

And outside Figgins & Co. promptly went, landing in a heap in the snow of the quadrangle. And the victorious scouts went on with their training.

CHAPTER 4.

Figgins & Co. Make Themselves at Home.

FIGGINS picked himself up out of the snow. Kerr followed suit, and then lent a hand to Fatty Wynn. Fatty had lately laid in a supply of good things at the school shop, and was rather short of wind.

"What's the matter with the dummies?" growled Figgins.

"Off their silly rockers, I suppose? What are they drilling in the gym for? I thought they had about enough of that from the sergeant."

"Some new wheeze, I suppose," said Kerr. "No good talking to them now."

"Let's go and wait for them in Study No. 6 in the School House," suggested Fatty Wynn. "I saw Blake taking in a bag from the tuckshop this morning."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, I'm getting rather peckish, and it's a good opportunity for a House raid while they are playing the giddy ox in the gym."

"Fatty's right; come on."

The three heroes of the New House promptly entered the rival establishment. They went straight up to Study No. 6, and found it unoccupied. The fire was dying down in the grate, and the table was littered with books and papers. Fatty Wynn

went across to the cupboard at once, and his eyes glistened as he looked into it.

"My word! Here's a beefsteak pie—one of the big ones that Dame Taggles makes—and half a ham."

"Ripping! I'm getting hungry myself," said Figgins. "I only had a few apples in the tuckshop, while you were putting away enough provisions for a siege of Ladysmith."

"I didn't have much, Figgins; only some baked potatoes and sausages and tongue, besides the rabbit pies and the fish-cakes. I got so hungry in this December weather, too."

"Well, trot out the grub, and I'll liven up the fire and make the tea."

"Ha, ha, ha! May as well make a feed of it."

And they did! The fire was raked together, and Figgins looked round for fuel. The coal locker was empty. In a corner stood a chair in the process of manufacture, the work of Blake, who was the amateur carpenter of the Hobby Club. Figgins looked at it, and then looked for a chopper.

"I'm sorry for that chair," he remarked. "I suppose Blake is working out a calculation, how many nails can be put into a given quantity of wood, judging by the look of it. I'm sorry to spoil his calculation, but we must make up the fire."

"Well, we can't be expected to sit here without a fire in December," said Kerr. "It was careless of them to have the coal-locker empty."

Crash, crash, crash!

The chair, in spite of the number of nails in it, was very loosely held together, and Figgins soon had the legs off. They were soon roaring away in the grate, and Kerr jammed down the kettle on the fire.

Fatty Wynn laid the cloth and spread out the eatables. Doubtless Blake had intended to have some friends into tea, for the supply was really generous.

"I'm glad we called," grinned Figgins. "This will be a pleasant surprise to Blake when he comes in. I'll carve the ham. Make the tea, Kerr, old chap."

"Right-ho," said Kerr.

The tea was soon made, the ham and the pie carved, and the New House trio settled down to a comfortable meal. It waited a couple of hours to tea-time, as a matter of fact, but in the keen wintry weather the appetites of the juniors were good. As for Fatty Wynn, he was always ready for a meal.

Figgins poured out the tea. The fragrant odour filled the study, and it came to the nostrils of three juniors who were coming up the Fourth Form passage in the School House. The three were Blake, Digby, and D'Arcy, and they sniffed appreciatively as they scented the fresh-made tea.

"Well, this is all right," said Jack Blake. "Old Herries has left that rotten bulldog to himself after all, and is making the tea ready for us. I call that decent."

"Yaas, wathah! Howwies is weally playin' up in a cweaditable mannah."

"He's not waiting for us, though," said Digby, as the clatter of knives and forks came from the study. "He's starting."

The three juniors hurried on, and pushed open the door of No. 6.

"Hallo, Herries—oh, my—my hat!"

Blake, Digby, and D'Arcy stared into the study in blank amazement.

Figgins & Co. were seated round the table, eating and drinking at express speed, and already considerable gaps showed in the ham and the pie.

"Bai Jove!"

"Why, the—the—the cheek! The nerve!"

Figgins rose to his feet.

"Hallo," he said hospitably. "Come in, you chaps! We've got plenty, and we'd like you to join us at tea, if you haven't had your tea yet."

Figgins's manner was so cool that for a moment Blake wondered whether he had wandered into the New House by mistake and entered Figgins's quarters instead of his own.

Fatty Wynn bolted beef against time. The feast was not by any means over, but it looked as if the reckoning were near at hand.

"The—the cheeky wottahs!" gasped D'Arcy.

"Our ham!" howled Digby.

"Bai Jove! Our beefsteak-pie, you know!"

"My chair!" shrieked Blake. "What's become of the legs of my new chair?"

"We ran short of fuel," said Figgins. "But it's all right—you'll get the nails back when you clean up the grate, and you can start the calculation over again from the beginning."

"Calculation! What calculation?"

"Weren't you calculating how many nails you could drive into a given space?"

"You—you rotter! I'll teach you to burn up my furniture! Go for 'em, kids!"

Figgins drew the poker from the fire, where he had left it to become red-hot. The chums of the School House jumped back from the glowing point.

Figgins made a playful pass at them with the poker, and they retreated hastily to the doorway.

"Come on," said Figgins pleasantly.
"You howwid wottah! If you put that beastly pokah neah my clothes, I shall give you a feahful thwashin'."

"Better make it pax," said Figgins. "We're only making ourselves at home, you know, as visitors ought to do. Come in and have tea, and make it pax."

"I'll pax you—I'll—"

"Rats! You can't argue with a red-hot poker. Besides, you ought to be grateful to us for not doing any damage."

"My chair—"

"Well, we were really doing you a service there. Suppose somebody had sat on it, and there had been an accident. Somebody might have sat on it, you know, by mistake."

"You—you ass! It was meant to be sat on."

"Oh, I thought you were working out a calculation—how many—"

"Oh, shut up! Put that poker down."

"Ye-c-es—presently. When you've made it pax."

"Bai Jove, Blake, we'd bettah make it pax, you know. Fatty Wynn is boltin' all the gwub while we're talkin', and there won't be any left soon."

"Let's raise the house, and have these rotters ragged bald-headed!" exclaimed Digby excitedly.

"But all the gwub will be gone by then, and I'm wathah hungwy."

Jack Blake burst into a hearty laugh. He knew how to take a joke against himself.

"Right you are!" he exclaimed. "It's pax, Figgy. You can put that poker down."

Figgins grinned, and the poker clattered into the grate. Fatty Wynn took his fifth helping of the beefsteak-pie.

Kerr took up the carving-knife.

"Give it a name," he said hospitably.

And he carved for the School House trio. Pax having been declared, the juniors banished all thoughts of warfare, and settled down to have tea together as if they had chummed in that study all their lives.

"Don't spare the grub," said Figgins generously. "You're more than welcome. Besides, we got this lot cheap."

And the Co. chuckled.

CHAPTER 5. The Deputation.

FIGGINS poured out the tea. The juniors were soon feasting on the best of terms. Then Figgins came to business.

"We were coming over to speak to you when you went for like a lot of asses in the gym," he said. "We were thinking—"

"Oh, we know what you were thinking of!" chuckled Blake. "You were thinking of starting a New House patrol; but the School House was first, as usual."

"And you've guessed wrong, as usual," said Figgins, grinning. "It's not a bad idea, but that's not what we were thinking of. It's about the breaking-up for the Christmas holidays."

"Oh, I see. Pass the jam."

Figgins passed the jam, and resumed:

"You see, the Grammar School breaks up on the sixteenth. Why should St. Jim's work two days longer, and wait till the eighteenth?"

"Echo answers why. Pass the butter."

Figgins passed the butter.

"Well, we've talked it over in the New House," he said. "We've come to the conclusion that this is a matter in which the two Houses ought to act as one."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"My idea was to send a deputation to the Head—"

"We had thought of that already in this study."

"Well, you hadn't done it, anyway. The idea is to send a deputation to the Head, consisting of fellows from both Houses. I was thinking of myself, Blake, and Tom Merry as the members, as representing both Houses and both the Fourth Form and the Shell."

"I wathah considah that I am a more pwopah person to wepresent this study. What you wequire is a fellow of tact and judgment."

Blake laughed.

"As the deputation will probably get a licking each, I don't care if Gussy takes my place," he said. "I'll leave it to you, Gus."

"I'll make it spades," said D'Arcy—"I mean I accept. I shall be vevy pleased to wepresent this study. I weward it as extremely pwob that when I have explained to the Head he will see weason, and gwant our request."

"We'll give him a chance, anyway. Better put some exercise books in your bags, in case it's more serious than a caning."

"Weally, Blake—"

"That's settled," said Figgins. "Now about the seniors. I thought it would be a good idea to have some seniors in the

deputation to the Head, to give the matter more weight, you know."

"You won't get any seniors to follow a junior's lead."

"Well, I wouldn't mind making the seniors the leaders, so long as we gain our point," said Figgins. "The great thing is, to break up on the sixteenth instead of the eighteenth. I was thinking of Monteith, our head prefect, as chairman of the deputation, but he has declined for some reason. I suggest that we should approach Kildare on the subject. He is captain of the school as well as School House prefect, and is just the man for our purpose."

"Yaas, wathah! And it's best to stwike while the iwon's hot, you know, so as soon as you've finished, Figgins, we'll go and see Kildare."

"I'm ready," said Figgins, rising to his feet.

"Hold on, Figgins!" said Fatty Wynn. "Give a chap a chance. I'm not done yet, by long chalks."

"Keep on, then, till the grub's all gone," said Figgins. "Blake can watch you; it's as good as seeing the animals fed at the Zoo. Come on, Gussy!"

"I am quite weady, deah boy."

And Figgins and Arthur Augustus quitted the study, leaving the other juniors still discussing the good things on the table.

"Hallo, there's the chap we want!" exclaimed Figgins.

Tom Merry was coming upstairs. He stopped as Figgins came up, looking on his guard. He remembered the scene in the gym. But there was nothing hostile in the manner of the great Figgins.

"It's all wight, Tom Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus reassuringly. "We've made it pax with these wottahs. We are goin' in a dep. to the Head on the subject of the breakin'-up for Chwistmas, and we want you to join as a membah."

Figgins explained; and Tom Merry cocked his head thoughtfully as he listened.

"I don't know about asking Kildare," he said. "The seniors always make it a point to be down on a junior wheeze, and Kildare mayn't look at it in the same light that we do, you know."

"No harm in asking him, though."

"Oh, no. I saw him go into his study a few minutes ago, so we shall find him there," said Tom Merry. "Come on."

A minute later they were tapping at the door of the St. Jim's captain. Kildare's pleasant voice bade them enter and he looked up from his book.

The three juniors coughed a little, not exactly knowing how to begin. The captain of the school looked at one after another inquiringly.

"Well, what is it?" he said at last.

"Ahem!" said Tom Merry. "You see—"

"You see," said Figgins—"ahem—"

"You had bettah leave the explainin' to me," said D'Arcy. "This is how the case stands, deah boy. We—er—ahem!"

"You have caught a cough?" asked Kildare.

"Not at all, deah boy. You see—er—ahem!"

"It's like this," said Tom Merry.

"Exactly," assented Figgins.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Good," said Kildare. "You've made it perfectly clear; and now would you mind getting out of my study? Shut the door after you."

The juniors grinned at one another feebly.

"The fact is," said Tom Merry, taking the plunge—"the fact is, Kildare, that we are going to send a deputation to the Head, and we want you to be chairman."

"You—you want me to what?"

"We're the deputation. We are going to represent to the Head that as the Grammar School breaks up on the sixteenth St. Jim's oughtn't to go on till the eighteenth. We think that if you were chairman of the deputation you could explain things to the Head, and he would be more likely to listen to a chap in the Sixth, too."

Kildare stared at the juniors in blank astonishment for some moments.

When he realised that it was not a case of "rotting," a smile broke over his face. He pointed to the door. Tom Merry glanced in the direction of his outstretched finger, and then glanced back again. He looked puzzled.

"What does that mean, Kildare?"

"It means—outside."

"Don't you want to be our chairman?"

"I don't want to lick you," said Kildare, "but if you're not outside this study in three seconds, I shall."

The deputation were outside the study in the three seconds. Kildare grinned as the door closed behind them. In the passage the juniors looked at one another uncomfortably.

"Kildare didn't seem to catch on to the idea," Figgins remarked.

"Well, he wasn't what you'd call enthusiastic about it," agreed Tom Merry. "I was rather afraid from the first that he mightn't like the idea. Shall we ask Darrel next, or shall we try it on without any seniors?"

"Oh, blow the seniors. Let's try it alone."
 "Yaas, wathah! I'll tell you what's the pwopah thing to do, deah boys. Follow my lead, and I'll bwing you through all wight."

"Come on!" said Figgins.

And in an heroic mood the deputation proceeded to the Head's own quarters. Their hearts were sinking a little. Kildare's reception had been, perhaps, an earnest of what they were to expect in the Head's study. But they had gone too far for retreat now. If they went back to Study No. 6 with their mission unfulfilled, they would never be allowed to hear the end of it.

But when they arrived at the Head's door, it was some moments before they could summon up sufficient nerve to tap.

"Are you going to tap, Figgins?"

"Eh—er—yes. I thought you were going to."

Tom Merry and Figgins tapped at the same moment. There was no reply from the study, and they tapped again. Still no reply.

"The Head's not there," said Tom Merry, with an involuntary breath of relief.

"There's a light under the door."

"Powwaps he's stepped out for a minute."

"Tap again, anyway."

"Dear me! what are you boys doing here?"

The juniors started at the sound of the Head's voice.

Dr. Holmes had come up the passage behind them, and was looking down at them in surprise, evidently not expecting to find three heroes of the lower school holding a debate outside his study door.

The deputation looked dismayed. They had come there to speak to the Head, but his sudden appearance had taken them by surprise. And, as a matter of fact, a great deal of their nerve oozed away as they found the clear, grey eyes of the doctor searching their faces.

"Well, what is it, my boys?" said the Head, in a not unkindly tone. "Did you come here to speak to me?"

"Ye-e-o-es, if you please, sir."

"You may come into my study."

The Head opened the door and went in, and the juniors followed. Dr. Holmes took his seat at his writing-table, and the three heroes stood in a row, feeling, and looking, a great deal like three culprits called up for judgment.

"Now, what is it, please?" said the Head.

The juniors exchanged dismayed glances. They found it even more difficult to explain to the Head than to explain to Kildare.

Dr. Holmes looked at them in surprise.

"You need not be afraid to speak out," he said. "What is your purpose in coming here? Come, be brief."

"If you please, sir—"

"Pewwaps you had bettah leave it to me, deah boys. The case stands like this, sir. Wylcombe Gwammah School bwreaks up for the Christmas vac. on the sixteenth of the pwesent month—"

"I am aware of that, D'Arcy."

"St. Jim's does not bwreak up till the eighteenth."

"I can hardly fail to be aware of that also. If you have come here to say nothing but that—"

"Not at all, deah boy—I mean, deah sir—"

"D'Arcy!"

"Yaas, sir. We—the lowah Forms of St. Jim's—think that it would be a wippin' ideah to bwreak up on the same day as the Gwammah School. We don't like the ideah of workin' two days longah to the term than the Gwammawian wottahs."

The Head's brow set severely.

"Preposterous!" he exclaimed, rising angrily to his feet.

"We don't wegard it in that light, sir. The whole of the lowah school thinks as we do, and the seniahs weally agwee with us, only they don't say so."

"I am afraid the lower school is in need of a lesson in discipline, then," said the Head angrily. "I never heard of such impertinence in my life."

"But weally, sir—"

"If you will allow us, sir—"

"You may go!"

"Yaas, sir; but undah the cires, we—"

"Boys!" thundered the Head, "I regard your absurd request as a piece of unwarrantable impertinence! You may go!"

The deputation looked at one another glumly—and went!

CHAPTER 6.

A Plot Against the Head.

"WHAT luck?"

Four or five voices asked the question as the crestfallen deputation re-entered Study No. 6. It was hardly necessary, however, as the looks of the deputies told the tale plainly enough.

"Rotten!" said Tom Merry frankly. "The Head wouldn't hear of it."



It was very cold and bleak in the water-butt, but duty compelled Arthur Augustus to sit tight.

"Get a licking?" asked Jack Blake.

"No. But the Head was wild."

"He waised his voice in weplyin' to us," said D'Arcy. "I wegard it as wathah ungentlemanly to waise the voice. I was thinkin' of pointin' that out to him, but I westwained myself."

"Ha, ha! Jolly lucky for you you did. Well, I could have told you all along that it was no good," Jack Blake remarked.

NEXT
TUESDAY:

"TOM MERRY'S VOYAGE."

A Double-length Tale of Tom Merry & Co.
By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

apparently having resolved to take up the role of Job's comforter.

"Oh, wing off, deah boy!"

"I say I told you——"

"Don't cackle like a girl over it, for goodness sake!" said Figgins.

"Figgins, I request you to withdraw that expression. I cannot allow any derogatory remarks concernin' the gentle sex to pass in my presence."

"Oh, rats!" said Figgins crossly.

"Gentlemen, I must request that pwoceedin's be stopped for a few minutes while I administrah a fealful thwashin' to Figgins. I could not, undah any circs., allow him to speak disrespectfully of girls in my presence. I wondah what my Cousin Ethel would think if she heard him? And Cousin Ethel is comin' down to-morrow, too."

"Is she?" said Figgins eagerly.

"Yaas, wathah! I don't suppose she will speak to you, especially as you have such a wude and bwatal way of alludin' to the female sex."

"Oh, don't be a chump, old chap!"

"Unless you withdraw that oppwbvious expression applied to girls, I shall have to give you a fealful thwashin'. Any expression applied to myself," said D'Arcy, with dignity, "I can forgive. But I wegard any wude allusion to girls as an insult to the charmin' sex, and I weally——"

"I withdraw the expression," said Figgins humbly, "on condition that Blake agrees not to cackle like a parrot."

"Vewy good. I should have been sowvy to thwash Figgins——"

"You would have been sorry if you started," grinned Figgins.

"Never mind. What are we going to do about the Head?"

"Sack him!" suggested Blake.

"Weally, Blake——"

"Is this a time for cheap jokes?" said Figgins, rather heatedly. "Something's got to be done. We're close on the sixteenth now, and unless something is done, we shall be sticking here fagging away while the Grammarian rotters are breaking up. Can't we do something?"

"I don't see how we can argue with the Head," said Digby, "and he's rather too high up in the school for us to rag him."

"Still, something might be done," Tom Merry remarked thoughtfully. "Suppose the whole of the lower Forms slack down. Things generally get rather slack at the end of the term, especially the Christmas term. They might get slacker."

"Good! Impositions don't count much now, as the masters never ask for 'em at the beginning of a term."

"No; all imposts left over the Christmas holidays are as good as done. Of course, lickings are lickings, at any time."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"But a few lickings aren't much in a good cause. Suppose we show the powers that be that we're not to be trifled with."

"Good!"

"Ripping!"

"We can't depend on the upper Forms to help us. If we win, they'll be glad enough to break up on the sixteenth instead of the eighteenth. But they haven't the nerve to be pioneers. The old fogies of the Sixth are too sleepy for this sort of thing," said Figgins.

"Hear, hear!"

"The true spirit of progress is found in the rising generation, as represented by the Fourth Form and the Shell."

"Hear, hear!"

"Is it agreed, then—slacking, and ragging, and rows generally, till we get our way?" said Figgins, looking round.

"Agreed!"

"And in case of a row, we all stand by one another, and make every individual's quarrel the quarrel of the whole of the lower school?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hear, hear!"

"That's settled, then," said Figgins gleefully. "We'll raise Cain over in the New House, and you chaps do the same here in the School House. Come on, kids. My only aunt! ain't you finished yet, Fatty?"

"Sha'n't be a minute," said Fatty Wynn.

He wasn't more than a couple of minutes, as he was finishing the last remnant of the beefsteak pie, and there was nothing left to eat on the table. Then he rose, looking very fat and satisfied.

"I'll lend you a hand to roll him home, if you like," said Digby.

Figgins laughed, and pushed Fatty Wynn out of the study, and Kerr followed. The New House trier went back to their own House across the dusky quad, chuckling over the new scheme for bringing the Head to reason.

Tom Merry went up the passage towards his own quarters. Lowther and Manners had left him after the scout practice, to go to the village; but the hero of the Shell expected them to be back by this time. The study was dark when he reached it, and the door ajar.

"Not back yet?" he asked cheerily, peering into the study. There was a growl from the darkness.

Tom Merry started a little, and then he laughed. He remembered the agreed-upon signal of the Dog Patrol.

"By Jove, that was good!" he exclaimed. "So you're here. I almost thought that was a real dog for the moment, kids."

And he entered the study.

He was feeling in his pocket for some matches, and he was rather surprised that Manners and Lowther did not speak.

"Why don't you make a sound, you image?" he exclaimed. "Give me some matches. My box is gone."

"Growl!"

"Oh, rats!" said Tom Merry. "Do give me some matches."

"Growl!"

It dawned on Tom Merry that the scouts were waiting for him to give the reply growl, as he was in duty bound to do, as leader of the patrol.

"Oh, it's all right," he exclaimed. "I forgot."

And he promptly gave the reply growl. He did it rather well this time, too, and it sounded very much like the growl of a dog.

"Growl!"

The same answer came from the darkness of the study.

"Oh, ring off!" exclaimed Tom Merry impatiently. "Nuff's as good as a feast, you know. We can't carry on a conversation in doggy language. Where's the matches?"

There was a deeper growl than before.

Tom Merry snorted, and groped his way towards the mantel-piece. He knew that he would find some matches there. There was a red glimmer of dying embers in the grate, and something dark was looming on the hearthrug. Tom Merry did not see it in the gloom, and he blundered right into it. It was a large basket, and his foot fetched it a powerful kick as he stumbled.

"My hat! What's—that's that?"

It was not a growl this time, it was more like a roar. Something white flashed in the gloom, and Tom Merry jumped clear of the floor, just in time to escape the teeth of a bulldog.

"Ow!" gasped the junior.

He made one bound for the door. He realised the facts at last. It was not the signal of the boy scouts he had heard in the study; it was the growl of a real dog!

He bounded through the doorway; and after him bounded the bulldog.

Tom Merry gave a yell as he heard the teeth snap behind him, and rushed frantically down the passage, with a heavy weight behind him. It was Towser, hanging by his teeth to the seat of the junior's trousers.

CHAPTER 7.

Towser Takes Possession.

HERRIES had just come into Study No. 6, looking rather fatigued. He cast a somewhat dissatisfied glance at the cleared tea-table.

"So you've finished," he remarked. "I don't see why you couldn't wait for a fellow."

"You see, Figgins & Co. started, and we came in a bad second as it was," explained Blake. "There's the hambone left, and the pie-dish, if you're sharp set. Where have you been all this time?"

"Looking after my bulldog."

"Dear me! I hope he had a nice quiet end—I—I mean, I hope he's quite well."

"It's a bit of a cold he's got," said Herries. "That place where we keep the pets isn't warm enough or aired enough for him, now he's seedy. He ought to be taken into a warm, cosy place and-looked after."

"I must weally insist that no wotten bulldogs are brought into this study, Hewwies. If you want to bring a dog indoors, you must bring him up to have some respect for a fellow's twousahs."

"Oh, I'm not going to bring him in here," granted Herries. "You fellows make too much noise, anyway, for him to have any quiet. I've taken advantage of Tom Merry's offer."

His chums stared at him.

"Tom Merry's what?" said Blake.

"His offer," said Herries obstinately. "You surely remember his saying that he saw no objection to a bulldog in a study?"

"Ha, ha! He was thinking of this study, not of his own, I imagine."

"I've taken him at his word. I suppose I've a right to take a fellow at his word. I've made Towser up a comfy bed in a clothes-basket in front of Tom Merry's fire, and he'll be all right there if he's not disturbed."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'll tell Tom Merry as soon as he comes in, so that he won't go blundering in and disturbing Towser——"

"Ha, ha! Tom Merry has been in a long time, and he has just gone to his study," grinned Digby.

"Oh, hang! I hope he won't go blundering into Towser's basket. Towser hates being disturbed when he's taking a nap. I——"

"Hullo! What's that fearful row?"

"Bai Jove, it is a wow, and no mistake."

Gr-r-r-r-r!

"Ow! Help!"

Gr-r-r-r-r!

It was indeed a "row." It came from the passage, and from the direction of the Shell studies, and it was approaching.

Gr-r-r-r-r!

Jack Blake rushed to the door and flung it open.

"What's the—— My hat!"

Tom Merry was dashing down the passage at frantic speed, with Towser clinging to him behind. Fortunately, Towser's teeth had met only in the cloth, but they had gone near enough to the skin for Tom to know that they were there. Towser hung on like grim death, his hind legs sweeping the linoleum as the junior dashed on.

A roar of laughter from Study No. 6 greeted the unfortunate Tom, as he dashed into the light from the open doorway.

"It's Towser!" gasped Blake. "Got him, Towser?"

Herries uttered an exclamation of annoyance.

"My aunt! I might have known he would have gone there bothering Towser!"

"Call him off!" shrieked Tom Merry.

"Here! Towser! Towser! Towsy! Good dog!"

Towser refused to come off, but Blake rushed to the rescue with a cricket stump, and the bulldog was persuaded to let go. Tom Merry reeled breathless against the wall.

"Hurt?" said Blake, trying not to grin.

"N-n-no, I think not," panted Tom. "But—but I was startled. The beast was there in the dark, and when he growled I thought it was Manners and Lowther making the patrol signal—and then he went for me. The beast! He was in a basket or something stuck in front of the fire. Some utter ass shoved him in my study."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, rats!" growled Herries. "I suppose you'll say next that you didn't offer to have my dog in your study while he was seedy?"

Tom Merry stared.

"Blessed if I remember offering anything of the kind," he said. "I'd just as soon have a boa constrictor or a jabberwock."

Herries patted his savage favourite's head. Towser was sniffing round Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, apparently inclined to sample his nether garments. The swell of the School House backed into the study in alarm.

"Howwies, keep that brute away!"

"Well, you keep away from him!"

"I'll tell you what," said Tom Merry. "I'll put a bob towards a subscription for buying a poleaxe for that dog. That's the only offer I'm going to make with regard to Towser."

And he walked away. Herries grunted discontentedly.

"It seems to me that there's a set being made against my dog," he said. "A nice, quiet old chap, too, only likes a little bit of fun at times. Well, as Tom Merry won't have him, and it's no good asking any of the other fellows, I don't see any way out of it but by having him in here!"

"Weally, Hewwies——"

"Take the brute back where he belongs," growled Digby. "Blessed if I can see why you don't sell him and buy some white rabbits."

"Oh, go and eat coke! Now, look here, you chaps," said Herries appealingly. "Towser's not well, and I want to keep him indoors for a bit. If you all back me up we can keep it dark from the prefects, and he won't be discovered here. I think you might back me up for once."

"Well, if you put it like that," said Blake, relenting.

"Yaas, wathah! If Hewwies appeals to us on the grounds of friendship, I don't see that we have any alternative but to grant his request."

"Oh, let him keep the tripehound here if he likes," grunted Digby.

And the chums of the Fourth took their prep. down to the common-room, and left Herries and his bulldog in victorious possession of Study No. 6.

CHAPTER 8.

A Cat and Dog Story.

MEW! Miaou-ou-u!
"Hullo, that's Thomas!" Tom Merry remarked.
The juniors were going up to bed when the musical voice of Thomas the cat was heard. Thomas was the house-dame's cat, and Mrs. Mimms was very proud of him. Thomas had the freedom of the School House, and was monarch of all

he surveyed below stairs. Thomas was a quiet cat, as a rule, and would purr on the hearthrug in the kitchen or the house-dame's room for hours together, only leaving off purring to lap up milk or lick himself. But Thomas had one strong aversion. He barred dogs. When a member of the canine tribe was near, Thomas would bristle and glare, and his back would go up like a very much bended bow.

Miau-ou-ouw!

"Something's wrong with Thomas," said Monty Lowther. "Perhaps he wants to go over to the New House. Mrs. Kenwigg's cat is on intimate terms with Thomas——"

Mew-mew-iau!

"Well, I hope the brute will shut up soon," remarked Manners. "I sha'n't be able to sleep with that row going on."

"He can niff your beast of a dog, Herries," whispered Jack Blake. "Thomas always makes a row when there's a dog about."

"I don't see how he can. Towser's shut up in No. 6."

"Shouldn't wonder if Thomas was wandering round there looking for scraps."

"Then it serves him jolly well right if Towser pins him."

"There will be a row if he does."

"Oh, I don't know—he won't last long if Towser once gets a good hold on him."

"Ha, ha! I mean a row with Mrs. Mimms."

"Oh, Mrs. Mimms ought to look after her cat. Besides, there are lots of tom cats!"

There was the sound of a cricket ball thudding along a passage and down stairs, and the mew of Thomas ceased.

The juniors went to bed, and soon were in the land of dreams. But in Jack Blake's dreams the mew of Thomas mingled, with a curiously realistic effect; which was accounted for when he suddenly awoke and found that the noise was real.

The junior blinked in the darkness of the dormitory, listening to the noise.

Miau-miau-sisisis!

Thomas was on the war-path.

A quarter chimed out from the clock-tower, and Blake knew that it must be a quarter past ten. He sat up in bed.

"That blessed cat!"

"Bai Jove!" came a voice from D'Arcy's bed. "I wogard that cat as a perfect howwah! I have been awake for ten minutes, you know."

"The beast is in the house, I think," said Blake savagely.

"I don't mind a mew or two in the quad, when the brute is leandering to the New House tabby's Hero, but it's a bit too thick to have it inside the house."

"I wathah think the feahful bwute is aftah that ham-bone in Study No. 6."

"I shut the door when I left the study, though."

"Yaas; but I think I left it open when I went back."

"Ass! What did you go back for?"

"I wufuse to be called an ass! I went back to bring away my hat-box and glove-box. I could not wun the wisk of leavin' them in the study for Hewwies' bulldog to gnaw. He was gnawin' your football boots, as it was."

"My football boots!" shrieked Blake. "He was gnawing my football boots, and you never told me."

"Bai Jove, you know, I nevah thought of it; I was feelin' so anxious about my silk hat. As I was sayin', I couldn't shut the door, as I had a hat-box in one hand and a glove-box in the othah."

"My football boots——"

"Yaas; when you come to think of it, it is wathah wuff on your football boots, and I weally wish I had thought of mentionin' the mattah to you."

"You—you—you——"

Miau—miau—miau-u-u—ss-s-s-s-s-s!

Gr-r-r-r-r!

A terrific uproar rang through the silence of the School House.

"My hat!" cried Digby, starting up. "What on earth's that?"

"Something's disturbing my bulldog!" growled Herries.

"Faith, and it sounds as if it were a cat intirely," said Reilly.

Blake hopped out of bed. He was anxious to get to Study No. 6 and stop the din before any masters or prefects arrived upon the scene. There was a very strict law in the School House that pets should not be kept within doors—especially dogs. A dog had got into the Head's library once, and chewed up his Catullus; and since then, dogs had been taboo.

Half a dozen other Fourth-Formers followed Jack Blake as he rushed half-dressed from his dormitory.

The uproar from Study No. 6 increased rather than otherwise, and it was pretty clear that a desperate cat and dog fight was in progress.

"What does this mean?" shouted Kildare, coming along the passage in shirt and trousers, with a lamp in his hand.

"Sounds like a cat and a dog," said Blake. "It might be a cheap phonograph, it sounds like a——"

He dodged just in time. Kildare was not in a humour for funny remarks. The captain of St. Jim's rushed in the direction

of the noise, and several other seniors followed him. The juniors had to make way. They arrived in a crowd at the open door of Study No. 6.

The din by this time was really terrific.

A startling scene met their gaze, as the lamps and lanterns were flashed into the study.

Towser had left his basket, apparently having forgotten that he was ill. He was chasing Thomas the cat round and round the study. Thomas could have bolted out of the open door, but either he was too frightened to think of it, or he was unwilling to abandon the ham-bone which had attracted him to the study.

The ham-bone was on the floor, having been dragged out by either the bulldog or the tomcat, and apparently it had been gnawed by both.

Gr-r-r-r!

Mew-ew-ew-s-s-s-s-s-s-s!

Thomas turned on his enemy every second or two and arched his back and spat, his eyeballs glaring like green fire.

"My only hat!" gasped Blake.

Thomas had jumped upon nearly everything in the study in escaping from his foe. Half the loose articles in the room were strewn upon the floor. Blake caught a glimpse of a football boot in the basket Towser had occupied. It was gnawed pretty well through.

"Who brought this dog into the house?" roared Kildare.

Mew-ew-ew!

Thomas was pinned at last!

He went down on the carpet, with Towser's teeth in his fur, and there was terrific screeching and spitting and yapping and clawing.

Herries rushed forward.

"The beast! He'll hurt him!"

"Collar him, while I get Thomas away," exclaimed Tom Merry, who had joined the investigators, half-dressed like the rest.

Herries snorted.

"Blow Thomas! I was thinking my dog would be hurt! Towser doesn't like being clawed."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake.

Herries' anxiety was all for his precious bulldog. Even Kildare could not help grinning. Herries dragged at the collar of Towser, and his hands were clawed by Thomas. Tom Merry was clawed too in getting the tomcat away. But the combatants were separated at last.

Tom Merry tried to stroke Thomas into a good humour, but Thomas was not to be pacified. He struggled and scratched, and flew out of the junior's arms, and out of the doorway. The boys there scattered to let him pass, and he whizzed down the passage. A little gentleman in glasses was coming along the passage with a lamp in his hand, and Thomas dashed between his legs; and little Mr. Lathom gave a jump, and sat down suddenly on the linoleum. There was a crash, and his lamp went out.

"Dear me!" gasped Mr. Lathom.

Kildare ran to help him up.

"Dear me!" murmured the master of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's. "Something smote me on the legs—some animal I think, with greenish eyes!"

"It was the cat, sir."

"Oh, the cat! That cat is a terrible nuisance, and I must really remonstrate with Mrs. Mimms. I am a merciful man, but I really think that cat should be painlessly extracted—I mean, painlessly killed."

"He was fighting with a dog, sir."

"Dear me! But dogs are forbidden in the School House."

"You had better speak to Herries about that," said Kildare grimly.

"I certainly shall!" Mr. Lathom had arrived at the door of the study. "Herries, is it possible that you have so far disregarded the rules of the House as to bring a dog into your study?"

"I—I—I—"

"Pway let me explain, Hewwies. I can explain to Mr. Lathom evah so much bettah. Towseh was wathah seeday, sir, and Hewwies persuaded us to let him have the wotten bwute in the study. Hewwies has certainly bwoken a wule of the House, but on the othah hand he certainly deserves a pwize medal fwom the Woyal Humane Society, for takin' care of a howwid beast that anybody else would have shot at once."

Some of the juniors giggled, and Mr. Lathom blinked at Herries.

"Herries, if your dog is really ill, I will excuse you for bringing him into the house, on condition that you never do anything of the sort again."

"Yes, sir," said Herries, with a heavy heart, "I—I— Must I take him out again, sir?"

"Certainly, you must. But if you wish him to be taken care of, I have no doubt that Taggles, the porter, will take him in charge, for a—er—a small gratuity."

"Thank you, sir," said Herries, brightening up.

"Take the animal out of the house at once. And now, boys, go back to bed."

And so the affair of Towser ended; and it was fortunate for Herries that he had had mild little Mr. Lathom to deal with. Towser was taken over to the porter's lodge, and deposited there. Taggles, the school porter, had not many virtues, but he was fond of dogs, and kept two himself, and a tip made him quite willing to take charge of Towser. Herries, somewhat relieved in his mind, went back to bed.

Tom Merry bathed his hands and wrists where Thomas had scratched him, and went to bed. Five minutes later, he sat up with an exclamation.

Beneath the window sounded the musical notes of Thomas the cat:

"Mew—miau—miau—ew—c—w—ew!"

CHAPTER 9.

Tom Merry Misses the Cat.

TOM MERRY stepped out of bed with a blaze in his eyes.

Thomas the cat had scratched him and clawed him, and he had not been angry. Thomas the cat had raised Cain in the School House, and wakened nearly everybody who had gone to bed, and had escaped scot-free. But when Thomas the cat started serenades under the windows of the Shell dormitory, the time had come for the condign punishment of Thomas.

Miau—miau—lu—au—au!

"The beast!" muttered Tom Merry. "The horrid brute! It was a mistake not to let Towser finish him."

Miau—miau—au—au!

"Oh, it's all right," yawned Lowther. "He's only Leander. He'll cross the Hellespont soon, and they'll have the benefit of his sweet voice in the New House. He's serenading Mrs. Kenwigg's tabby."

"He can't do it under our windows. He'll cross the Styx if I get hold of him," growled Tom Merry. "Where did you put your boots, Lowther?"

"What do you want with my boots?" asked Monty suspiciously.

"I want one to chuck at the cat."

"Chuck one of your own."

"It might get lost."

"Why, you—you—you—"

"Never mind; here's one of Manners' football boots!"

"You let my football boots alone," yelled Manners, who had not shown any signs of wakefulness hitherto. "If you shy my football boots at that cat, I'll jolly well shy you after them."

"Oh, blow your old football boots! I never saw fellows like you two for making a fuss." Tom Merry groped in the darkness and found a shoe-horn, and then made his way to the window.

The window was high up in the wall, and could only be reached by standing on the head of a bed. Tom Merry dragged the nearest bed towards the window, and there was a startled gasp from the occupant, who happened to be Herbert Skimpole, the inventive genius of the Shell.

"Dear—dear me! What is happening! Is it an earthquake?"

"Oh, hold your row, Skimmey."

"Is that you, Merry? Is it an earthquake that is happening? It must be, as my bed has moved from its place of its own volition, and, in fact, is still moving. Ow!" gasped Skimpole, as the bed bumped against the wall. "What a terrific shock! Has any part of the roof fallen in yet?"

"You utter ass, I'm moving the bed, to stand on the end—"

"It is most remarkable," went on Skimpole, unheeding; "I must take some notes of this. Earthquakes in Sussex are very rare, and—"

"Will you hold your row?" roared Tom Merry. "I'm dragging your bed here to step on the head, to get to the window. I'll step on your head instead if you don't shut up."

"Oh dear! Is that all it is, Merry? I was quite startled, and I had no doubt that a most remarkable phenomenon was occurring."

"Well, you shut up, and that will be a remarkable phenomenon enough," growled Tom Merry, as he clambered on the bed and gained the window.

He pushed the window open and looked out. The night was dark, and he could see little or nothing.

The mew-ew of Thomas the cat was still audible, but it was farther off.

Tom Merry growled discontentedly.

Thomas the cat, as if scenting danger, had moved round an angle of the building, and, judging by the sound, he was now seated on the stone balustrade of the School House steps, a favourite spot he had for sunning himself in the daytime.

"Beast!" muttered Tom Merry, dropping the shoe-horn in disgust.

There was a yell from Herbert Skimpole.

"Ow! Ow! What was that?"

"Ha, ha! I'm sorry. I forgot you were under there," said



There was a fearful yell from below—Tom Merry had missed the cat!

Tom Merry, peering downwards. "Did that fall on you, Skimmy?"

"Ow! Yes, Tom Merry. It gave me a most unpleasant crack on the head, and——"

"Too bad," grunted Lowther. "It was cracked already, too."

"Really, Lowther——"

Tom Merry jumped down, and bundled Skimpole's bed back into its place; then through the stilly night came a louder and more penetrating sound from the dusky quad.

Miau-miau-miau-au-au!

"My only Aunt Matilda Ann!" exclaimed Tom Merry, exasperated. "That has got to be stopped."

"Go out and look for him," said Lowther encouragingly. "When you find him, give him one for me."

"You come with me."

"Well, it's so jolly cold. And you're out of bed already, you know."

Tom Merry picked up one of Manners' football boots without saying anything to its owner. Silence was golden, and saved argument. He left the dormitory with the boot in his hand and a vengeful look on his face.

Quietly enough he went down the passage.

The window at the end of the passage commanded a view

of the School House steps, and from there it was possible to take a good aim.

Thomas the cat was warming to his work now, and the sound of his serenade was piercing the stilly air far and wide. Tom Merry meant that it should be interrupted forcibly. He was getting fed up with the nocturnal music of Thomas.

He reached the end window, and opened it cautiously.

It opened easily enough, with scarcely a sound.

Tom Merry peered out into the gloom. He could make out scarcely anything, but from the darkness below came the unmelodious notes of Thomas.

Tom Merry took careful aim with the boot, judging more by sound than sight. There was a sound in the quadrangle, but he did not notice it. He only heard the music of Mrs. Minims' pet.

He did not know that a dark form was stealing to the School House steps to execute vengeance upon Thomas. He had no means of guessing that Taggles the porter was also abroad cat-hunting.

Miau-miau-au-au-au!

The boot flew from Tom Merry's hand with avenging force,

There was a fearful yell from below.

Tom Merry had missed the cat.

But the missile was not wasted. Taggles the porter, as he crept up, had caught the boot—with his head. And the yell

that Taggles gave scared Thomas away as much as the football boot could have done. The cat made one bound, and disappeared.

Taggles sat down on the steps, and said things. Tom Merry, with a quiet chuckle, crept back to bed. The voice of Thomas the cat was heard no more round the School House that night. But the things that Taggles said cannot be reported.

CHAPTER 10.

The Slackers.

THE next morning the campaign against the Head opened. Towards the end of the term at St. Jim's, as at most schools, things became slacker. Masters were less exacting, and pupils less inclined to take trouble. Thoughts were fixed on the approaching holidays, and the genial influence of Christmastide softened all asperities. Prefects forgot to cuff cheeky fags, and even among the Babes of the Second Form there were fewer scrimmages.

There was a great deal of slacking in the class-rooms the last few days of the term, but such an amount of slacking as now commenced had never been heard of before at St. Jim's.

The Shell slacked, and the Fourth Form slacked. The Third Form followed suit, and slacked also. Such a crowd of slackers was amazing.

Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell, did not know what to make of it. His class that morning knew nothing. Things he had told them a dozen times had passed completely from their minds. They made the most random answers to the easiest questions.

Tom Merry was one of the best in the Shell in the Latin lesson, but Tom Merry construed that morning not only in a way that would have made "Quintilian stare and gasp"; but in a way that made Mr. Linton feel inclined to tear his hair. Monty Lowther's old joke about Julius Cæsar giving three parties in Gaul was nothing to it.

"Profusus patriamque iramque parentis vitat Agenorides," said Tom Merry, with a face of preternatural solemnity. "A profuse pater, the parent of a ram—"

"What?" shrieked Mr. Linton.

"A profuse parent, the pater of a ram."

"Merry!"

"Yes, sir."

"It is impossible that you can be so stupid. You will take a hundred lines for impertinence!" thundered Mr. Linton. "Lowther, you will construe."

Tom Merry sat down, and Monty Lowther rose with a lurking grin on his face.

"A profitable pater, the parent—"

"Take a hundred lines, Lowther. You will construe, Manners."

"A pertinacious ram, the property of a pater—"

"Two hundred lines, Manners. Construe, French."

"A profuse country with angry parents—"

"Three hundred lines, French. You will construe, Gore."

"A fugitive from an angry ram—"

"Four hundred lines, Gore. You will construe, Macdonald."

"A countrified fugitive—"

"Five hundred lines!" shrieked Mr. Linton. "And the next boy to make a ridiculous answer will be sent up to the Head."

And the rag was stopped for a time.

But the Shell were in earnest, and they kept up the game. They found it rather exciting, and comical, too, and the impositions that were showered upon them as thick as leaves in Vallambrosa did not trouble them much. It was a physical impossibility to get all the lines written out before breaking up for the holidays, and all the traditions of St. Jim's were against carrying over imposts into a new term.

Herr Schneider took the Fourth Form and the Shell together in German that morning. He had had his hands full with them before, but never so full as on the present occasion.

It was never an easy task to drive his beautiful Deutch into the heads of the juniors, but fellows like Lowther and Merry and Kerr had always been good German scholars, and had given him little trouble. But now the brightest fellows in the class seemed as dense as the dullest. Such a simple sentence as "Weinen wollte mit ihnen gern" was the cause of trouble at the start.

"Pour out the Rhine wine," said Monty Lowther demurely.

Herr Schneider stared at Lowther fixedly.

"Vat did you say mit yourself, Lowther?"

"Pour out the Rhine wine, sir."

"You vas pretend tat you tink tat tat sentence tat I tell you is vat you say mit yourself after!" roared the Herr, his English growing mixed as his anger mounted. "Lowther, I tink tat you te stupidest poy tat nefer vas after."

"Yes, sir," said Monty Lowther meekly.

"Tat sentence have noting to do mit trinken wine. I ask you again vat it is," said Herr Schneider heatedly. "I have written him on te plackboard for you. Use your prains."

"I haven't any, sir."

"Eh?"

"I haven't any prains, sir. I don't know what they are."

"Poy, I really tink tat you speak troot, and tat you haf no prains inside of your head before."

"Oh, you mean brains, sir! We generally pronounce brains, brains in England, and not prains. I suppose you don't have brains in Germany?"

"Lowter, you will take vun hundred lines."

"Well, that's hard cheese, because they don't have brains in Germany," grunted Monty Lowther, as he sat down.

"Merry, vill you tell me vat tat line be in Engleesh?"

"I should like to whine with you, sir."

The class giggled, and Herr Schneider turned pink.

"Take a hundred lines also, Merry. You may speak, Plake."

Jack Blake wrinkled his brows thoughtfully at the sentence the Herr had scrawled on the blackboard.

"I'll have a drink with you," he said.

"Take two hundred lines, Blake. D'Arcy."

"Yaas, sir. Pway wait a moment while I adjust my monocle. Let me see. Yaas, I can do that as easily as anythin', sir. I would I had some wine to drink with you, sir."

"Vun thousand lines!" roared Herr Schneider. "Ten thousand lines! Twenty thousand lines after!"

"Yaas, sir. Shall I do them at home during the vac, sir?"

"Sit down, D'Arcy. I tink te class have gone mad mit itself before," said the Herr. "You vas all know aretty pretty well—tat tat line say, 'Fain would I veep mit you.' Fain would I veep mit you, you stupid poy."

"But we're not weeping, sir," said Digby.

"Vat tat you say, Tigby?"

"We are not weeping, sir, so you can't weep with us."

"Tigby, take vun thousand—ten thousand lines before. Vat I say is te translation of tat line on te plackboard. Fain would I veep with you."

"We'd be glad, sir," said Blake. "Only we're not doing any weeping now."

"Himmel! I tells you—"

"If you'd like to weep, sir, don't mind us. We can wait."

"Poys! Peasts! Idiots!"

"We don't mind, sir," said Tom Merry. "If you would fain weep with us, we'll try to do a weep, sir, to keep you company."

"I tells you tat—"

"Yes, sir, don't mind us, sir."

Herr Schneider picked up his pointer. He rapped the knuckles of a dozen boys nearest to him, and there were howls in the class, even if there were no weeping.

The German master glared at the juniors.

"I tink tat te class is insane mit itself this morning," he said. "But I tinks tat I uses te pointer venever tere is any sheek, ain't it."

And for the rest of the lesson the unfortunate Herr had a quieter time.

But when morning lessons were over, and the masters at St. Jim's compared notes, all the junior masters found that they had had a troublesome time.

Mr. Selby, the Third-Form master, was gasping when he left the class-room, where he had been combating the amazing stupidity of the Infants, and even in the Fifth Form there had been some signs of the "rag," and Mr. Ratcliff was looking as pleasant as a thunder-cloud after lessons.

The Sixth had been the only model Form that morning, anything like a rag being miles below the dignity of the grave and reverend seniors of the Sixth.

The Head was unconscious of the new departure of the hopeful juniors till after morning lessons, but when he met the masters he could not fail to see signs of disturbance in their faces.

He looked surprised and troubled when he learned of the unusual proceedings in the junior class-rooms.

"It is very curious," he remarked to Mr. Railton, the master of the School House, "I am aware that a little unruliness often shows itself at the close of a term, but really this seems to be passing all bounds."

Mr. Railton smiled slightly.

"I am afraid the juniors are dissatisfied, sir."

"Indeed! why?"

"It is an absurd idea they appear to have in their heads. The Rylcombe Grammar School breaks up to-morrow, and we remain here till the eighteenth. The boys appear to think that they are entitled to break up two days earlier."

Dr. Holmes frowned darkly.

"Ah! I heard something of that yesterday; three juniors had the astounding impertinence to come to me, in a sort of deputation, to ask me to allow the school to break up two days earlier than usual."

"Of course, it is utterly unreasonable. St. Jim's has broken up on the same date for hundreds of years, and the establishment of the Grammar School in the neighbourhood cannot make any difference to us, except by some mental process peculiar to the junior mind." The Head smiled. "There is really no

accounting for the fancies boys will get into their heads at times," he said. "But this really amounts to a plot against me—an attempt to coerce their headmaster! I am afraid the delinquents will have to be severely dealt with if there is any more of this absurdity."

And the Head looked as if he meant what he said.

CHAPTER 11.

Tom Merry Confesses—The New House Patrol.

TOM MERRY & CO. poured out into the quad after morning lessons in high spirits. The "rag" had commenced, and seemed to be going well. A few impositions did not matter, as they would never be written. The Terrible Three marched out arm-in-arm with gleeful faces. A crowd of juniors went to cheer under Mr. Linton's windows, but scattered soon enough when they saw the Shell master looking out. Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth, came out into the quadrangle, and looked severely towards the group of juniors chatting and laughing round Tom Merry. Tom's face became grave all at once.

"I want to speak to Lathom," he said. "I'll join you in a minute."

"More rag?" grinned Blake, "what's the little game?"

"Oh no. It's about that pass the other day."

"Eh! What about the pass?"

"You remember—we got Lathom to sign a pass for us, and he didn't know Figgins was hiding behind the hedge, and I wrote the pass for him to sign so that it would include the chaps he didn't see."

"Ye-es. I thought afterwards that I'd rather we had owned up."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, that's what I was thinking of doing," said Tom Merry, frankly. "Lathom's a good little sort—but I won't mention names, in case it means a licking."

"I think we had better come with you."

"Rats! It was my idea. No good two getting licked for one wheeze." And Tom Merry scudded off.

Mr. Lathom stopped as he saw the junior coming towards him. He looked rather severely at Tom Merry through his spectacles.

"You wish to speak to me, Merry?" he said, majestically.

"Yes, sir, if you can spare me a minute. It's—it's about that pass the other day," said Tom Merry, colouring. "You may remember, sir—it was dark, and I wrote it out, and you signed it."

The Fourth-Form master looked puzzled.

"I remember perfectly, Merry. Your pass had been accidentally burnt by the match one of you was holding, and I signed a new one."

"It—it wasn't an accident, sir. The pass was burnt on purpose."

"Why? Why was not the old pass as good as the new one?" demanded Mr. Lathom, looking very much surprised.

"I—I wrote out the second one, sir, and didn't specify the number of chaps it covered," stammered Tom Merry, "and you signed it."

"Well, Merry?"

"And—you didn't see all of us, sir. The rest of us were behind the hedge."

Mr. Lathom frowned darkly.

"Then you—you were guilty of an imposition upon my—er—credulity, Merry? You passed in a number of truants by means of the pass so obtained."

"Ye-es, sir," said Tom Merry, hanging his head a little. "I didn't mean any harm, sir. It was more a joke than anything else."

"And you confess to me now that it has come to light, I suppose?"

"Oh no, sir, it hasn't come to light."

"Oh! Then what is your motive for telling me about it?"

"I—I felt rather uneasy in my mind on the subject, that's all, sir. I made up my mind to tell you about it, and—and take my guel."

"Your what—oh, your punishment." Mr. Lathom paused.

"Well, Merry, you have taken a very honest and manly course in telling me this. I am glad to see that you are so frank and truthful, at all events. You certainly deserve punishment for imposing upon a Form master. But—but under the circumstances I shall pardon you. You may go."

Tom Merry's eyes danced.

"Oh, thank you, sir."

And Mr. Lathom was smiling as he walked on. He liked Tom Merry, as everyone else at St. Jim's did. The open confession had done Tom more good than harm with him, though the hero of the Shell had not foreseen it.

The juniors had gone into the gym for further scout practice, and Tom Merry joined them there. They had nearly an hour before dinner. Blake was standing in the doorway staring into the gym when Tom came up.

"Anything the matter?" asked Tom, as he caught the expression on Blake's face.

The Fourth-Former pointed into the gym.

"Just look!"

Tom Merry looked, and whistled. Six New House juniors were going through evolutions under the direction of the great Figgins. Kerr, Wynn, French, Pratt, Smith, and Roberts, of the New House, were the six, and it was evident that they were forming a patrol.

The School House juniors looked in somewhat indignantly. Figgins & Co. had not been long following their lead. The New House juniors took no notice of them. They went on practising with stolid faces.

"The patrol being known as the Rat Patrol, in honour of our respected housemaster," said Figgins, "it will be necessary for the members to learn the squeak of the rat as a signal."

"Squeak, squeak!" came from some of the more humorous School House juniors in the doorway.

Figgins smiled blandly.

"You will be able to pick it up easily——"

"Squeak! Squeak!"

"——because there are some of the animals in the gym now, squeaking away for all they're worth."

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the Rat Patrol.

And the School House squeakers looked rather sheepish.

The Rat Patrol began to practise squeaking in deadly earnest, and Tom Merry stopped his ears.

"Bai Jove, I wogard that as a feahful wow," said D'Arcy. "Whenevah I hear a wat squeakin' in future I shall think of Figgins. I say, Figgy, deah boy, I wish you'd stop that wow. It sounds like wusty hinges."

"Oh, go and eat coke!" said Figgins.

"I suppose you call yourselves a patrol," said Tom Merry with good-tempered tolerance. "They say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Bosh!" said Figgins cheerfully. "It's not imitation to take up an idea and work it properly, instead of watching while others muck it up."

"Of course, you wouldn't compare your rotten Rat Patrol with our Dog Patrol."

"No, I wouldn't—there's no comparison," said Figgins, disdainfully.

"Wats, Figgins! I must weally say——"

"Well, pit your patrol against ours, then," said Tom Merry at once. "We're ready to test you, in anything you like."

"Right-ho!" said Figgins, instantly. "What shall it be—running, riding, walking, scouting, tracking, boxing, wrestling—anything you like."

"Scouting, of course, as we're scouts," said Tom Merry. "We've got time before dinner."

"We can't go out of the grounds——"

"No need; the quad is big enough. Look here, one patrol has to track the other, and then the other has to track the one. The patrol that unearths the other party the quicker wins the bet. Is that clear?"

"Clear as mud," said Kerr.

"Don't you speak, corporal," said Figgins severely. "Silence in the ranks."

"Silence in the wanks, deah boys."

"It's all right," said Figgins. "We'll stay in the gym, while you fellows go and get into cover. Then we track you down, and every fellow tracked down is a prisoner unless he can get back to the gym. Then you serve us the same. Go ahead."

"Yaas, wathah, and I weally think, Figgins——"

"Never mind what you think, Gussy. Get a move on."

Tom Merry and Blake dragged D'Arcy away. The Dog Patrol left the gym, having arranged that the Rats were to give them three minutes' grace. Figgins & Co. could be trusted, of course, not to look.

Tom Merry looked round the quad. It was thick with snow, and likely to show footprints very plainly when the juniors left the well-tramped paths.

"Bai Jove, I can see a likely place," said Arthur Augustus.

"You can give me a bunk up, Tom Mewwy, if you like, and then cut off and hide yourself, Tom Mewwy! Bai Jove! fancy a chap walkin' away while I'm talkin' to him! I shall have to manage it by myself, I suppose."

The swell of St. Jim's hurried off.

Round a corner of the old School House was an ancient water-butt. It was no longer used for its original purpose, but it was still there, as well as the pipe that had once emptied into it.

Some distance above the butt the pipe ended, in a wide mouth overlooked by the lower end of another pipe, which had once conveyed water from the gutter above. The open top of the underneath pipe was within reach of the box-room window, but that was a fact to which Arthur Augustus paid no attention at the time. He was only thinking of the dry butt as a place of concealment.

He reached it, scudding through the snow, in too much of a hurry to notice that he was leaving tracks that a blind man could have followed.

He arrived at the water-butt, and looked at it doubtfully

for a moment. It was not over clean, and it did not look inviting. Arthur Augustus thought of his clothes, and hesitated.

But he heroically nerved himself to the effort. He heard a shout from round the corner, as he stood there, showing that Figgins & Co. were coming out of the gym.

"Bai Jove! I must wisk it!" he muttered.

And he clambered over the side of the old butt.

To drop down inside was the work of a moment, and the swell of St. Jim's found plenty of room to crouch, so that his head would be below the level of the top.

There he hoped to remain secure till Figgins & Co. had gone further afield in search of the hidden Dog Patrolters, and then a dash to the gym would be easy, and D'Arcy, at least, would be one of the winners.

The open pipe above his head did not obtain even a glance from him. If he had known that a couple of faces were looking out of the box-room window, and that Gore and Mellish had watched all his movements with much interest, he might not have felt so easy in his mind.

"What the dickens is he getting into the water-butt for?" asked Gore, staring at the cad of the Fourth in amazement.

Mellish chuckled.

"Figgins & Co. are after him, I expect. This is some of their patrol rot, you know; they're doing the boy scout wheeze. Rot, I call it!"

"So do I," agreed Gore.

Gore and Mellish were just the fellows to call the boy scout idea "rot." They had gone into the box-room to smoke cheap cigarettes, pretending to enjoy them, and at the same time quaking with dread of hearing the footstep of a prefect.

Mellish flattened his nose against the window, but D'Arcy had disappeared into the water-butt. The cad of the Fourth grinned.

"My hat, what a ripping wheeze!"

"What is it?"

"We can reach the pipe from here. What price a jug of water in it. It would give Gussy a giddy ducking."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Gore.

"Don't make a row," grinned Mellish. "He might hear. You get the jug of water while I get the window open."

"Right you are!"

And Gore hurried away, and by the time he returned with the jug of water, Mellish had succeeded in silently opening the window. Arthur Augustus crouched in the water-butt, oblivious of his impending doom.

CHAPTER 12. The Rival Scouts.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS was listening with painful intensity. He put his head above the level of the butt and looked round, and caught a glimpse of the trackers examining the snow at a short distance.

He popped down again like a jack-in-the-box.

Were they going to track him to the water-butt, or to pass on and leave him a clear run back to the gym?

He could not resist putting his head up again to see, but at the same time he was careful to make no sound.

It was very cold and bleak in the water-butt, but duty compelled Arthur Augustus to sit tight.

The trackers were coming closer.

He could hear the sound of Patrol-Leader Figgins's voice, and the answering tones of Corporal Kerr.

Were they tracking him down?

He felt that he must have one more look.

His head rose again higher—and then a fearful screech left his lips and echoed through the frosty air.

"Ow! Wow! Gr-r-r-oooooch!"

A flood of cold water had suddenly swished down the pipe over his head, and splashed all over him.

The unfortunate swell of St. Jim's was drenched from head to foot.

"Ow! Ow! w-w-w-w-oooooch!"

Figgins gave a yell.

"There he is!"

And three or four New House scouts dashed up to the water-butt. From the open window of the box-room Mellish and Gore were yelling with laughter.

Arthur Augustus was trying to scramble out of the butt, and Figgins & Co. laid violent hands on him and helped him out; so forcibly that he bumped on the ground and yelled again.

"Got him!" roared Figgins.

"Welease me! You howwid wottahs, welease me! I wefuse to be dwenched with watah and bumped on the beastly gwound! Welease me at once!"

"Ha, he, ha!"

Mellish and Gore yelled with laughter from the window, and the New House scouts were yelling, too. Arthur Augustus picked himself up.

"Got him!" shouted the scouts. "You're a prisoner, Gussy!"

"I wefuse to—"

"Look out! There goes Tom Merry!"

The scouts dashed away, without bestowing any further attention upon Arthur Augustus. Tom Merry was making a break across the quad for the gym, the way having been left open by the scouts in the tracking of D'Arcy.

The New House patrol were tearing after Tom Merry in a twinkling, but the hero of the Shell was in first. He turned breathlessly in the doorway of the gym and snapped his fingers cheerfully at the Rat Patrol.

"Never mind," said Figgins, "look for the rest."

And the scouts recommenced the tracking.

Reilly made a break from behind a fence, and just got into the gym by the skin of his teeth, so to speak; but Manners and Lowther were both captured on the run. Digby was run down in the bicycle shed and captured, and Jack Blake was cornered behind the chapel.

But Jack Blake was a youth of resource. He was driven from cover, but he ran and dodged, and dodged and ran, till he was fairly cornered. Then he swung himself to the top of the wall by the ivy, and ran along recklessly, and dropped into the Head's garden before Figgins & Co. quite knew what he was doing.

From that spot he had the choice of three or four ways back to the gym, and he got in safely by one of them.

Figgins & Co. were only about five seconds behind, and they came in breathless. Arthur Augustus had disappeared. He had gone in to get a rub down and change his clothes.

"Four captures and three escapes," said Tom Merry. "If we don't do better than that, Figgy, you can call yourselves the cock-house of St. Jim's as far as scouting is concerned."

"Well, we're ready to try."

"Where's Gussy?" exclaimed Tom Merry, looking round.

"We can't try the game fairly without our full number."

"He's gone in to change his things," grinned Blake.

"The young ass! Ripping sort of a scout he makes—fancy a scout in war time going in to change his things! I say, Herries, come and be a scout?"

"Right-ho!" said Herries, who was looking very cheerful. He had just had a favourable report from Taggles as to the state of Towser.

"Now we're up to the number again," said Blake. "Get off, you New House wasters, and we'll give you three minutes."

And Figgins & Co. went out to take cover in their turn.

Tom Merry and his patrol waited impatiently for the three minutes' grace to expire. The hero of the Shell snapped his watch shut at last.

"Time's up!"

And the School House Patrol left the gym.

There was no sign of Figgins & Co. in the quadrangle. There were plenty of tracks in the snow, but which were made by Figgins & Co., and which weren't, was open to question. Tom Merry's eyes glistened as he caught sight of a shoulder behind the corner of the wood-shed.

"There's one of the bounders!" he muttered.

"Faith, and it looks like Figgins's jacket!" muttered Reilly.

"Come on—quietly!"

"Sure, I'm wid ye!"

The two scouts stole off quietly through the snow. The others spread in various directions. Tom Merry and Reilly approached the wood-shed with the stealthiness of real scouts on the war-trail. They came close—closer—closer—and all of a sudden rushed round the corner and pounced upon the junior there, and dragged him over in their victorious clutch.

"Got the beast!" shouted Tom Merry.

"Really, Tom Merry—oh, dear—you startled me—please do not tread on my papers—pray do not be so rough—"

"Faith, and it's Skimpole intirely!"

"Skimpole! The—the utter ass!"

Skimpole blinked at Tom Merry. He had chosen that quiet corner behind the wood-shed for the purpose of going through his notes for the four-hundred-and-forty-fifth chapter of his forthcoming book on Socialism, Determinism, Darwinism, and several other isms.

His notes, like the graves of the severed family in the poem, were scattered far and wide, now. He groped after them wildly, but the playful December breeze was after them, too, and they floated away in all directions.

"Really, Tom Merry! Pray help me collect my notes—"

"Rats!" said Tom Merry wrathfully. "What do you mean by sticking there behind the wood-shed and pretending to be Figgins?"

Skimpole blinked at him in amazement.

"But I didn't pretend to be Figgins that I am aware of, Merry. I had chosen this retired spot in order to—"

"You shrieking ass! To give us all this trouble for nothing."

"Pray help me find my notes—"

"Oh, blow your notes!"



The "Terrible Three" slunk in at the gates of St. Jim's.

"Really, Merry—pray stop a minute—this may seriously delay the publication of my great work, and possibly set back the clock of human progress for a considerable time. Dear me, even that fails to move him; he is gone. It will be very distressing indeed if the clock of human progress is set back through this unfortunate incident," murmured Skimpole, groping in the now for his precious notes.

Tom Merry and Reilly were dashing off. They had caught sight of Figgins now, making a desperate break for the gym, and they were after him like greyhounds.

Figgins ran well, but Tom Merry gained, and his hand touched the shoulder of the New House junior within six yards of the door of the gym.

The touch, however, seemed to act as a spur to Figgins, for he bolted away from it, and sprang desperately on. But Jack Blake rushed in from a different direction, and charged the fleeing junior right over.

Figgins rolled in the snow, and in a moment Tom Merry had pinned him; and the next second Reilly came up and grasped him, too. In his excitement and determination that the prisoner should not escape, Reilly sat on his head and flattened

him down into the snow, and the unfortunate New House junior gurgled and choked.

"Don't kill him!" gasped Tom Merry.

"Faith, and I've got him!"

"Yes, but don't suffocate him."

"Faith, and it's a prisoner he is intirely."

Jack Blake dragged the excited Irish junior off. Figgins was helped up, too winded to move a limb. He gasped as he leaned against the door of the gym.

"Well, you've got me!" he panted. "Any others in yet?"

"No. We've captured Skimpole by mistake, but he doesn't count."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins gasped for breath in the doorway of the gym, and Tom Merry, Blake, and Reilly rushed off in search of fresh captures.

Smith and Pratt were being marched towards the gym by Herries and Lowther, and so three prisoners were already collected in the doorway.

A few minutes later Kerr got safely home, and the Scottish

partner in the Co. was the first of the Rat Patrol to get in safely; and as it proved, he was also the last.

One by one the Rat Patrol were run down and captured, until the collection of prisoners numbered six.

Figgins grinned rather ruefully.

"Well, you dogs take the biscuit this time, I admit," he said. "But we'll give you another run for your money after school." And it being nearly dinner-time, the fatigued boy scouts went in with extremely keen appetites to the welcome meal.

CHAPTER 13.

Tom Merry is Sorry.

THE success of the morning had encouraged the plotters, and they came in to afternoon lessons ripe for further mischief. Having caused Mr. Linton to lose his temper and Mr. Selby to fly into a rage, and worried Herr Schneider to the verge of apoplexy, and driven Mr. Lathom into a state bordering on hysterics, the juniors felt that things were going well. A little more, and they would have proved to everybody's satisfaction that the Lower Forms were a force to be reckoned with at St. Jim's.

But in the meantime the Head, as we have seen, had learned what was toward, and he had taken counsel with the masters. When the Shell resumed work at half-past two, Mr. Linton was very quiet and calm—and ready for them.

He had the pleasure of conducting the Shell upon an excursion into Roman history. Tom Merry was the first to start the ball rolling. He informed his amazed master, in reply to a question, that Hannibal founded the city of Rome, in the reign of Trajan; and Mr. Linton, prepared as he was, gasped.

"Merry, step out here!"

Tom Merry made a grimace, and stepped out before the class. He expected punishment, and he was ready to take it; that was all in the game.

But Mr. Linton did not pick up cane or pointer. He wrote a few words upon a sheet of paper, gave it to Tom Merry to read, and told him to take it to Dr. Holmes.

Tom Merry turned crimson as he read the brief note. It stated concisely that Thomas Merry had been guilty of gross impertinence in class.

The junior stood fingering the note, with crimson cheeks and downcast eyes. As a matter of fact the note stated the exact truth, only it had not occurred to Tom Merry in that light before. Mr. Linton looked at him grimly.

"Well, Merry, do you need telling twice?"

Tom turned slowly away and left the class-room.

A hush fell upon the Shell. To be sent in to the Head was a punishment too severe to be lightly encountered. That, and the absence of their leader, brought the juniors to order. The "rag" ended as suddenly as it had begun.

Tom Merry took his way to the Head's study with faltering steps. The doctor was not there, as he happened to be taking the Sixth that afternoon. Tom Merry knew where he would find him, and he went on still more slowly to the Sixth-Form room.

The door was closed, and he tapped on it. His tap was not heard, and he pushed open the door and looked in. Dr. Holmes and the Sixth were fighting over again the ancient battles of the Seven against Thebes, and the doctor, at all events, was too deeply interested to note the entrance of so insignificant a personage as a junior.

Kildare and Darrel glanced at him, and Rushden and Drake, and grinned a little at his crimson face. They knew what was going on in the Lower School.

Tom Merry came up to the Head, but Dr. Holmes did not look down. Tom dared not step out before him and attract his attention, nor would he venture to pluck him by the gown. He had the pleasure of standing there for several minutes, while the Head was expounding a difficult passage, with the eyes of all the Sixth Form upon him.

To judge by the colour of his complexion, all the blood in his body was being pumped into his face. The lurking smiles of the seniors were not lost upon him, although his eyes were downcast. He would have given a term's pocket-money for the floor to open and let him fall through out of sight.

Dr. Holmes became aware at last that the attention of the Sixth was not centred upon the speech of Eteocles. There was nothing comic in Eteocles' speech, but the Sixth were smiling.

The Head looked a little puzzled. He glanced round, and saw Tom Merry, and gave a slight start.

"Merry! What are you doing here? Why are you not in your class-room?"

"If you please, sir—" stammered Tom.

"You have a note for me," said the Head, seeing it in the junior's hand. "Very well; give it to me."

Tom handed him the note without a word.

Dr. Holmes glanced over it, and his brow grew very dark. He read through the note, and then looked at Tom's crimson face, and then looked at Mr. Linton's note again.

"So you have been guilty of gross impertinence, Merry!" he exclaimed at last.

"I—I—I—"

"It is very annoying that a Sixth Form lesson should be interrupted by the impertinence of a junior," said the Head. "I hope you realise what a trouble you have made yourself, Merry. Go to my study and wait for me there."

"Ye-es, sir."

Tom Merry left the Sixth Form room and returned to the Head's study. There he waited in unpleasant apprehension for about a quarter of an hour, while the Sixth were getting through with the Seven against Thebes.

The doctor entered at last. His face was very severe, and the rustle of his gown was awe-inspiring. Tom Merry waited in silence for his doom.

The Head stood with one hand on his table, his eyes fixed upon Merry. Tom did not meet his glance. There was silence for some moments, which seemed to Tom to last for centuries.

"Merry," said the Head, at last, "I am sorry for this. You have a very good character in your Form, and I am very sorry to see you entering into this sort of thing. There are boys in the Shell in whom it would not surprise me. But I did not look for it in you."

Poor Tom wished the caning or flogging, whichever it was to be, would begin. It would be better than this.

"You have been impertinent to your Form master," said the Head. "You do not deny the charge, of course?"

"I—I—I did not mean to be impertinent, sir."

"What did you do?"

"N-nothing, sir."

"What did you say, then?"

"I—I made an incorrect answer, I think, sir."

"Indeed! Mr. Linton would hardly report you to me for impertinence if you had made only an incorrect answer," said Dr. Holmes. "I am afraid I must conclude that the answer was deliberately incorrect, and part of a plan. But what was the answer?—repeat it to me."

"I—I only said that Hannibal founded Rome, sir."

"You said what!" said Dr. Holmes, petrified.

"That—that Hannibal founded Rome, sir, in—in the reign of Trajan."

"Indeed! I am surprised that you did not say in the reign of Edward the Seventh," said the Head, sarcastically. "You were deliberately pretending to be stupid, Merry, for the purpose of causing your Form master trouble. I believe that this is what is called a "rag" in the Lower Forms. You know perfectly well that Hannibal was a Carthaginian general who fought against Rome, when the city had been in existence a very long time, and that Trajan did not reign till many centuries after Hannibal's time. You made the most absurd answer possible. I think I am not wrong in concluding that a "rag" is in progress in the Lower Forms."

Tom Merry was silent. He wondered why the Head did not begin with the cane at once, without wasting time. But the Head had other methods.

"Now, Merry," said Dr. Holmes, in a kinder voice, "you are not the sort of boy to lend yourself to insubordination in this way. I expect better things of you. I think you have acted without reflection, and I am sure I can depend upon your better nature. I shall not punish you."

Tom Merry's eyes opened wide.

"I shall depend upon your reflecting on this matter, and seeing how absurd and childish it is to rebel against constituted authority for a fanciful reason," said Dr. Holmes. "You may go, Merry."

"I—I may go!" stammered Tom Merry.

"Yes; and reflect on what I have said to you."

Tom Merry made a movement to go, and then turned back. At last his eyes met the doctor's frankly.

"I am sorry, sir," he said.

The Head smiled genially.

"Very good. I was sure I was not mistaken in you, Merry."

And Tom Merry left the study, mentally declaring that the Head was a brick, and that so far as he was concerned the "rag" was at an end.

CHAPTER 14.

The End of the Rag.

TOM MERRY was a model for the rest of the afternoon. The Shell, accustomed to following their leader, did so on the present occasion, and Mr. Linton's worries were at an end. For which relief he was duly grateful, though a little puzzled.

When the Form left the class-room, Tom Merry staggered

ANSWERS

NEXT
TUESDAY:

"TOM MERRY'S VOYAGE." A Double-length Tale of Tom Merry & Co.
By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

Under two terrific thumps on the shoulders, administered by Manners and Lowther.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Manners.

"Did you get a very bad licking?" exclaimed Lowther.

"I didn't get a licking at all, and there's nothing the matter—except that I'm being thumped by a pair of dangerous lunatics."

"A lecture instead," said Lowther, reflectively. "I'd rather have a licking, myself. Fancy turning over a new leaf like that all of a sudden. The rag fizzled right out."

"All the better."

"You don't mean to say it's all up!"

"Yes, it is, as far as I'm concerned," said Tom Merry, colouring a little, but speaking quite firmly. His chums looked at one another.

"He's been reading a goody-goody book," said Lowther, with conviction.

"I haven't!" exclaimed Tom Merry, indignantly.

"All about a good little boy who wouldn't take a plum out of the pudding," said Lowther, solemnly. "And there was a bad little boy who did take a plum out of the pudding, and was tossed by a bad bull—I mean by a mad bull, and died in fearful agony; all through taking a plum out of the pudding while the good little boy was doing his home-lessons by the fireside, or weeping on the paternal shirt-front."

"Oh, don't be an ass, Lowther!" exclaimed Tom Merry, as Manners giggled. "There's a difference between having a little sense and being goody, I suppose? The fact is, we have been playing the giddy ox."

"Well, I rather thought that all along, but it was fun."

"Come to think of it, there isn't much fun in being silly asses. I'm done with the rag, and I'll speak to Blake and Figgins about it."

Blake was coming along from the Fourth-Form room, looking rather lugubrious.

The Terrible Three stopped him.

"Wherefore that pensive brow?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Oh, it's rotten," said Blake. "We started ragging Latham in class, but it was a fizzle. It was a good wheeze, too—we started on him in decimals, and got him into a fix so that I thought he would begin to rave. Then the bouncer sent us into the Head's study—Figgins and me."

"Licked?"

"Poof! I wouldn't have minded a licking. But—the Head talked to us like a Dutch uncle, and made us feel small. The fact is, you know, I begin to think that we've been playing the giddy goat, and it's time this rag stopped."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What are you cackling at, you stupid Shell-fish? If you want a set of prize thick-ears all round," said Blake, "you've only got to say so."

"It's all right, old son; keep your wool on. Only we've just come to the same conclusion."

"So you've turned over a new leaf," said Gore, in passing.

"I hear that you're turning the other cheek, Merry?"

And he gave Tom Merry a tap on the nose. Tom's left came out like a flash, and Gore rolled along the passage.

"Must have been a false report," said Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Gore sat up, and then stood up. He pressed his handkerchief to his mouth.

"You beast!" he roared. "Can't you take a joke?"

"You should have said it was a joke, then," said Tom Merry. "How am I to know your jokes unless you tell me so beforehand?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Gore walked away scowling. The juniors looked out into the quadrangle; it was the December dusk was thick, and a few flakes of snow were falling, adding to the masses already piled in the quad. It was not an enticing sight, but, uninviting as the weather was, the boy scouts of St. Jim's were not scared by it. There was nothing soft about them.

"Bai Jove, it's not what you call attractive," Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remarked. "Pewwaps it would be bettah to stay indoors, as—"

"Rats! Don't be a mollycoddle, old chap."

"I should wese to be a mollycoddle undah any cires., Blake. I wasn't thinkin' of the cold, you know, but the dangah of spoilin' our clothes!"

"Ha, ha! Never mind our clothes! When a foreign foe lands in Britain, you don't want him to find you putting your trousers in the press, or brushing a silk hat, do you? If you are ever going to die for your King and country—"

"Weally, Blake, we have had enough of that from Tom Mewwy. I am quite weady to go out scoutin' if you chaps are; in fact, I had bettah come if you do, as you are pwetty certain to get into twouble without me."

"That settles it," said Tom Merry. "Gussy must come."

"I wathah think you are wottin', you wottah, but you are wight all the same. Besides, if we go towards the village, it is quite poss. that we may meet my Cousin Ethel."

"If you knew when she was coming—"

"Yaas, wathah, in that case we could meet her at the station; but, as a mattah of fact, she only said she was comin' to-day, and didn't say whethah she was dwivin' or walkin' ovah, or whethah she was comin' by twain, or which twain!"

"Just like a girl," agreed Blake.

"Weally, Blake, if you mean that remark in a dispwagin' sense, I must take exception to it, as—"

"He means it in a Pickwickian sense," grinned Tom Merry. "Let's get ready, and have a run before tea. Kildare will always give us a pass for scouting, I know—he's getting up a patrol in the Sixth, and he likes the idea."

The pass was easy enough to obtain. Both patrols prepared for business. The motto of the boy scouts, "Be prepared," was one that was taken in earnest by the scouts of St. Jim's. As the School House scouts went out into the snowy quad, Figgins & Co. came over from the New House. The rival patrols saluted one another. But Figgins had something to say.

"I understand that Miss Cleveland is coming to St. Jim's to-day," he remarked.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"But you don't know how or when?"

"Yaas, deah boy. You see—"

"Well, I've an idea. She's certain to come in time for tea with Mrs. Holmes, I should think—at least, she usually does. Most likely she's on her way now; and, on a night like this, she ought to have an escort."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, suppose we spread round towards Rylcombe," suggested Figgins, "and scout on every path, so that some of us will be bound to fall in with her, if she's coming. Some of us take the lane, others the footpath through the woods, and others the Wayland road. Then we shall meet her if she's coming—some of us."

"Good wheeze," said Tom Merry, heartily.

"Right-ho," said Blake, "I'll take the Wayland road, and Dig can come with me."

"Good: I'll scout towards Rylcombe railway station," said Figgins, carelessly.

"Weally, Figgins, I think I had bettah do that," said D'Arcy.

"That is the way Cousin Ethel is almost certain to come."

"Oh, she might take a short cut by the footpath," said Blake.

"That is vevy unlikely."

"Still, she might," said Tom Merry. "You come with me that way, Gussy, in case she does. Manners, you come along, too; and Lowther and Reilly can scout on the lower footpath. The chap who meets Cousin Ethel gives a whistle as a signal and the rest will most likely hear it."

"Agreed."

"But weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Oh, come on, and don't argue with your leader." And the scouts left the gates of St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 15.

A Terrible Tussle.

TOM MERRY, Manners, and D'Arcy parted from their companions in the road, and the three took the well-used footpath through the wood, a short cut to Rylcombe. Figgins & Co. went by the lane. The scouts scattered in their allotted directions, and the hunt was up.

"Bai Jove, it's jolly cold, you know," Arthur Augustus remarked, as the three plunged into the gloom on the footpath. "The beastly snow's still coming down, too."

"Well, what would Christmas be without some snow?" said Tom Merry, cheerfully. "By Jove, it's dark here."

It was lighter further on, where the trees were thinner, and the light of the early stars had a chance of penetrating.

Suddenly Tom Merry gave a start.

"Hold on; quiet!"

"What is it?"

"Somebody on the footpath! Quiet!"

It might have been anybody on the footpath: most probably a labourer going home from his work, or a tramp taking a short cut to the village. But that did not matter: all was grist that came to the boy scouts' mill in the way of practice. Tom Merry knelt down and placed his ear to the ground to listen.

By this device he heard the footsteps more clearly—heavy footsteps, as he now distinguished them, and growing fainter, so that he knew the person who made the sound was going from them, and towards the village.

"Not Cousin Ethel?" asked Manners, as his leader rose.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"No, whoever it is is going the same way we're going, and has jolly big feet. He's not very far in advance, either. We shall see him soon."

"Good; you're getting on."

"There's an awful lot of fun in learning to scout," said Tom Merry, seriously, "and what we learn now may come in useful if we go abroad into a wild country—and we never know what may turn up. I've got an uncle in America, and I might go out

to him some day—and another in India, too. I think it's very likely that a knowledge of scout-craft may come in very useful to me some day."

"Yaas, wathah; I was thinkin' the same. I wathah think I shall make an expedish when I leave school, to the Wocky Mountains to shoot grizzly beahs. I wathah fancy myself as a grizzly beah huntah, you know."

"I rather think the bear would do most of the hunting," grinned Manners.

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"Hark!" exclaimed Tom Merry, suddenly.

Through the silence of the wood a cry suddenly rang.

"Help!"

It was a girl's voice!

"Cousin Ethel!" shrieked D'Arcy.

"Help!"

"Come on!" roared Tom Merry, and he bounded away like a tiger.

Whether it was Cousin Ethel or not, it was a girl in danger of some kind, and that was quite enough for the boy scouts to know.

The three juniors tore along on the shadowy path at top speed.

Arthur Augustus caught his foot in a root and fell headlong, and Manners tumbled over him. He was up in a second; but Tom Merry was far ahead now. The hero of the Shell came out into the light of the stars where the trees were thinner, and caught sight of a slim, girlish form and a terrified face.

"Cousin Ethel!"

It was Ethel. A burly form was near her, that of a tramp of herculean build, undoubtedly the man whose heavy footsteps Tom Merry had detected on the footpath.

His hand was outstretched and clutching the girl's arm, and the open palm of the other hand showed that he was demanding money. The slight figure of the girl seemed to shrink and shake like a reed in his brutal grip. A torrent of threats were pouring from his lips, terrifying the girl too much for her to make even an effort to obey his demand.

But the tramp's flow of language was suddenly cut short. Tom Merry came tearing up, his eyes blazing, and without pausing a second, he hurled himself at the ruffian.

There was a yell, and the tramp rolled over in the snow under the impact.

But he was up again in a second; and so was Tom Merry. As the ruffian ground out a brutal oath between his teeth, Tom Merry sprang between him and the trembling girl, his fists clenched, his eyes ablaze.

"You cowardly ruffian! Stand back!"

With a curse the tramp sprang upon him. Brave and athletic as the junior was, he was a child in the grasp of the powerful ruffian. Back he reeled in an iron grip, and in a moment more he would have been smashed to the ground with stunning force; but Manners was on the scene now.

Manners' fists came together upon the ruffian's face, with a crashing blow, and he staggered and released Tom Merry. His fists swept round, and the blow sent Manners staggering three or four yards before he fell.

"Now your turn!" hissed the tramp, springing upon Tom Merry again.

"Help!" shrieked Ethel.

The woods rang and echoed the cry. Tom Merry struggled desperately in the savage grasp, raining blows on the brutal, stubbly face. Arthur Augustus came tearing up and fastened upon the ruffian, and Manners, dazed as he was, staggered to his feet and joined in the conflict again.

Three sturdy juniors, fighting their hardest, gave the ruffian enough to do, powerful as he was.

They went down again and again under his furious blows, but they jumped up again with undiminished pluck, and there was always one of them clinging to him and hitting fiercely.

The punishment they received was terrible, and their clothes were rent and torn in the desperate struggle, and smothered with snow and mud. But they fought gamely, while Ethel's shrieks for help woke the echoes of the wood. The result of the struggle was still doubtful when there was a crash in the underwoods, and Figgins & Co. came rushing upon the scene.

They saw what was taking place at a glance, and they fastened upon the tramp like so many cats, and dragged him down.

Tom Merry and Manners and D'Arcy were gasping and exhausted; the relief had come only just in time.

Figgins & Co. were fresh, and they gave the tramp plenty to do, and a couple of minutes later Blake and Digby came up and joined in.

The ruffian, big as he was, had no chance then. He received a tremendous hiding, and was aching in every limb when he at last tore himself away and fled into the darkness of the wood.

"My hat!" gasped Figgins. "I call that exciting. So jolly glad we heard you, Cousin Ethel."

The girl was still trembling violently, and Figgins took her hand to reassure her, Ethel leaned on his arm.

"Oh, I was so frightened," she sobbed, "and Tom and Manners and Arthur—I am sure they are terribly hurt."

"Bai Jove! I am feelin' wathah wotten," said Arthur Augustus feebly. "The uttah bwute has completely wuined my clothes, you know."

"I don't think any of us would take a prize in a beauty show," gasped Tom Merry. "How do you feel, Manners?"

"Rotten," said Manners laconically.

"I am sorry, so sorry," said Ethel softly, "and it was so brave of you to come to help me like that against that terrible wretch."

"Well, we couldn't leave you to tackle him, Cousin Ethel," said Tom Merry laughing. "This is all right, you know. Boy scouts have to swear—"

"Eh?" said Blake.

"Oh, don't be an ass, Blake. You scouts have to take the scout's oath, you know, to stand up for those who are in need of help, and take their gruel without making a fuss. We've taken our gruel, and nobody's making a fuss except Gussy."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, I wefuse to be wogarded as makin' a fuss. I was merely remarking that the bwute had spoiled my clothes."

"Well, he has, and no mistake," grinned Blake, surveying the swell of St. Jim's. "You do look a scarecrow, old chap."

"I feel like one, by Jove."

"I am so sorry," said Cousin Ethel. "Hadn't you better get to the school as soon as you can, and—"

"Yaas, wathah! I should be vewy glad to get a beefsteak for my beastly eye, you know," said D'Arcy.

"And we'll see Miss Cleveland safe to St. Jim's," said Figgins blandly.

"Weally, Figgins—"

"Good!" said Tom Merry. "Come on, kids. The sooner we are in the better. I want a beefsteak for my eye, too."

And the three juniors started off at a good pace for St. Jim's, leaving Cousin Ethel to follow more slowly with her escort.

But the pace of Tom Merry and his companions slackened before they reached St. Jim's. They were feeling quite done up, and they arrived at the old school at a walking pace. Even after their toughest fights with the Grammarians of the neighbouring school, Tom Merry & Co. had never returned home in such a plight.

"Let's get in without being seen, if possible," muttered Tom Merry. "I don't want to have a crowd round me—in this state."

"Bai Jove! I quite agree with you."

"Yes, rather!" said Manners. "Quiet does it."

The "Terrible Three" slunk in at the gates of St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 16.

Heroes Three—The Breaking Up.

"BLESS my soul!"

Dr. Holmes uttered the words in tones of absolute amazement. He was standing in the hall chatting with Mr. Selby, when three tattered and forlorn figures sneaked into the School House.

Tom Merry, Manners, and D'Arcy had hoped to cut upstairs without being seen; and it was certainly hard luck that they should run almost into the arms of the Head himself.

"Boys!" said Dr. Holmes, in a voice of thunder.

The three juniors came to a halt.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "We're in for it now, deah boys. This is weally what I wogard as wotten."

"Boys!"

"Ye-e-es, sir," said Tom Merry, blinking out of a half-closed eye at the doctor.

"How came you in this state?"

"We—we—we—"

"You have been fighting!"

"Ye-e-e-es, sir!"

"Yaas, wathah, sir, and my clothes are uttahly wuined."

"They look ruined, D'Arcy. You all three look like disreputable hooligans," said Dr. Holmes angrily. "I can forgive boish fun, or even horseplay, but such absolute ruffianism as this it is impossible for me to overlook. Follow me to my study."

"If you please, sir—"

"Do you hear me?"

And the Head strode away. The juniors exchanged dismayed glances, and followed.

"Bai Jove, this is wotten!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "We can't vewy well explain to the Head, you know. It would sound so much like blowin' our own twumpets, you know. I sha'n't say a word for one."

Tom Merry nodded.

"Right-ho! We can't yarn about having played the heroic rescuer, for the sake of getting out of a row."

"Wathah not!"

"It's hard cheese to be licked for nothing," grunted Manners, "and I fancy from the Head's chivvy that it's a licking to come."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Can't be helped," said Tom Merry, as cheerfully as he could. "It's a bit rough, but a boy scout can't grumble at that. We've got to face the music and grin and bear it."

They followed the Head into his study. In the bright electric light, the three juniors looked even more tattered and torn and hopelessly forlorn than ever.

The Head surveyed them for some moments without speaking, a very grim expression upon his face.

"Disgraceful!" he said at last. "Absolutely disgraceful!"

"Bai Jove!" murmured D'Arcy.

"Have you anything to say for yourselves?"

The juniors were silent.

"You admit that you have been fighting?"

"Yes, sir."

"Whom have you been fighting with?"

They were silent again.

"Then you refuse to reply?"

The juniors looked very uneasy, but they did not speak. The cloud on the doctor's brow darkened ominously.

"Boys," he said, "I give you the opportunity of explaining. You have come back to this college in a disgraceful state. Your appearance would excite remark in a slum. How dare you act in this manner?"

"We are very sorry, sir."

"I am afraid that it is the expectation of punishment that causes your sorrow, Merry. I have been bitterly disappointed in you—in you more than in the others."

Tom Merry flushed painfully.

"After what I said to you to-day," resumed the Head, "I looked for a change in your line of conduct. Many headmasters would have flogged you; I preferred to appeal to your better feelings. I did so, and I thought with a happy result, as I received a very favourable report from your Form master. I perceive now that you have only changed your tactics, and that instead of impertinence towards your master in school hours, you prefer to be guilty of low ruffianism out of school hours. I am ashamed of you, Merry!"

"Oh, sir!"

"I repeat, I am ashamed of you. You have not a word to say in your defence," said the doctor, raising his voice—"not a word!"

The juniors were silent.

"Very well," said Dr. Holmes, compressing his lips, "I will give you five minutes to think over the matter. If at the end of that time you have not decided to speak out and give me the explanation I require, I shall flog you all three in public, assembling the school in Hall for that purpose."

"Bai Jove!"

The juniors were looking white enough now. A public flogging was the worst punishment, short of expulsion, that could fall upon them, and the words sent a shiver through them. But they were "grit" all through, and their determination never wavered. They had made up their minds not to speak, and they would not speak.

Dr. Holmes sat down, his face turned away from the three boys. They stood in an uneasy row, shifting from one foot to another. They were feeling very exhausted from the hard struggle they had been through, and the injuries they had sustained; their eyes and noses were smarting, and most of their bones aching. Dr. Holmes glanced at his watch and rose. His stern, indignant glance dwelt long upon the bruised faces of the three juniors.

"Now, my boys, have you any explanation to give me?"

"No, sir," said Tom Merry, respectfully.

"Very well!" The doctor's face hardened. "Follow me!"

He opened the study door. A slim form was coming along the passage, and the Head paused as Cousin Ethel ran up to the study.

"Miss Cleveland! I did not know you had arrived," he said kindly.

"Oh, Dr. Holmes! I—I heard that—that Merry and Manners and my cousin were to be punished, and—"

"My dear child—"

"But let me explain, Dr. Holmes. I—"

"It's all right, Ethel," said Arthur Augustus. "Pway don't trowble. We can gwin and bear it, deah boy—I mean girl!"

"Nothing of the kind," said Cousin Ethel, firmly. "Dr. Holmes shall know how you came to be in that state."

The Head paused, irresolute.

"Do you know anything about this matter, Miss Cleveland?" he said.

"Yes, sir. I was walking from the station, and thoughtlessly took the footpath through the wood, and—and was stopped by a horrible ruffian, who was going to rob me!" panted Cousin Ethel, breathlessly. "Tom Merry and Manners and my cousin came to help me—"

The Head's expression changed.

"Do you mean to say, my child, that these boys were injured like this in defending you from a ruffian?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, sir."

"Bless my soul! Merry, why did you not explain this to me?"

"Well, sir," said Tom Merry, hesitating. "You see, sir—"

"Pway allow me to explain, Tom Mewwy. I can manage it much bettah, I think. You see, deah sir, we wathah thought you might considah we were blowin' our own twumpet, you know, and bwaggin' about a little twife—"

"That's it, sir," said Tom Merry. "We are boy scouts, you know, sir; and boy scouts have to take their gruel without whining."

"Yes, rather," said Manners, "it was a point of honour."

"Yaas, wathah! As one gentleman to anothah, sir, I need not explain that we couldn't possibly give up a point of honah."

The Head smiled.

"My dear boys, you should have explained to me; you could have trusted me to judge you rightly," he exclaimed. "I am only too glad that Miss Cleveland came in time to save me from committing an injustice. You were wrong not to explain, but I understand your motives, and excuse you. I am sorry, Merry, that I misjudged you, even for a few minutes. You may go, my lads."

"Oh, thank you, sir."

And the juniors went—with Cousin Ethel. The Head looked after them with a glance that was very kind, and then he turned into his study with a thoughtful expression upon his face.

"Why not?" he murmured. "They deserve it—why not?"

The boys of St. Jim's were surprised at being called to a general assembly in the hall later that evening. All the Forms were convened, as upon important occasions, and they wondered what was in the wind.

"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus remarked, "I hope the Head hasn't changed his mind and decided to flog us after all, you know."

"Ha, ha! That's not likely," said Blake. "More probable he's going to make a speech on the subject, and hold you up to admiration, as an example for all good little boys to follow who don't want to be tossed by mad bulls."

"Weally, Blake—"

"My hat!" said Tom Merry, "I hope he isn't going to make any allusion to it in public—make us all feel fearful asses!"

The juniors crowded in and took up their places. When the whole school was assembled, the Head came in by the door at the upper end of the hall.

There was a hush. The Head made an imposing figure in his rustling gown, and a sign of his hand was sufficient to restore silence.

"Boys!" said the Head, "there has been some dissatisfaction in this college because the breaking-up is two days later than that of a neighbouring school. This dissatisfaction was unreasonable. The same date has been observed here for many generations. Yet for certain reasons I have decided to advance the date of breaking-up—"

An irrepressible cheer interrupted the Head.

"Bai Jove, that is wippin'!"

"Hurrah!"

Dr. Holmes raised his hand for silence.

"I am taking this step for the following reason—an act of great bravery on the part of some juniors of this school has come to my notice. Three boys of the lower school have been injured in this act of bravery." Every eye was turned in the direction of the three battered and bruised scouts, who turned red to their very ears. "As some acknowledgment of this act, I am going to accede to the wishes of the boys in respect of the breaking-up. I do not wish this to be understood as being a reward for the action of these lads; I know well that they do not desire anything in the nature of a reward. It is rather intended as a public acknowledgment of great pluck, which reflects credit on the school as a whole."

The doctor ceased, and a tremendous burst of cheering rang through the old hall and made the rafters ring again.

This time the Head did not check it. There were cheers for the breaking-up, cheers for the Head, and cheers for Tom Merry.

In the midst of the cheering the Head retired, and the boys dispersed at last, gleefully discussing the news. Tom Merry and his chums celebrated it by a big feed in the study, to which the chums of No. 6 and Figgins & Co. were invited.

And so ended the term at St. Jim's, and the boys departed far and wide on their Christmas holidays. And with Tom Merry, to spend the vacation with him, went Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and his brother Wally, and Skimpole of the Shell, whom Tom asked out of the kindness of his heart. And as it was arranged that all the rest of the chums of St. Jim's were to pay flying visits at some time or other during the Christmas vacation, it was assured that Tom Merry would have a lively and a merry Christmas.

THE END.

(Next Thursday: "Tom Merry's Voyage," a grand, long complete tale of Tom Merry by Martin Clifford. Please order your copy of "The Gem" Library in advance. Price One Penny.)

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BRITAIN INVADED!



A Powerful and Stirring War Story.

THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

The Greyfriars School Cadet Corps, commanded by Captain Sam Villiers, scout, are standing about in small groups, talking anxiously, when the clattering of hoofs is heard, and a young farmer from one of the homesteads on the cliffs comes galloping in on a sweating horse, and reins up hastily.

"The furriners are on us!" he cries. "There's a whole fleet o' tugs an' barges an' ships o' war headin' in for Frinton Gap, wi' thousands o' men aboard! They're Germans, an' they're goin' to land!"

Captain Sam Villiers was at his side in a moment.

"How far off are they?"

"Four mile out when I left, an' comin' in fast. I seed the men aboard 'em wi' my owd telescope, an' the sun glintin' on their helmets; an' I've tried to send messages at the telegraph-offices, but none can't get through. They tells me all the wires is cut. Let me go! I must push on!"

Nearly all the boys are killed or captured when the first German column attack and capture the school.

However, Sam Villiers and his brother, Steve, manage to escape and gain the Colchester garrison, who have turned out and entrenched themselves for the defence while the main forces come up.

The boy scouts tell their story to the British general, and, after a good sleep, go out and reconnoitre.

Sam Villiers Scores.

Sam Villiers is able to capture the German plans, and thus saves the British forces from a terrible defeat.

General Sir Sholto Nugent retires with his men, and manages for a time to keep the Germans in check.

Sam and Steve are sent out by Sir Sholto to find the strength and position of the Germans in Maldon. They manage to obtain some very useful information, but on returning through the enemy's lines narrowly escape capture. They are pursued by a German, and Stephen just manages to save Sam from being shot.

(Now go on with the Story.)

The Boy Scout's Report.

"When we separated," said Stephen to Sam, "I scooted off to the left, an' seein' my man was a good runner, I dodged round a reed-bed an' hid in a clump of thorn-bushes, as soon as I was out of sight of him for a tick. The silly ass thought I'd gone ahead, an' went blunderin' on after me, so I lay doggo in my thorn-bush, an' presently I saw you come into view an' scoot across the marsh an' fall in. I'd hung on to my rifle like wax—I bet you're glad, now, I didn't throw it away, as you wanted me to—an' as soon as the German chap reached you an' stopped, I drew a pretty careful bead on him. It was a longish shot, but he came down all right."

"Just in time," was Sam's reply, "and you saved my life again, Steve, I'd made up my mind my end was come, an', by gum, I was so sick an' savage at the mess I'd made of it, that I hardly cared! Me, blundering into the marsh like some flat-footed Dutchman! Bah!" he said, in bitter disgust.

"Every chap's liable to slip, hopping about on tussocks," said Steve, for his brother looked inconsolable. "There's nobody else in Essex could have brought us through as far as this, like you have, old boy. D'ye think we might go on now?"

Sam crept to the mouth of the foxearth, and listened. Then he made his way through the wood, silently as a cat, and located the sentries. It was half an hour, however, before the district was clear enough to travel through, but at last they managed it, for the Germans had made away to the westward, in the belief that the boys were there. Mile by mile the brothers won their way from point to point, till at last all signs of the enemy had been left behind, and, by the time they had passed Peldon, they were safe, as far as the enemy was concerned.

There was yet a long distance to be covered before they came in sight of Colchester, and at last the stress of the terrible two days they had passed through overcame them, and they were all but dropping, when a patrol of mounted infantry suddenly cantered into view across the open meadows.

Had they been Germans, the boys would have fallen easy

NEXT
TUESDAY:

"TOM MERRY'S VOYAGE." A Double-length Tale of Tom Merry & Co.
By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

victims, for they were too dead-beat to save themselves. But a cheer broke from Stephen's cracked lips as he recognised the smart, workmanlike, British uniforms, and a few moments later the patrol galloped up to the boys.

"Why, hang me, if it ain't our two young bricks of the Kid's Cadet Corps!" cried the subaltern in charge. "D'you mean to say you've got back from Maldon alive?"

"More or less," said Sam thickly, swaying as he stood. "We've diddled the Dutchmen, anyhow. Can you get us to headquarters? We've news for the general."

"Well done, kiddies! By Jove, you look dead-beat! Here, jump up behind me, you! Corporal, take the other one on your beast, an' we'll make short miles of it into camp! I b'lieve the old man's sick with himself for letting you go, but he's burning for news from Maldon!"

With Sam behind the lieutenant, and Stephen mounted at the corporal's back, the patrol galloped back to Colchester, and through it to the British position on the slopes overlooking the Colne. The swift ride through the cool air revived the boys somewhat, and they were instantly taken through the lines to General Nugent's tent, where the bluff old commander received them at once.

"I'm glad to see you back, youngsters—I've been blaming myself for letting you go!" he said. "You didn't get into Maldon, I suppose?"

"Yes, we managed that all right, sir," said Sam.

"What! Not one of my scouts have got through the lines! Give me your report, boy, quick!"

Sam, standing to attention, told him briefly the whole story, putting into a few words his capture on Tiptree Heath and his rescue by Stephen, the details of the enemy's force he had learnt at Maldon, and the sinking of the two store and ammunition ships. When he had finished, Stephen gave his report of the batteries he had discovered in Mundon Hill.

The general's eyes grew larger and more astonished as he listened, and, at an early stage, he signed to his aide-de-camp at the despatch-table to take down the reports in shorthand, and did not speak till he had finished.

"Take that to the field-telegraph at once!" he ordered, almost excitedly. "And send a condensed report of it to Lord Ripley, at headquarters! Give the names of these boys, and the manner in which the information was won!"

He turned to the brothers, his face alight with enthusiasm.

"My boys," he said, "if I did not know what services you have done us, I should not have dared to send that report as a true one! This information will be of the very greatest value to the Commander-in-Chief. You will have done more for the flag than you have any idea of!"

"I will say no more now, for I see you are both worn-out, and it is little wonder. Get food and sleep while you can, for you sorely need it, and there will be little enough for any of us in a few hours' time. I shall want you again. Such lads as you can't be spared at a time like this. You've done me more service than an extra regiment! Now go, and make the best of the short time that's before us."

The boys saluted and left, but how they reached Army quarters they scarcely knew, so worn-out were they. They had a vague notion that their old friend, the adjutant, took them somewhere—to a little tent at the back of the lines—and there they slept like the dead; nor did they know how long they lay.

The Storming of Colchester.

Sam, after several hours of stupor-like sleep, fell into a curious dream. He dreamed he was at home at Cotehall Towers near the end of the summer holidays, sitting among the long grass of the apiary, among the beehives, and that a million bees were buzzing drowsily as they streamed in and out of the hives.

Above the humming rose the crack of guns from one of his father's shooting-parties on the stubbles near by, opening the campaign against the 1st of September partridges.

When he opened his eyes the buzzing and the reports were still going on, but much louder.

It did not take him long to realise what those well-known sounds meant. The humming of bees was the shrill song of German shells soaring over the camp, and the gun-shots the reports as the shells burst.

Sam threw off his blanket, and was on his feet in a moment, waking his brother. Just then the adjutant's orderly came in.

"Are they going for us already?" said Sam.

"Only the first of the shots, sir. They're gettin' our range with a shell or two," returned the orderly; "but it won't be long before we're in the biggest old scrap of the campaign. They'll be into us with all their forces inside an hour."

"Let's get out an' see it!" exclaimed Stephen, rolling up

his blanket swiftly, and pitching it aside. "Come on, Sam!"

"Captain Devine told me to have food ready against you woke, sir. He said you'd want it," put in the orderly, bringing in a large bowl of hot meat extract, and a big tin of bully-beef—not American—on a field-canteen plate. "It's all ready here. The row won't start in earnest yet."

Both boys stopped long enough to make short work of the provender, for they were ravening with hunger, and neither had had a square meal since leaving Ned of Northey's houseboat nearly thirty hours before.

They had been too exhausted even to eat when they arrived, and had dropped asleep before they reached the tent. The orderly had pulled them in, and thrown a blanket over each.

"My eye! I could eat a horse!" said Stephen, with his mouth full. "Wonder what the time is? I say, orderly, how long have we been asleep?"

"Since five yesterday arternoon, sir," returned the orderly. "It's now eight o'clock in the morning. The captain said you was used up, an' there weren't no call to wake you, as you weren't on regimental duty."

"Great scissors! That's fifteen hours!" said Sam, as he finished his share of the food. "Well, I won't say we didn't need it. How d'you feel, young'un?"

"Fit as a flea!" said Stephen, who felt ready for anything after his long sleep. "I've laid in a good whack of prog, too, an' I vote we pocket some biscuits, as there's no sayin' when we'll get any more, an' join in the fun."

The boys started out at once, and found there was a lull in the firing, and the shells had ceased coming over.

Stephen still held on to his captured rifle, but he looked at it discontentedly.

"This old iron did us a good turn yesterday; but it's a clumsy thing, an' our cartridges don't fit it. I wonder if I couldn't swop it? Let's go to the ammunition-waggons an' see."

They made their way to the rear, and started to spread butter upon the A.S.C. officer in charge of the stores. The boys, part of whose exploits were known, were such favourites throughout the division that they wheedled the things they needed out of him, Sam getting possession of a good Service revolver and side-holster, while Stephen discarded his heavy German rifle for a weapon that made his eyes glisten—a fine little repeating-carbine, sighted up to 1,000 yards, and a pouch of cartridges.

These obtained, the brothers went straight back to the lines, where they found the whole force settling down rapidly into battle order.

There were no serried ranks of men in busbies, no "thin red line," as of old. The hillside was packed with infantry; but they were all but out of sight in countless trenches, with earthworks in front, and the batteries were screened, while the cavalry was out of sight behind the rise.

There was an army on the hill, though scarce a hundred men could be seen, for so is war waged nowadays.

The boys, who knew enough now to go where they wanted without getting in the way or being ordered out, reached the trench where their friend Devine, the adjutant, lay with his men.

"Hallo, kids! I hear you've been an' done it again. The old man's awfully pleased," said Devine, "though I'm afraid to-day's work'll sour him a bit."

"Why?" said Stephen.

"You'll see presently. There's goin' to be the Old Harry of a fight, an' the part he's got to play won't please him. Look yonder!"

It was the lull before the storm—the short pause before two great forces met in the death-struggle.

Between them and the enemy lay the sluggish River Colne, and on the far slopes beyond, like great herds of ants, the German troops were moving.

Horse, foot, and guns, they looked enough to overrun a whole country; and as it was theirs to attack, and not defend, they were much more in view than the British force.

"What skits of them there are!" said Sam.

"Yes, but not a fifth of the force they've got in the country. There are over 250,000 Germans in England, an' that's only two army corps yonder. They're double our strength, though, thanks to the position we've got here, we've been able to hold 'em, and get reinforcements down. The ball's goin' to open now!" he added, as one of the distant German batteries opened fire.

"Will this be the big battle that decides everything?" said Stephen eagerly.

"Bless you, no!" returned the adjutant, with a grim laugh. "We've nothing like our full strength up. It isn't here that Britain'll make her great stand. There'll be lakes of blood spilt before that happens. In an hour or two's time we shall be out of this, an' in full retreat."

"D'you mean we shall be licked?" said Sam, his face darkening.

"No, not that. I can't tell you any more now; but the old man's got a fine game to play, only it's rather a bitter pill for him to swallow. You'll understand soon, if you're left alive. I'll tell you this much, our first job is to break the Germans all we can before they get across the river. Then the fun'll begin."

With a rattle and a crash the four British batteries behind them came into action, and a furious duel began between the artillery of the two forces.

The air was thick with screaming shells, and the deafening noise as the enemy's shots came home around the British guns was appalling.

"Gosh! What a picnic!" muttered Sam, his field-glasses to his eyes. "They've got to pound us a lot before they can send their men to storm us. Our guns are shootin' a bit better than theirs."

"They can't cross the river, can they?" said Stephen, nearly dazed with the crash of the firing. "All the bridges are blown up. Can't we keep 'em off?"

"For some time, but not for good," said Devine, under his breath. "Their numbers are too great, an' there are one or two weak spots. They'll throw pontoons across."

"Should ha' thought we could have stopped that with our guns."

"Perhaps we mean to let 'em cross," said Devine, with a grim smile. "You don't know the old Grey Fox, an' neither do they."

"Grey Fox" was the Army nickname for General Nugent, and he had done a good deal to deserve it in his time. But there was little space for talk now.

The German field-guns had drawn within range, and they began their deadly hammering at the trenches, leaving the heavier batteries to fight the artillery duel.

A crash and a wicked whistling overhead made the men in the trenches lay themselves flat to the breastworks.

It was no big, fort-wrecking shells that came now, but loads of deadly shrapnel that burst over the trenches, and sent a scattering hail of bullets all around them.

Thicker and thicker came the fatal messengers, and the dying sobs of stricken men sounded through the uproar as chance shots went home.

It was the hardest test of all—to lie still and be fired at without striking back—but the finest infantry in the world stood it without a murmur.

"It's awful for our chaps!" muttered Stephen, as a hail of lead from a bursting case-shot screamed close over his head.

"It's as bad for the German beggars!" said Sam grimly, for he had the glasses to his eyes, and was looking through them over the breastwork. "Our field-guns are mowing 'em down!"

The deadly duel lasted for a time that seemed an age, and then, as gun after gun became silent on the British side, the long lines of Prussian infantry began to roll out in their legions and make swiftly for the river.

Then the British had their revenge. As the Germans came within range every trench on the hillside spouted its storm of rifle-bullets, till the whole slope was furrowed and fringed with fire.

The field-guns flung in their shrapnel, and a tempest of lead met the German front, that withered and went down before it like corn before the reaper's scythe.

Yet rank after rank rolled on as steadily as a tidal wave, leaving their dead behind, and on they pressed towards the river itself.

"They're plucky chaps, anyhow!" said Stephen.

"They're under the most iron discipline in the world," said Sam, "an' their leaders don't care how many men they chuck away as long as they get there. That frontal attack'll get mopped up, but there's lots more comin' in on each flank, an' a company of Engineers to bridge the river with pontoons."

"I ain't a scientific chap myself," said Stephen, resting his carbine on the breastwork and cuddling his cheek down against the stock; "but they're comin' within range of this little piece of mine, an' I can bag one or two, though it won't make much difference. See that big chap whackin' some of his men up with the flat of his sword?"

"It all helps," replied Sam grimly, as he saw the far-distant German sergeant-major whom Stephen had pointed out fall forward on his face as the boy's rifle cracked. "There he goes! He's got a home in the Fatherland, I s'pose; but I've no pity for any who've brought fire an' death into a peaceful country. Keep on doin' it, Steve! I wish I could use a rifle like you."

"By Jove, you're a wonderful shot for a kid!" exclaimed Devine, who had found time to give a glance at Stephen's performance, and was astonished at it.

"He was the best shot in the corps at Grey Friars by long chalks," said Sam. "I say, are those our men sliding out

to the rear, under cover? Why, half of our force seems to have vanished!"

"You're an observant infant!" said Devine. "They're goin' to fall back on Colchester and beyond. Colchester must go; but though it's a big price, we'll get a big profit out of it. See? No, I suppose you don't see, but you will before nightfall. When a nation's caught asleep, like ours, an' the Army's not even properly on a peace-footing, let alone ready for war, time's the great thing to gain."

"By gum," ejaculated Sam, "I believe I see the Grey Fox's move!"

Stephen was eager to know what he meant, but there was no time now for talk. So far, it had been all long-distance fighting, but now the enemy were right up to the river, striving to bridge it in three places, and the din of battle became appalling.

The German guns pounded furiously at the British forces, and the rifle-fire on both sides was devastating.

The boys, although they had been through the forlorn hope on the other side when the gun was saved, were appalled by the fury of the struggle.

Down below, a single bridge was at last thrown over the river, and the foe began to pour across.

Just then a messenger came down the side trench and spoke quickly to Devine, shouting to make himself heard above the din.

"We shall be out of this pretty soon," said Devine a few moments later, turning to the boys, "leaving most of our dead behind us. The general's sending messengers to Colchester. He's said nothing about you two, of course, but you ought to go. You can be useful there, and you can do no good here, except to fill the grave-pits later on. Cut along up to the side trenches, lads, and get to work! I oughtn't to have let you come here at all."

Stephen glanced at his brother. Both were disappointed at being ordered out, but they had to obey without question-

ing. It meant a journey up the side trench and a dash across the open among the flying bullets before they gained the rear; and, with a last look back, they saw the German troops rushing up the hillside with loud cries, and falling in swathes under the hail of the British fire.

Directly they were under cover of the hill-top they saw how swiftly and completely the bulk of the British troops had retired.

Already the foot and guns were well away to the left of Colchester, and one of the first persons the boys met was General Nugent's aide-de-camp, galloping in with orders. He caught sight of the boys, and shouted to them as he passed.

"Hallo, Villiers! Still alive to claim that £50? Ride into Colchester and join the other messengers in clearing the people out. They've all got to go. You'll find your two nags down by the Red Cross waggons."

The rest of the aide's words were lost as he galloped on, but Sam took to his heels at once and made for the spot where the Red Cross flag was flying.

"Come on, Steve!" he cried. "We'll do what we can. Got to make ourselves useful, if it's only as messengers. We'll soon be in the fun again!"

It was a big surprise, after all that had passed, to find their horses were neither dead nor seized for service, and they judged that they owed it to the cheerful aide-de-camp and Devine. Both the mounts were there—Sam's black charger that had been captured from the Uhlan, and the bay hunter Stephen had stolen. Mounting swiftly, the boys set off at full speed for Colchester.

"It's hard luck being hauled out just as the fun's at its height," said Stephen, as they galloped side by side. "Why are our men falling back? Couldn't they hold the hill?"

"The old Grey Fox is going to lead the Germans back into Colchester an' hold 'em there; then he'll post himself on the high ground beyond," replied Sam; "it'll make the difference of a couple of days, an' that's everything now. All the people are being cleared out. My aunt, but it'll be a rare old shivaree when the Germans get into the town! It's a regular trap!"

"They'll be beaten off, then?"

"For a time; but they're probably meant to get hold of it after."

"D'you mean Colchester'll have to go?"

"I reckon it'll be ashes before night. You needn't look glum, Steve. It looks like a rout to see our men falling back like this, an' a big English town falling to the enemy; but it ain't one. It's a big score for us instead, an' Nugent is drivin' the first nail into the German coffin."

"It's cruel to see, but I s'pose it's right," returned Stephen.

"Yes, war nowadays often looks like a defeat when it's a victory. You'll see to-night what the difference is. We

shall be cheering, then. Colchester's got to go first, an' that's the punishment for our slackness an' not being ready. I tell you, Steve, there are folks in Parliament an' the War Office who ought to be hanged from lamp-posts for this! Look, there comes Devine's regiment! They're only leaving the field-guns an' two battalions behind."

"Will those be wiped out?"

"No; they'll be able to skate over the brow of the hill an' join the rest. What Nugent wants is to weaken the attackin' corps as much as he can, d'you see? They've lost a heap of men storming that hill, an' they'll lose twice as many more when they come messing round Colchester. Here we are! Ride right down an' help clear out everybody who don't fight. There'll be no townspeople lost, anyway!"

They rode into the famous old town at a hard gallop, and once there they saw why General Nugent wanted to fall back upon it. An enormous number of smart Volunteers had arrived, and, with the Regulars, were rapidly barricading the streets and mounting guns. It did not need any military knowledge to see that to take those winding streets one by one would cost the enemy terrible losses.

All the women and children had been sent Londonwards by train hours before, for the British troops held the railway, and now all who were not fighting-men were quickly making their way out. The boys at once joined one of the parties that was clearing the town, and helped the civilians out with as much of their goods as they could take. Scores of the townsmen who had weapons of any sort remained to help the defence, caring nothing for the fact that they would be shot at once if captured alive, not being in uniform. The British Lion was fairly roused, and only one idea held all classes—to beat back the insolent foe.

It took a very short time to clear the town of those who were unfit for the coming struggle, and when it was done Sam and Stephen hurried back to the town-hall, near where they found the Volunteers and a company of Engineers rapidly putting up a barricade.

"Bear a hand, Steve!" cried Sam. "Let's help to put up something that'll worry the beggars when they come!"

Everybody toiled with might and main, and the barrier grew swiftly. Anything and everything was pressed into service. Carts were overturned, waggons run up into position; furniture of all sorts was stacked across the High Street in one great, bristling heap, backed with sandbags, sacks of coal and flour, and anything that would stop a bullet. It was a strange sight for the peaceful old city, that three days before had never dreamed of such a thing as war in its quiet streets, where soldiers were generally looked upon as picturesque ornaments.

In every street a similar barrier was thrown together; and just as the finishing touches were put to the one in the High Street the first shots were heard to the east of the town, and the general's aide-de-camp galloped up on a lathered horse and gave the chief's orders to the officers in charge. As he wheeled to gallop off his eye fell on the boys.

"No cadets at the barricades!" he called to them. "You youngsters must make room for heavier men. We want weight here!"

"He's right," said Sam reluctantly. "They want big fellows here, used to the bayonet. Come on, Stephen! Must obey orders! We'll find as good a job somewhere!"

"Put me where I can use my little pet here," said Stephen, unslinging his rifle, "an' we'll do all the good we can! What d'you say to a second-storey window somewhere, so as to get a good bead down the street?"

"I've got it!" exclaimed Sam. "The old castle! Up top of the donjon keep you'll be able to do all the sniping you ever want, an' we'll get a grand view of the fight all over the town as well, an' watch our chance to make ourselves useful!"

Without another word both the brothers ran off towards the old castle, that stood in its own ground in the midst of the town, just north of the High Street. Quickly reaching the foot of the tall round tower of the keep, they started to mount the inside staircase.

"We shall get mopped up if they take the town an' tree us up here," said Stephen; "but I s'pose that can't be helped. We must take our chance of it."

"You go on up to the top. I'll follow in a minute," was Sam's reply; and he left his brother to mount the tower alone.

Stephen reached the head of the steps and crawled out on to the top, where he filled the magazine of his rifle to its full capacity. Sam now joined him, with a couple of long cart-ropes over his arm.

"Never chuck a chance away," he said, knotting them together to make one long rope. "These ain't likely to save us if we're treed, but, still, they may."

He fastened one end of the rope securely to a buttress, and laid the rest in a neat coil beside him.

They looked out over the city, which lay beneath them

like a map, for they were on one of the highest points for far around, and could see over the whole landscape.

"There's where the general's perched himself," said Sam, pointing to a hill just outside. "He's drawn half his men there, an' the rest will lure the Germans into the town."

"An' there they come!" exclaimed Stephen, pointing to the other side, where the masses of the enemy's troops came swiftly forward towards the town.

After the first on-and-off firing the city was soon in the full storm of the battle. The advance cost the Germans nearly a whole regiment, as the fire of the defenders broke out from every street and alley that gave upon the open. But the irresistible numbers came rolling on; and, disputing every foot of the ground, the defenders slowly drew back into the town, firing as they went. Their losses were small, and soon nearly the whole force was behind the barricades, save for sharpshooters, who opened fire from houses and windows along the route.

Now the street filled swiftly with the enemy, and every roadway was the scene of a fierce struggle. The British rifle-fire swept the narrow streets, and the gutters ran with blood. Here a solid phalanx of Prussian soldiers, pushing on at top speed, were mowed down or beaten back—there a company of the foe reached a barricade and stormed it, stamping the plucky defenders out and passing on, leaving half their men dead or dying behind them.

"They're at the High Street barricade! Look!" cried Sam.

Bayonets in hand, a battalion of grim Hanover riflemen came rushing up the High Street. Down they went like ninepins before the withering fire that poured over the barricade. Stephen, firing coolly and quietly, picked off man after man from his lofty post, never wasting a bullet or firing rashly. The street was paved with the dead, but still those remaining came on.

Like a wave breaking on a rock the Germans swept on to the barricade with loud yells of "Hoch—hoch!" and such a fight raged as Colchester had never seen since the Romans came. Bayonets flashed and stabbed, rifle-butts crashed into the invaders' faces, and the barrier itself became one rocking tumult. Great bearded Hanover soldiers were dashed bodily back among their comrades.

Stephen, his eyes riveted by the sight, could no longer fire, for fear of hitting the defenders, when Sam caught his arm and pointed down another street to the left, opening on to the castle. Straggling companies of Germans, who had fought their way through the back streets, were coming up fast.

"The leaders—pick off the leaders!" exclaimed Sam. "If they take our men in the rear there'll be Old Harry to pay!"

Stephen's carbine spoke before the words were out of his brother's mouth, and a big Saxon captain, who was hoarsely shouting as he led a company on, sprang into the air and fell flat. A non-commissioned officer dropped the next moment, and the lieutenant of the company, swearing savagely, brought them forward at the double. The unseen carbine spoke again, and he went down. A British half-company, dashing round the corner, suddenly flung itself on the officerless force, and swept it back in disorder, clearing the street, save for the dead that were left behind; and Stephen wheeled round to cover the road in the other direction, where two files of Saxon infantry were rushing up. "They've seen us!" said Sam, as his brother dropped one of the foremost men.

And with loud shouts of rage the Germans, pointing upwards at the tower, hurled themselves forward and rushed in through the gates. One file swept onwards along the street, losing two more of its men, but the other gained the foot of the tower and dashed in through the doorway—a lieutenant and seven or eight men—swearing savagely.

"No quarter to the sharpshooters!" cried the hoarse voice of the officer as he and his men rushed up the staircase.

"Can you hold it against 'em?" cried Sam to his brother.

"No," said Stephen, firing rapidly down through the opening. "I can bag two or three, but they're bound to get up. Have they all gone in, or are there any below?"

"They've all gone in!" said Sam grimly; and he cast his coil of rope over. "Give 'em a farewell shot down the stairs an' take to the rope. You first!"

There was a crack and the sound of a heavy fall on the stairs, and Stephen sprang for the rope; while Sam, revolver in hand, stood at the top. Down went Stephen over the parapet, the rope running swiftly between his hands, and Sam's revolver spoke just as his brother reached the ground.

Sam sprang over and went down so swiftly that the rope tore the skin from his palms; but before he had completed the perilous journey the German lieutenant and his men appeared above.

A shout of rage broke from the officer as he saw how he was outwitted. His men threw their rifles to their shoulders, and three shots rang out.

The End of Colchester.

Amid a quick spatter of rifle-shots from the top of the keep, Sam swung himself away by the rope and dropped the last six feet, landing so far out that with a couple of active springs he was able to gain the shelter of the buttress, out of reach of the rifle-fire. A single bullet ripped down his coat-sleeve and grazed the whole length of his upper arm, but the hurried downward shots of the Germans took no other effect. In three seconds Sam was in safety beside his brother, who had dashed round behind the buttress.

"Come on! Bunk for it!" cried Sam.

"Just a second," was Stephen's reply.

He looked round the buttress, and saw the shouting, infuriated Saxon lieutenant leaning out from the tower, trying to see where the boys had gone. Throwing his carbine to his shoulder, Stephen took a quick sight and fired.

The German officer flung up his arms with a cry, and the next moment his body came toppling over the parapet, to fall with a crash on the gravel below.

"That's another one to us," said Stephen, slinging his rifle rapidly. "Lead on, Sam! Where to now?"

"Round by the streets, before the file aloft comes down an' chivvies us," said Sam, darting away right round the castle.

The boys gained the trees round by the left side, where they paused for some seconds, hiding behind the trunks to let a full company of Hanover infantry go by up the road. Then, climbing the palings, they ran rapidly through a couple of side streets as soon as the chance offered, and reached the barricade in the High Street.

There was no need for the boys to make room for heavier men now. The defenders were glad of any sort of reinforcements, for they had lost eighteen men, and were toiling with might and main to replace the broken-down parts of the barrier, while riflemen at the corners kept up a fire at those of the enemy who were in sight.

If the British side of the barricade had lost heavily, the street beyond it looked like a human shambles. Over ninety dead and dying Hanover infantry men lay on the road and pavements, and the gutters on each side ran red. For the time the attack had been beaten off, but the Germans were gathering again for the assault, and the grim, battle-stained British Regulars and Volunteers, many with crimsoned bandages hastily wound about their bare heads, awaited the onslaught.

"Have you come to help the finish, you kids?" said the sergeant-major of the Volunteers. "Come on, then! Anybody with a weapon is useful now. Only one of you got a rifle? Take another from one of the wounded. Range yourselves at the corner here, an' take cover."

"A revolver's more use to me," said Sam, drawing one from the side holster of a young lieutenant who lay on his face in the road. "This poor chap'll never use his again. How's the fight goin', sergeant-major?"

"The beggars are goin' down in all the streets. The barricades are too much for 'em, and every house is full of snipers. The enemy's lost a good six hundred outside the town an' in. If we set this next lot back, they'll have to skedaddle back out of Colchester. If not— Look out! Here they come again!"

Sharp orders rang out behind the barricade as a black mass of Germans suddenly came round the distant curve of the street and rushed towards the barricade as hard as they could run. On either side, near the walls, riflemen fired swiftly to cover the advance of their comrades, who carried fixed bayonets.

The British force, some seventy strong, opened a devastating fire. There is only one way to check rushers on a straight front, and that is by rifle-fire that breaks the attack before it reaches the defenders. Every part of the barricade seemed to blaze out fire as the repeating-rifles got to work.

In five minutes the whole attack was over. The front of the oncoming Germans seemed to thin out like peelings falling from an apple as the British rifles mowed the men down, and rank after rank fell. But those behind came on as steadily, and the force was so great there were plenty to carry on the attack. Stumbling over the bodies of their mates, the Germans swept up to the barricade.

Stephen fired swiftly and surely, for it was easy to make every bullet tell at the short range, and each cartridge in his rifle accounted for a man. Half the assailants were down before they reached the barricade, and then they broke upon it like a great dark wave dashing upon a breakwater.

All Stephen knew of the struggle was a savage whirlwind of men fighting hand-to-hand; grim, unshaven faces glaring through the smoke; the sound of blows, and the deep "hough!" as bayonet after bayonet went home. A long

blade flashed at him, and he managed somehow to dash it aside with the barrel of his carbine. It was raised for another blow, and Sam's revolver banged within a foot of the assailant's face, whose big body then fell forward upon Stephen and dashed him to the ground.

At one point of the barrier a stream of Germans came over in single file, only to be bayoneted swiftly by those who had set the trap for them. On top of the barricade the fight raged till both sides were piled with dead. The attack rolled back, baffled. A deadly volley was poured in as the Germans wavered, and when Stephen extricated himself from under the fallen soldier, and scrambled to his feet, the remnant of the foe were in full flight down the High Street, the British rifles still mowing them down as they fled.

A wild cheer rose from the barrier, and in all the main streets other shouts of victory and the stampeding of men told of the German defeat. The attack on Colchester had failed. The British poured out on every side to complete the rout, and as the enemy drew clear of the streets two squadrons of British Hussars suddenly swept down upon them on the open and cut up two of the Hanover battalions.

Right across the German rear came the cavalrymen like evening argols, scattering the flying foe, and galloping swiftly round into cover again when their work was done, and the German guns opened fire.

The two boys, mad with excitement, ran on with the rest of the pursuers, and gained the outskirts of the town just in time to see the last of the rout.

"Eight hundred of 'em down, if there's a man," said the sergeant-major grimly, as he halted and wheeled, "and we ain't lost a hundred an' fifty! You two kids are blooded to war now—eh?"

"They want no bloodin'," said a grizzled Fusilier. "Those are the two young 'uns who got the despatches from Von Adler's camp, an' helped to save the last gun at Elmstead."

"Are they, by jinks?" exclaimed the sergeant-major. "A precious lucky couple of plucked 'uns to have with us, too! Blow me if I laugh at the cadet rifle corps any more. Fall in there, lads! By your left—double!" he cried to his men; and his force turned rapidly back to the High Street once more, for the last German who could move had disappeared from the town.

"We've walloped 'em, then!" cried Stephen enthusiastically.

The sergeant-major laughed.

"We've driven some of 'em back for a time," he said. "They're near double our strength, but we've thinned 'em out well, an' that's what was needed—besides gainin' time. They're only drawin' back to bombard the town, which they didn't choose to do at first, for good reasons."

"Bombard us, will they?" said Stephen thoughtfully. "This'll be a pretty hot shop when they begin, I should say."

"It will," grinned the soldier.

"An' there's no way of hitting back from the town," said Sam. "Wonder what we're goin' to do?"

The sergeant-major would say no more, however, and the boys soon found that all the troops were collecting quickly and quietly towards the western end of the town.

"It looks as if Nugent meant to get 'em all out, an' let the Germans thump away at an empty town," said Sam pensively, "if he can do it without them knowing. Look! There go his victual-waggons, getting all the supplies out."

"What! An' lose the town?" said Stephen.

"Colchester's bound to go. It's served its turn, an' it'll give Nugent a fine position on the other side of the Roman River, while they'll use up their ammunition knockin' the town about. Didn't the aide-de-camp hint as much? War's war, Steve old boy; it ain't a fire brigade. By gum, I call it a fine idea of the old Grey Fox!"

"What had we better do in the meantime?" said Stephen briskly.

"There don't seem much for us to do just at the moment. I vote we clear out an' take a post of vantage where we can see what's goin' on. We'll soon get a chance to do something."

The brothers left the town at once and made for a rise of ground some distance from the city, where a good deal could be seen. Stephen, looking round, chose a big elm-tree, which was easily climbable, and began to make his way up it, with his rifle slung behind him.

"Hi, Sam!" he called down. "Come up here an' bring your glasses. There's a grand view, an' you can see right over the other side of the town!"

Sam joined him, and they perched themselves on a leafy fork well up towards the top. The height gave them a fine view of a great deal that was not to be seen from the ground, and they could see to the distant side of Colchester, which had been left early that morning.

"The beggars are all over the place!" said Sam. "Look at the German cavalry an' mounted infantry, away to the eastward!"

The small, straggling parties of cavalry patrols and reconnoiters seemed to be everywhere, and at one point a German and a British patrol had come upon each other, and were exchanging shots. Beyond, on the heights east of the town, and no great way off it, Sam could see the German batteries assembling for the bombardment.

"Isn't that General Nugent?" said Stephen, pointing to a knoll on the left, five hundred yards away, where six or seven mounted men were to be seen.

"Yes," said Sam, directing his glasses to the spot. "General Nugent an' his staff an' a small guard. He's watchin' the outlook."

"Pity he ain't up here; he could see better. I say, he's a long way off his force, ain't he? Only a few men with him, too."

"He always does that."

"What a chance for the Germans, if they knew!"

"There ain't any as far west as that," said Sam; but as the words passed his lips he changed colour, for something startling caught his eye.

"By gum!" exclaimed Stephen. "D'you see that little squad of cavalry cantering round by the valley on the other side of him? They're no British, I'll swear!"

"No; they're Prussian Dragoons!" said Sam, aghast, as he bent the glasses on them. "By George, they've seen their chance an' sneaked round by the low ground to cut him off!"

"He can't see 'em from where he is!" cried Stephen. "We're seventy feet higher!"

Both boys glanced at each other, and Stephen began rapidly to descend the tree.

"We must try an' warn him."

"No use!" exclaimed Sam. "They'll be on him before you can go half-way. Fire your rifle off, an' try to signal from here."

Crack went the carbine, and one of the distant mounted men looked round. But before any warning could be seen or given, the squad of Prussians burst round the corner of a little copse and came at a furious gallop straight for the British general and his staff.

The boys held their breath in consternation. Sir Sholto Nugent, always fearless of his own danger—perhaps more than a man who was the eyes and brain of his Army ought to be—had suddenly fallen into extreme peril. There were only seven men with him, and the patrol of a dozen Prussian Dragoons, seeing their chance, had taken the risk of a ride right round in order to try and rob the British force of its leader. Now they came on—a short, thundering charge—with drawn swords and every chance of success.

The little British guard stood its ground. Three carbines cracked quickly, and as the revolvers began to speak, five of the German saddles were emptied. The staff spurred on to meet the enemy, and in a few moments the horsemen crashed together.

The Prussians drew clear of the melee, and rode with all their might at General Nugent. The boys heard the crack of the last shot from his revolver; one man went down, and the general met the other with his sword. The horses were reined up on their haunches, and the steel flashed in the sun. For the moment the boys could not see which had the mastery.

At that moment a third dragoon drew clear of the fight with the staff, and spurred furiously on at the general. Sam saw, with utter dismay, that Sir Sholto, though he had felled his assailant, had but a bladeless weapon in his hand—his sword was broken short at the hilt, and the third dragoon was all but upon him.

"Steve," cried Sam desperately, "can't you get him?"

Stephen was already lying out flat along a horizontal bough, his weapon levelled.

On came the dragoon, his sabre flashing as he raised it high to strike. The boy's carbine cracked viciously, and the next moment a riderless horse plunged on past General Nugent, and the dragoon lay a motionless heap upon the turf.

"Thank Heaven!" said Sam, with a gasp of relief. "That shot was worth five regiments to our side, Steve! I feared Nugent was gone. Any more afoot?"

Stephen watched with a beating heart as the general spurred ahead to help in the melee, but only two of the dragoons remained, and, finding the cause hopeless, they thundered away down the hillside at a gallop, unfollowed by any shot.

Four of the general's guard and staff were down, and as he trotted coolly back towards Berechurch, the boom of the first German shell flung into Colchester was heard.

"Hope that'll teach the Grey Fox to take more care of himself," said Sam, wiping his forehead, for no escape of his own had ever stirred him so much; "but I reckon not—

he ain't the kind that cares about his own skin. Got the V.C. when he was twenty! Hark! They've opened the ball now!"

The whole sky seemed filled with the whirl and boom of the distant shells, and a couple of British batteries to the left replied. But from Colchester, keeping it between them and the Germans, the British forces moved swiftly, and in an incredibly short time had passed on towards East Donyland and Laver de la Haye, while the artillery answered Von Adler's guns.

Stephen, whose youthful soul had rebelled very much against the idea of retreat, now saw plainly enough how well the plan was working, and the strength of the position General Nugent was able to take up, after the heavy losses he had inflicted on the enemy.

"By gum! The old Grey Fox has spoofed 'em," he cried, "though he hasn't half their men!"

"It's a dummy city Von Adler's knockin' to bits; there's nothing left in it," said Sam. "Cheap at the price, though it makes one pretty sick to see it go."

For nearly an hour, spellbound, the brothers sat in the elm-tree and watched the sight. It was gigantic. The old town crumbled away piece by piece before the heavy German guns. The castle was struck six times; the old stronghold that had defied armies in the time of the Normans, and held out two months with a cavalier garrison for King Charles against the rebels, now melted away at the crash of the huge shells, and its ten-foot walls were blown to atoms.

The churches, St. Botolph's Priory, and the Town Hall also went, and the rows of shops and dwelling-houses were razed like castles of cards, while fire broke out in a dozen different spots.

By five in the evening the last gun was fired, and Colchester, that morning the first town in Essex, was now a heap of smoking ashes.

The Message from Home.

"A day's victory for us, I s'pose, but a mighty queer one," said Stephen, with a sigh. "Come on, Sam, let's get out of this! Wish we could go back an' see Von Adler's face when he sees how he's been made a fool of."

"I ain't exactly keen on meetin' Von Adler," said Sam, as they descended and walked off towards Laver, "unless we met alone. Relations were a bit strained when I last saw him in his tent, an' it was my painful duty to black his eye before I got hold of those despatches. He might be rude to me if I ran across him now."

"Considerin' there's two steps in rank for any German who brings us in, I shouldn't wonder if he was," chuckled Stephen. "I say, I'm awful hungry, an'—"

"Tired?"

"And worn out. I could do with a short sleep; we've been on our legs a good bit lately."

"It'll be all right in camp to-night if they can do with us," said Sam. "There'll be victuals, anyhow."

They pushed on till they had crossed the old Roman river, where much digging and mining was taking place, and reached the new British position. The brothers were too hungry and tired to notice its strength or the reinforcements that were coming in, and, making straight for Devine's corps, they were in time to join in a regimental feed, after which they curled up under a Red Cross waggon and went to sleep.

It was just growing dark, when a bugle awoke them, and, turning out well refreshed, they soon came across Devine, who was snatching a hasty meal by himself.

"Hallo, youngsters!" he said. "You've had your bellyful of fighting to-day, I should think. They tell me you did well at the barriers. But the general was askin' for you just now, an' nobody could find you. He's made all his arrangements, an' he's pretty pleased all round. You'd better cut off."

The boys hurried away rather anxiously, wondering what they were wanted for. They were soon admitted to the general's tent, and he received them warmly.

"Well, my lads, you've seen something of war to-day," he said. "Many a good man has made his last bivouac. However, we've done what we set out to do. Were you in the town?"

"Yes, sir," said Sam.

"I expect you hardly guessed that the German attack on Colchester was partly owing to your doings at Maldon?" said Sir Sholto, smiling.

"To ours, sir?" said Sam, puzzled.

"Yes; the sinking of those two transports left the Germans short of supplies, and their anxiety to capture Colchester and provision themselves there at once, before destroying it, was the reason they made the assault on the town rather than bombard it and burn up all supplies in it. Do you see?"

"Yes, sir, I'm glad we were so lucky at Maldon," said Sam. "We never expected we'd done much good."

"Is lucky the word?" said the aide-de-camp, who was sealing up a despatch. "You were lucky, too, sir, this afternoon. It was touch-an'-go when those dragoons got round us."

"Yes, and I wondered what the dickens happened to that poor fellow who rode at me when my sword was broken," said Sir Sholto. "He came down just in time, but none of us were shooting."

"Stephen shot him, sir," said Sam.

"Shut up, Sam!" muttered his brother, reddening.

"What!" said the general.

"We were up an elm-tree on the next knoll, sir, an' saw the dragoons charge," added Sam, "and my young brother got that last one with his carbine!"

"He's a doosid pretty shot!" said the aide-de-camp. "I saw him at work this morning."

"Then I owe you not only good news, but my life!" said Sir Sholto, holding out his hand. "Shake hands, boys! Egad! It seems to me you bring us all our luck. I've a message for you here from the Chief-in-command," added Sir Sholto, opening a despatch; and he read out from it quickly:

"Convey my strongest thanks and approbation for the courageous action of the two cadets, Aubrey and Stephen Villiers. Their work at Elmstead and Maldon has been of the greatest service.
RIPLEY."

"You will get more than thanks when there's time to attend to such things," said Sir Sholto, as the boys flushed with conscious pleasure; "but I called you here for another matter of much importance to yourselves. I have received a letter from Cotehall Towers, most anxiously inquiring about you."

"From father?" cried Stephen.

"From your mother—Mrs. Talbot Villiers, is it not? Your father is away on service; he is a colonel in the Yeomanry, as, of course, you know. I have sent word that you are with me, and uninjured, which will set her fears at rest about you. But it seems likely that the Germans may reach Cotehall Towers—indeed, they may be there now, as this letter gives me news that they are approaching."

"Approaching Cotehall, sir!" exclaimed Sam.

"Yes; one of their transport fleets entered the River Crouch at the beginning; they hold the river at present, and are pushing their outposts inland. They will very likely take Cotehall with a few men, and quarter them there. But I am unable to send any help in that direction, for it is not important to the defence of London, and I am concerned with the enemy in front. Your father is absent—"

"Our mother and sisters are alone at the Towers, then, and the Germans are going there!" exclaimed Sam. "Can we go at once, sir, please?"

"The Germans coming to Cotehall!" said Stephen, aghast. "You'll let us go, sir, won't you?"

"Most certainly! Off with you, without delay," said the general. "Do not alarm yourselves unnecessarily; but your place is there, so go! It may be a false alarm."

The boys saluted, and left the tent quickly, both of them paler than they had been since first the Germans landed in England.

"Good heavens!" said Stephen thickly, as they ran back to the lines. "Mother and Daisy and Madge alone there, an' those German sweeps may attack the place at any moment! We've got to get there to-night if we have to run all the—"

"I say, young 'uns!" called the aide-de-camp, who had run after them. "You'll want your horses. I sent 'em on for you before the shindy started at Colchester, an' they're in the Lancers' lines!"

"Thanks, awfully! You're a good chap!" exclaimed Sam, dashing off at once towards the horse-lines.

In another five minutes they had found the black charger and the hunter, saddled them in record speed with the willing help of the troopers, and galloped away into the night, a cheer rising behind them.

"That aide's a trump!" said Sam, the wind whistling in his ears as he rode. "I never thought we'd see our horses again, an' we couldn't have got any others. Now it's only a question of two or three hours' ride, an' we'll be there!"

"Nothing on earth must delay us that we can help," said Stephen, who was still pale. "Do you think the mater's in any danger?"

"There's no sayin' what may happen, though the Germans don't shoot women an' girls. But if the horsemen and stable-lads show any resistance, they'll fire on the house, an' then—"

"The women ought to have all been sent away to London or somewhere safe, long before," cried Stephen. "How is it that wasn't done?"

"You know what the mater is. She's the proudest woman in England, and as plucky as any man. That's what makes me scared. The Germans give no quarter to anybody who resists them, man or woman. An' then there are the girls—"

"Ned of Northey's there," said Stephen, remembering the young marshman. "We told him to go when we parted on the Blackwater."

"He's a useful chap."

"And all the menservants and stablemen and people about the estate. They'd do anything for us, I know."

"That's the danger. If they make a defence it's sure to be bungled, an' the Germans'll wipe the whole place up. The Towers, or at any rate the Moat House, could be defended pretty easily by anyone who's got a notion of the way to set about it; but what do the men know? We've got to save Cotehall, Steve, if it can be done. But it's the mater and the girls I'm worried about. Mind how you ride that horse of yours; it'll never do to have him founder."

Little more was said by either of the boys during the long night ride. They had some eighteen miles to go, and, thanks to Sam's knowledge of the country, they were able to cut off some big corners. The first part of the route lay inland, and, leaving Maldon far to the left, there was little chance of their running across any Germans.

Passing by Chelmsford, they struck south-east again, and came within view of Cotehall Towers, on the skyline two miles away, after a couple of hours' ride. They took to the road and kept a sharp look-out, for now they might fall in with Germans at any moment.

"Confound!" said Stephen suddenly. "My beast's goin' dead lame. He can't go any further possibly. You'll have to push on to the house, an' I'll follow. We're nearly there."

"Cast him loose an' get up behind me," said his brother.

"Look out," said Stephen softly; "someone ahead."

They reined up in the shadow of the hedge, and each of them sought his weapon. But the dark form they saw approaching on foot was alone, and as it came nearer Sam gave vent to an exclamation.

"By Jove, it's Ned!"

The stranger stopped dead, and the brothers recognised in a moment the sturdy figure of Ned of Northey, in sea-boots and jersey.

"Who's there?" he said sharply. And the boys saw he carried a rifle.

"Don't you know us?" exclaimed Stephen, spurring up to him eagerly. "Ned, what news? Are mother and the girls safe?"

"Great flounders, is it you, young sirs?" cried Ned. "Ay, Mrs. Villiers be all safe as yet, an' your sisters, too. But how long that'll last I don't know, for the pigs of Germans are movin' down our way fast. I was out to see if I could see aught of 'em."

"Thank Heaven the folks are safe yet!" ejaculated Sam, with a great breath of relief. "But you're expectin' the Germans down on us? Where's the mater?"

"She's at the Moat House, an' the young ladies, too."

"The Moat House!"

"Ay; she ain't been at the Towers for days. Madam says the Moat House can't be attacked so easy, an' that if the Germans come she'll hold it against 'em even if they burn her in it! I've begged her to go, Master Aubrey, but she only bids me hold my tongue."

"That's like the mater!" said Sam. "She must go, though. We can do nothing till she's safe, an' I shall be in a fearful stew till I know she's out of it all. Steve, I'm goin' to gallop on an' get to her. You follow with Ned as quick as you can."

Sam dashed away into the darkness, and Stephen, whose horse was too lame and foundered to carry him another step, jumped down and led it by the bridle, walking rapidly along beside the marshman.

"Do you know where my father is, Ned?" he asked eagerly.

"Nay, I don't; but he's somewheres to the northward with his Yeomanry, an' there's a report that he's givin' the Germans a lot o' work. He'd be main troubled if he knew your mother was at the Moat House. We've got to save her to-night."

Stephen had not guessed his mother would be there. There were two separate manor houses on the estate—one of them was the Moat House, the original home of the Villiers, an old stronghold of the very early days, with a moat round it and a small keep.

A couple of hundred years ago the family had left it and built the great house of Cotehall Towers, on the other side of the estate, two miles away. The Moat House was still

kept up, however, maintained in good repair, and a staff of servants kept there. In the old keep Stephen's father kept all his sporting gear and motor petrol. There was a garage by the house, as well as stables and the kennels of the harriers, of which Talbot Villiers was master.

"Your mother she ha' sent the servants an' the hounds an' all away to the Towers," said Ned, "an' she says the Moat House is the proper place for the Villiers if there's fightin' to be done."

"There's the house. We'll take a short cut across the park an' cross the moat from this side," said Stephen. "Is the bridge still there?"

"Ay, 'tis."

"Then it oughtn't to be. It should have been cut down. Hurry, Ned!"

They hastened across the small park surrounding the Moat House, and soon were in sight of the moat itself. The moon had risen, giving more light on the scene.

"Take my horse on, will you?" said Stephen. "There's something here I want to see to."

The marshman went on with the lame steed, and Stephen turned to the right through the trees, where he wished to see if an outer defence could be put up, for it occurred to him that if several of the big, straggling oaks could be cut down by blasting charges, and allowed to lie round the outside of the moat, they would make a fine bar against attack. Suddenly the sound of cantering horses was heard, and Stephen turned sharply, to see two mounted Uhlans bearing down towards him.

"Which is the way across this ditch?" cried one of them sharply to him in German. "We take possession of this house, and you shall guide us in!"

"Shall I, you Prussian pig!" said Stephen, more enraged to see the enemy's horsemen galloping up to his old home as if it belonged to them, than by anything else since the invasion began. "You'd better clear out if you want to go alive!" he said viciously, unslinging his rifle. A shout from Ned was heard at the same time.

"A uniform!" exclaimed the Uhlman officer, catching sight of Stephen's grey cadet jacket. "Some kind of soldier, it seems," he added, with a short laugh, whipping out his sword and spurring at the boy, while the other German galloped after Ned.

At the critical moment the sling of Stephen's carbine caught, and before he could clear and unslung it the Uhlman was upon him. The boy dodged smartly, leaping aside. The Uhlman's weapon missed him by a couple of feet, and the horse dashed into a low strand of wire that had been part of an old fence, and came down heavily, the Uhlman's sword snapping as he struck the ground.

The German was up again with incredible agility, and pouncing with rage to boot. He hurled his sword-hilt into Stephen's face just as the boy jerked his carbine clear, and sent him staggering backwards. In a moment the Uhlman lashed the carbine from his hands and had him by the throat, whipping out his long service-knife with his right hand.

"English brat," he panted, raising it to strike, "I'll teach you to tackle a Prussian!"

Stephen made a violent effort to grab the man's wrist, but failed. Then, just as the knife was descending, a dark form bounded forward, and a rifle-butt crashed down upon the Uhlman's head with awful force. The man dropped like a log, and Ned of Northey, who had dealt the blow, pulled Stephen to his feet.

"Has he hurt 'ee?"

"No. He was uncommon active for a German," said Stephen, panting. "Where's the other?"

"I fired an' wounded him when he came at me, an' he ashed away through the trees an' rode off. I didn't stop for him, but hurried to see if you wanted help."

"That's another I owe you, Ned! Let's hurry to the ouse, quick!"

They hastened across the little wooden bridge over the moat, which was some distance from the house and enclosed a good deal of ground with the building. As soon as they were across they saw Sam coming towards them, and beyond, at the doors of the Moat House, stood Mrs. Villiers, a fine-looking, grey-haired lady, as straight in the back as Sam himself, with her daughters Daisy and Madge.

"Thank Heaven for this!" cried Mrs. Villiers. "My heart has been aching for you, Stephen. What was that bring across the moat?"

"Only a row with a couple of Uhlans, mother," said Stephen, as he greeted his sisters. "Ned saved me from one of them."

"Are the Germans coming, Steve?" said Daisy, while Mrs. Villiers impulsively kissed Ned, who stood on one leg and blushed furiously.

"I reckon they are," replied Stephen. "I say, Sam, one

of 'em got away, and I expect we shall have a troop down on us soon. We must get mother and the girls out of this while we do what we can to keep 'em off."

"I won't go and leave you boys behind alone," said Mrs. Villiers.

"I think, sir, there'll be a lot o' danger in her leavin' here for the Towers now," put in Ned. "There's too many mounted men gallopin' round."

"The keep is the only safe place now," said Sam. "Mother, you and the girls must stay there till we can fend off the first attack, an' then we'll give you an escort to Cote-halt Towers, where you'll be out of the enemy's way. We can't hold this house against the German army. All we can do is to repulse an attack while you get away."

"Can you repulse it?" said Stephen quickly.

"Yes, if you fellows jump lively! Until they bring up the guns we can defy 'em here. Ned, get those axes from the lower room in the keep."

"I say, Sam," said Stephen, as they ran off towards the moat, "won't it be safer for the womenfolk if we surrender the place?"

"Not now, after that encounter with the Uhlans," returned Sam. "I wouldn't trust the beggars. Here, Ned, give us hold of those axes. Down with the bridge!"

He seized one of the long-handled hatchets Ned ran up with, and the three of them attacked the bridge Stephen had entered by. The old wooden structure, half rotten, was in pieces in a couple of minutes, and Sam led the way round to the front of the house, where they demolished the other bridge, which took more time.

Stephen did not understand what use the moat could be as a defence, for it had only a foot or two of water, and was half choked with weeds. But as soon as the bridges were gone, Sam ran for the gardener's shed, and wheeled out a rubber watering-hose on its carriage, Ned seizing a second, and brought them hurriedly to the keep tower.

"Tap the petrol tanks!" ordered Sam. "Screw the hoses on!"

The other two raised a cheer as they saw his plan. In the tower were three great tanks of petrol Mr. Villiers kept in store for his motor-cars, and it was no great difficulty to fit the hoses to them. Running the long hose-pipes from the tanks to the roof, one on each side, the boys put the taps on, under Sam's direction.

There was plenty of pressure, the tanks being on the first floor, and a spouting stream of petrol gushed into the moat on both sides. It naturally floated on the water, and running speedily both ways, it soon covered the whole surface and flowed all the way round the moat as the tanks poured out their contents.

"Just in time!" cried Sam exultingly. "It works beautifully! One spark of fire'll raise a barrier that no man or beast can pass. What's that? Can you hear horses?"



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The low drumming of hoof-beats was plainly heard across the park as they paused.

"Run for the sheds, Ned!" cried Sam. "Get two of those short lengths of big rope, dip 'em in petrol, and light 'em. Stand by the moat here, till I give you the word."

Out over the grass-land of the open park they could see a dark mass rolling swiftly towards the house, and the noise of hoofs grew louder.

"Cavalry!" said Sam, with a grim laugh. "More Uhlans. All the better for us."

Ned came out of the shed with a couple of stiff rope-lengths dipped in burning petrol, their smoky blaze shedding a dim light over the scene. Stephen, snapping down the bolt of his carbine, knelt behind a seat and levelled his sights at the advancing German Uhlans—for such they were.

On came the German cavalry, a troop of a dozen, with a captain beside them, their horses at full gallop, and the wind whistling in the pennons of their lances, each man with a carbine at his back, for they plainly meant to leap the moat and take the house by storm. Sam heard the hoarse orders of the captain, and he stepped out and held up his hand.

"Hold back!" he shouted in German. "Rein in there, and parley! No German sets foot here!"

The troop took no notice, but spurred forward for the jump.

"In with it, Ned!" said Sam.

And the young marshman flung one of his torches straight into the moat.

Woo!

Swiftly as a train of gunpowder the petrol took fire from end to end. A great wall of fire suddenly sprang up in the very faces of the horses as they reached the brink, and, rearing high in the air, they flung themselves backwards amidst an outburst of wild yells from their riders.

A New Use for Petrol.

It was a wonderful sight that Ned brought about by the flinging of his torch. At one moment all was darkness, the German troop thundering down upon the silent house and its three defenders with irresistible force. The next moment saw the old dwelling suddenly ringed about with flame, and the troops scattered like a handful of leaves in a sudden gust of wind.

Ned's shout of triumph mingled with the oaths and yells of the troopers and the squeals of the terrified chargers as they reared and broke away. Sam watched the scene critically, looking keenly to see that there was no flaw in his plans, and that the troopers could find no way across, and Stephen, kneeling behind the seat, was firing quietly and swiftly through the flames.

One—two—three saddles were emptied as the repeating-carbine cracked before the troop could collect itself. Two men had been thrown, or, rather, had come down with

their horses as the scared beasts roared back, and the others were unable to hold in their beasts, which bolted across the park in spite of rein and curb. They were trained to stand shot and shell, but this infernal outburst of flame from the very ground under their noses was too much for them.

"Well done, boys!" cried Madge from the window in the tower, where she had seen the whole manoeuvre, wild with excitement. "Give it them—give it them!"

"Cursed British pigs!" cried the captain of the troop furiously. "Rein back, you fools! Get your horses round!" he shouted to his men. "What are you about?"

"Go it, Steve! Nail as many as you can!" said Sam to his brother. "We shall get no quarter if they come over!"

"They can't get over. Horses an' men o' cast iron might manage it, but not flesh an' blood," said

Ned. "Gosh, but it was a fine idea o' yours, Master Aubrey!"

Shouting and swearing volubly at his troop, the German officer had them together again with remarkable quickness, and they rode round the moat at a gallop, seeking a way over. They soon found there was none, for the petrol was blazing the whole way round the moat, sending up a barrier of flame eight feet high. Savagely the officer rammed his spurs into his horse to try and jump through, but nothing would make the horse face it, and each time he swerved violently, nearly pitching his rider into the blazing ditch that gaped five yards wide.

The whole affair had barely occupied a minute and a half, and at the second attempt of the officer to cross, Sam stepped forward a few paces and held up his hand.

"There's no way you can cross!" he cried. "But if you like to draw your men off and parley—"

"Verfluchte, British cub!" roared the German, whipping out his revolver and firing point-blank at Sam, who was but twenty yards distant. "Parley with you? I'll shoot down every soul in the house when I get across!"

Twice he fired, the bullets whirring wide past Sam's head, for it was no light for pistol-shooting, and before he could fire again, Stephen's steady carbine spoke, and the officer fell forward on his horse's neck.

A sub-lieutenant, spurring forward, shouted something to the men, who quickly unslung their carbines and fired a rattling volley at the house and its defenders. Four or five bullets drummed round the window of the tower where Mrs. Villiers and the two girls, too excited to be scared, stood watching the scene, and though a leaden messenger flattened itself on the stone lintel above the elder woman's head, she did not flinch.

"Get back, up there!" cried Sam anxiously, as he joined his brother behind the stone seat, and drew his revolver.

"Back, mother, and take the girls into cover!" "She's the right sort o' dame for the British lion's whelps!" laughed Ned grimly to himself, as he stepped behind a stone statue that shielded him from the wild shots of the Germans. "They be a fightin' breed, the Villiers!"

"Give it 'em!" said Sam, white with anger, as he emptied his Service revolvers at the troopers. "Teach 'em to fire on women!"

"Couldn't have seen who they were, surely!" said Stephen, for, bitterly as he hated the foe, he could not believe it was done purposely. Between each shot he jerked the ejector-bolt of his carbine and took a fresh sight, and seldom did he fail to reach his mark. "Don't rattle away like that, Sam; you're wastin' cartridges. It's too far for revolver shootin' in this light."

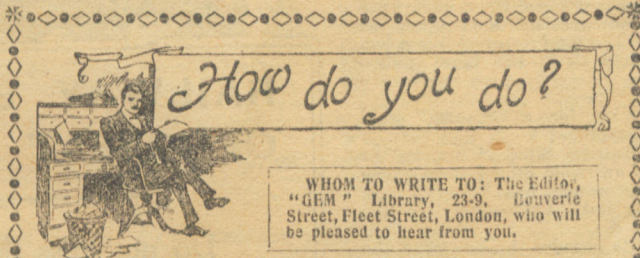
The fire of the troopers had been too wild to do any harm, for from the backs of their horses, dancing to and fro beyond the roaring petrol flames, they could not shoot accurately. Under the shadow of the house, and screened by the stone seat, with his rifle-barrel resting on the back, Stephen was able, with ease, to drop three more Uhlans in half a dozen shots.

There was no cover for the enemy, and to dismount and attack with carbines in the open would have been of little use. So, scattering, and riding round desperately again to try and find some way over, the Germans were forced to take themselves out of range of Stephen's deadly sniping, which bade fair to pick them all off one by one, while they were totally unable to get at him. So, rallying what was left of the troop, the sub-lieutenant galloped off with them full speed across the park, turning in the saddle to shake his fist savagely at the house as he rode.

"Game to us!" said Stephen, firing one parting shot that made the lieutenant drop his arm with a curse. "Eight goals to nothing!"

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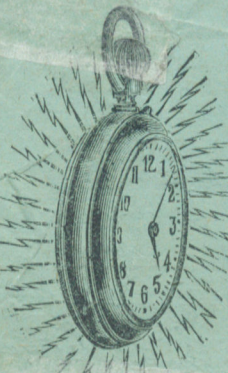
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