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TWO IN THE TOILS!

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co.

THE LIFT AND THE LIFTED!

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TWO IN THE TOILS!

A Magnificent, New, Long, Complete School Story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.

Mr. Selby's Friend the Professor.

"HE, he, he!" cackled Baggy Trimble of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's.

Baggy seemed highly amused as he stood by the gates and watched the approach of an equipage which was perhaps calculated to provoke mirth, though it was hardly funnier to an impartial observer than Baggy himself.

But Baggy failed to realise that. He did not regard himself as in any way lacking in good looks or symmetry of form. In fact, Baggy was—in Baggy's eyes—rather an Adonis than otherwise.

The sun shed hot rays upon the quad of the ancient school and the dusty road that ran past the fine old scroll-work gates. From the playing-fields came the click of bat meeting ball and the sound of voices. From the lodge hard by the gates proceeded sounds which suggested that Ephraim Taggles, the porter, was enjoying a somewhat noisy siesta—unless, indeed, Taggles had adopted as an inmate of his home a pig with a curiously regular and rhythmical grunt. But Mrs. Taggles would have put her foot down on that. So no doubt the regular noise was the snoring of the worthy Ephraim.

Baggy thought himself alone, as he had been until that moment. But there was someone close at hand now.

"He, he, he!" cackled Baggy again.

"May I inquire what it is that has so compelled your risibility?" asked a mild voice from the rear.

Baggy swung round slowly upon Herbert Skimpole, the eccentric philosopher of the Shell.

Skimmy was usually courteous, even to fellows whom he disliked. He had been known to address Racke and Crooke as "My dear Racke!" and "My dear Crooke!" though he certainly had no love for either. But he could not find it in him to say "My dear Trimble!" just then. Recent events had induced in Skimmy a very strong and wholesome contempt for the fat waster of the Fourth.

"Look at that, you silly chump!" snorted Baggy.

Skimpole blinked at Baggy, and then at the object of Baggy's derision. Having done that, he shifted a ponderous tome from his right arm to his left, and said:

"I perceive, Trimble, a gentleman of somewhat unusual appearance in a vehicle of slightly antiquated pattern. To a philosophic mind——"

"Oh, rats!" broke in Baggy rudely. "I dare say you don't think it's funny. You're funny yourself, and don't know it. But——"

"Absurdity resides rather in the mind of the beholder, Trimble, than in the essence of things beheld," said Skimmy weightily. "I have told you what my ocular sense shows me; and, in a measure, what impression is conveyed to my mind thereby. Will you be good enough, in the interests of science, to inform me what you see?"

"Blow the interests of science!" said the unphilosophic Trimble. "I see a silly old ass with a white hat and white whiskers sitting in a giddy trap that looks as if it came out of Noah's Ark, and a blessed piebald pony with its bones sticking out so that you could jolly well hang your hat on them!"

On the whole, the description given by Baggy, though it might not suit the open and impartial mind of Herbert Skimpole, which was not readily moved to mirth by absurd things, would have been regarded as tolerably correct by the average St. Jim's junior.

There really was something rather absurd about the approaching equipage—at least, to the unphilosophic mind, to which the unusual is the absurd.

The piebald pony was not quite so lean and bony as Baggy described it. The trap it drew could hardly have been in the Ark with Noah, since there is no warrant for supposing that any wheeled vehicle was there; but it certainly was not exactly twentieth century.

As for the gentleman who held the reins, he had upon his head a tall white hat; and upon his face, which was rather red, long white whiskers; and he looked rather more like some figure out of a comic opera than an ordinary human being. But it is doubtful whether the ordinary observer would have considered him funnier than the obese Baggy or the bumpy-browed Skimmy.

The piebald pony came to a halt, apparently without any hint or command on the part of his driver. Possibly he was one of those ponies who are willing to pull up anywhere.

The white-whiskered gentleman pulled out a big red handkerchief, and mopped his perspiring brow before he spoke. After that he looked, first at Skimmy, then at Baggy.

Perceiving, it may be, that Skimmy was in a state of abstraction, he addressed himself to Baggy.

"Is this—but I do not think I can be mistaken—this is St. James' College, I believe, my little man?"

Baggy scowled. He was not pleased by the form of address. But, in spite of the eccentricity of his appearance, the stranger did not look like a poor man; and Baggy, in whom there was a good deal of the toady, thought it worth while to be civil.

"Yes, sir!" he answered. "Did you wish to see anyone?"

"I desire to see my old friend Henry Selby. Is he——"

"There ain't any chap of that name here, sir," said Baggy, looking puzzled.

Then he made a mental effort, and reflected that it could hardly be a St. Jim's boy of whom the stranger spoke as an old friend. From that deduction it was not a big jump to Mr. Selby, the Third Form master.

Baggy might have been quicker but for the difficulty he had in realising that anyone could possibly regard the cross-grained Mr. Selby as a friend. Certainly no one at St. Jim's so regarded him.

"Oh, yes! Mr. Selby, you mean, sir!" he added. "I don't know whether he's in or out; but he doesn't go out very much."

Skimpole lifted his cap politely.

"To the best of my knowledge and belief, sir, Mr. Selby is at the present moment within," he said. "In fact, I saw him less than five minutes ago."

The stranger looked upon Skimmy with eyes of approval.

"You have a studious appearance, my young friend," he said. "It is a pleasure to meet a youth who speaks with propriety and courtesy, and who has apparently derived benefit from the instructions of his tutors."

"He, he, he!" giggled Baggy.

Trimble did not belong to the Shell; but it was common knowledge throughout St. Jim's that Mr. Linton, the master of that Form, regarded Herbert Skimpole as quite one of the most hopeless of his pupils. It was not so much that Skimmy could not learn the things that the Shell was expected to learn as that he would not. They bored him; and he considered Mr. Linton a person of mental endowments markedly inferior to his own.

He flushed slightly now as he said:

"I thank you for your good opinion, my dear sir. But I think that I am bound to point out that you are under a misapprehension. It is true that I am an earnest student of science in all its branches; but I must candidly state that neither the subjects taught here nor the methods of education—so-called—in vogue appeal to me in the very least degree."

"Ha! An original mind!" mumbled the stranger.

The piebald pony stretched out its neck and sniffed at Skimmy's glasses. Skimmy gave ground in some alarm.

"He, he, he! The pony ain't dangerous!" chortled Baggy. "I ain't afraid of him. I say, sir, shall I go and fetch old—Mr. Selby, I mean, for you?"

"Thank you, my little man! I shall be indebted to you if you will have that goodness."

"Oh, it's no trouble, sir! What name shall I say?"

"Professor Pompey Burnham, my child. Mr. Selby will probably remember me as Pomp. But you need not say that, perhaps. Make haste to acquaint him with my presence here, while I beguile the time by conversation with my young friend in the—er—glasses, whom I perceive to be of marked originality."

Skimmy beamed. Baggy scowled. He seemed to have been relegated at once by the professor to a position distinctly below Skimmy's.

But Baggy went. There might be a tip for the fellow who ran the professor's errands—scarcely for him with whom the professor conversed on terms of equality. Baggy much preferred even a small tip to the reputation of having an original mind. Skimpole despised tips from strangers.

"'Allo, there!" came a voice from the door of the lodge just before the fat Fourth-Former departed. "I say, sir—which what I says is this 'ere—you ain't allowed to drive inter this 'ere quad."

"My good man, I do not propose to do anything contrary to the rules and regulations of the place," answered the professor soothingly.

Taggles snorted. Something in the professor's appearance seemed to have aroused hostility in the breast of Taggles.

"I dunno as you've no call to be a-callin' of me your good man," he answered. "But what I says is this 'ere—that this animile of yours 'ave got 'is 'ead on the premises now, an' afore we knows where we are, in a manner of speakin', 'e'll 'ave 'is body after it. You may be up to all the rules an' reggylations of St. Jim's, though I dunno where you learned of 'em, but 'tain't to say as your 'oss is, if you calls the thing an 'oss, which I don't!".

The piebald pony's advance had carried his head inside the gates. The professor now gave a sudden tug to the reins, and slewed the pony round in a manner which could hardly have been comfortable. Having got chaise and pony well across the road, fairly in the way of any possible traffic, the professor dropped the reins into the chaise and clambered down.

"Will that satisfy you, my contentious friend?" he asked, with a mildness which Taggles evidently took as a mere cloak for sarcasm.

"'Tain't what satisfies me," replied Taggles morosely. "Precious little satisfaction the likes of me gets these 'ere days, what with one thing an' another. But what I says is this 'ere—rules is rules, an' if they ain't rules, what is they?"

"An incontrovertible position, my friend," answered the professor. "You also, I perceive, have some of the elements of philosophy."

"Fust I've 'eard of it," grunted Taggles. Then his face took on a more friendly look, and he murmured, "Thankee, sir!" as the professor slipped a half-crown into his horny palm.

"None of your larks, Master Skimpole!" he said warningly, as he retired into the lodge.

Skimpole looked positively pained. He was quite the least likely junior at St. Jim's to be guilty of any larks, more especially in the case of a personage who had already so won upon his esteem as had Professor Pompey Burnham.

"Do not heed him," said the professor. "His honest but rough and uncultivated mind fails to distinguish between a youth of your unusual mental endowments and the common herd. But I recognise in you a fellow-seeker after knowledge. I must see more of you, my young friend."

"It would afford me the greatest pleasure to improve our acquaintance, sir," said Skimmy solemnly. "Seldom, indeed, do I encounter a kindred mind."

"Ha! So I should have guessed. Come and see me, young sir. By the way, I do not know your name."

"Skimpole, sir—Herbert Skimpole."

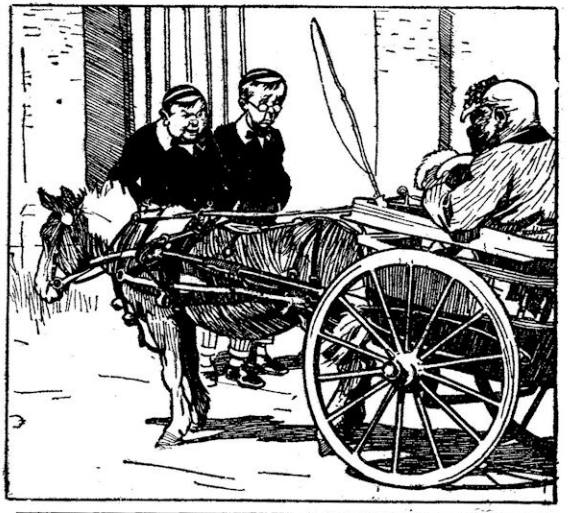
"Ha! Come and see me, Skimpole. I am resident at the Moat House, some little distance out of Rylcombe, off the Westwood Road. No doubt you know it?"

"I cannot say that I do, sir; but I shall experience no difficulty in finding it, I am sure. The presence of a man of your distinguished attainments must be a matter of notoriety in the neighbourhood, and anyone of whom I inquire will be capable of directing me."

The professor's face worked. As a matter of fact, the countryside had not taken to the professor, which was less his fault than that of his body-servant, Silas Stont.

Rylcombe folk were not yet sure whether Professor Burnham was a lunatic, a wizard, or an uninterned Hun, but they were quite sure that Silas Stont was a most objectionable person.

"You will find your way, no doubt—I trust soon. Bring your young friend with you, if you like."



A Queer Turn-out!
(See Chapter 1.)

"Eh?" gasped Skimmy. "I really do not quite grasp——"

"Your fat young friend—the agreeable lad who so obligingly offered to find my dear old pal Henry Selby for me."

Skimmy gasped again. The professor could hardly be a person of such discernment as he had at first seemed if he took Baggy for a friend of Skimmy's.

But before the philosopher of the Shell could say anything to remove that false impression Mr. Selby came striding up, with Trimble waddling behind him.

CHAPTER 2.
Skimmy Plays the Hero.

MR. SELBY looked as cross-grained and bilious as ever. He might be pleased to see the professor, but he did not show it.

The professor was evidently pleased to see him, however. He grasped the hand of the Third Form master in a grip which made that gentleman wince, and with his left hand patted his old friend's shoulder.

"My dear Henry!" he said heartily. "My dear fellow, this is a moment to which I have looked forward with keen pleasure. You are somewhat grey, and your face shows signs of care, I observe. The task of teaching the young idea how to—er—shoot, though, of course, that is not—but never mind—cannot be all—er—beer and skittles, as the vulgar phrase hath it."

Being instructed—to the frequent accompaniment of the cane—by Mr. Selby was certainly not at all that kind of thing for the Third Form; while it was extremely unlikely that beer and skittles had any attraction for the sour-tempered master. But the professor spoke in metaphors.

"But I doubt not that your heart is still as young as in the days when we were boys together," went on the professor.

"Um—er—oh, yes, Burnham, no doubt, no doubt!" replied Mr. Selby pettishly, trying to draw his hand away as he spoke.

Mr. Selby's own hand-shake had about as much warmth and grip in it as one might have expected of a fish-slice, and the professor's friendly grasp hurt his fingers.

But Professor Burnham entirely failed to perceive that the warmth was all on his own side.

"We were boys together. As young men we studied together—ay, and sported in company," he went on. "Let me see. It must be fully twenty-five years—more, perhaps—since you had that little trouble with the police, and hailed me as your preserver when I stood bail for you."

"He, he, he!" cackled Baggy. Then he clapped his hand to his mouth as Mr. Selby glared at him.

"Really, Burnham, I am surprised at you!" snapped Mr. Selby. "You are certainly confusing me with some other acquaintance of yours—someone whom I can hardly have known, as I have ever made it a rule to abstain from consorting with——"

"Not at all, my dear Henry—not at all! I can relate to you the whole circumstances. There was nothing really vicious in the affair; it was merely an ebullition of youthful——"

"I must really ask you not to discuss it further!" snorted the Third Form master.

He glanced towards Skimpole and Trimble as he spoke. Baggy tried to conceal a grin. Skimmy had no need to do that; he was not listening.

"Ha! I understand, my dear Henry! I was in the wrong. Even harmless follies——"

"Enough of that, Burnham! Really, I——"

"Quite so. Selby—quite so! I will spare your feelings! Nice lads, both of

those, in different ways. Pupils of yours, I hope!"

A motor coughed in the road, and the piebald pony threw up his head.

"Nothing of the sort!" Mr. Selby snapped. "I should be very sorry indeed—— Oh, look out, there!"

A big motor-lorry thundered past, narrowly missing the rear of the chaise. The spirit of years long past seemed to return to the piebald pony. The chaise rocked wildly as he dragged it round and set off, apparently in hot pursuit of the lorry.

"Oh, stop him, Trimble!" shouted Skimmy.

"Stop him, boys!" roared the professor.

"You young idiots! Stop the animal!" howled Mr. Selby.

"Not jolly well likely!" muttered Baggy, scuttling well clear.

But Skimmy sprang forward. Whatever Skimmy's shortcomings might be, he was at least no funk. Moreover, he had a very friendly feeling towards the professor, and was anxious to be of service to him.

For the moment the piebald pony might have regained some of the spirit of his prime. But if he had ever had any pace worth bragging about he had long since lost it completely.

Otherwise Skimmy could not have gained upon him as he did. For Skimmy was no great shakes as a runner. The strength of his understanding was a matter in which his legs had small concern.

Baggy stood still and gaped. But another pursued. The professor's timely gift had wrought a change in the heart of Ephraim Taggles.

Taggles bolted out of the door of his lodge, dashed through the gates, collided with Baggy, bowled him over, and blundered on down the road.

"Whoa!" he yelled. "Whoa, you silly jjjit! Stop!"

Skimpole pulled up, panting hard.

"Did you address that very injurious epithet to me, Taggles?" he demanded.

"No, Master Skimpole! Ho, what a hass the boy is! Which what I mean to say is, if you don't catch that there foolish animile——"

Skimmy heard no more. He resumed the pursuit, puffing hard, but yet managing a spurt which took him nearer the fiery runaway steed.

Taggles toiled after him, perspiring at every pore.

Down the road showed, firstly, a red cow; secondly, four fellows in straw hats bearing the red-and-white ribbons of St. Jim's.

The red cow, chewing the cud meditatively, proceeded to plant itself across the road, right in the path of the runaway pony.

"Hi, there! Drive that cow—out of the way—or she'll—be killed!" shouted Skimmy, now in great distress for want of breath.

"Is the cow in danger?" asked Sidney Clive.

"Depends upon the state of the meat market, I fancy!" returned Levison major, grinning. "But I don't think they're allowing milch cows to be slaughtered just now."

"Skimmy's runnin'!" said Cardew. "Must be somethin' up, y'know!"

"He's after that pony," Durrance said. "The pony's done a bolt!"

"Henceforth, Cousin George, none shall ever in my hearin' accuse you of want of imagination an' escape challenge!" Cardew said solemnly.

"If the pony's done a bolt, the bolt's done now!" said Levison.

"Skimpole's chasing it. So is Taggles.

Don't be asses, you chaps!" snapped Durrance.

"Skimmy undoubtedly presents the appearance of runnin'. The worthy Taggles also seems to be usin' what speed is in him!" drawled Cardew. "But the wild untamed steed of the desert might be takin' part in a funeral procession, by gad! As for the cow, I would go to her rescue like a hero if I saw need therefor. But what's your hurry, Cousin George? What's bitten you, Clive, dear boy?"

But Durrance and Clive together had slipped past the cow while he talked.

Their help was not needed, however. Skimmy drew up at that moment, and flung himself gallantly at the pony's head.

It is true that the piebald, which had never achieved a tremendous speed, had now slowed down to something between a trot and a walk. But to admit that is to cast no real reflection upon Skimmy's gallantry. For Skimmy had run his hardest; and to him the pony seemed to be urging on its wild career at a terrific pace.

He gasped as the animal pulled up short, and behind his spectacles his eyes gleamed with triumph. The cow turned mild, ruminative orbs upon the scene, and went on placidly chewing the cud.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Durrance and Clive together.

"Ho!" snorted Taggles. "It's all werry well to laugh, young gen'l'men; but which what I means to say is this 'ere—there'd 'ave been a collision if we 'ad'nt stopped this wild animile! So-ho, boy! Gently, my beauty! No more of it, now!"

"Didn't see you do a lot of stopping him, Taggy!" remarked Clive.

"Shoo!" said Cardew; and he slapped the cow's flank. She moved over to the grassy edge of the road, and Levison and Cardew, both grinning broadly, confronted, side by side with their chums, the two breathless runners.

"Ho, Master Clive!" began Taggles.

"I am confident that Taggles did all that in him lay, Clive," said Skimpole gravely. "At his advanced age——"

"Ho, Master Skimpole! Not so much of that, now! Which what I means to say is this 'ere——"

"At his advanced age," repeated Skimmy, firmly if breathlessly, "Taggles cannot be expected to compete with me in speed; but undoubtedly he did his best. I may say, my dear fellows, that I was really surprised by my own pace. I had no idea that I was capable of outstripping a runaway horse!"

"Good old Skimmy!" chuckled Levison.

"Well, I must say as Master Skimpole speaks fair enough!" growled Taggles. "But which what I mean to say is—there ain't no call to make out as my age is so advanced as all that there, or that Ephraim Taggles can't do a bit o' runnin' yet if so be as he's put to it!"

"You ought to have run in the Marathon, Taggles!" remarked Cardew blandly.

"Which I ain't saying but what fifteen mile might 'ave bin a trifle above my weight," puffed Taggles. "But——"

"Going to get in and drive, Skimmy?" asked Clive.

"No, my dear Clive. There is still a wild look in the eye of this animal which suggests to me the possibility of his meditating fresh trouble," replied Skimmy.

"'Tain't in the right eye," said Levison, examining that organ closely. "He's blind that side. Let's have a look at the left, Skimmy, old top!"

But Skimmy had now seized the reins, close to the bit, and was endeavouring to steer the piebald round for the return journey. Taggles clutched on the other side, and between them they slewed the pony round and led him off. The four Fourth-Formers followed, rejoicing.

"They'll get him to the gates, unless he drops dead on the way from old age, by gad!" said Cardew.

"It wasn't a first-class bolt. Still, old Skimmy bucked up well!" Durrance said.

"Who's that merchant with all the face-fungus?" inquired Cardew, as they drew near the gates.

"That gentleman, Cardew," replied Skimpole, in tones of gentle remonstrance, "is the learned Professor Pompey Burnham, of whose fame you have doubtless heard, although I must confess——"

"Don't know Pompey from Cæsar, by gad! Do you, Levison?" drawled Cardew. "But if this one's Pompey, give me Cæsar, every time!"

"My dear Cardew, your levity is really——"

But Skimmy's reproof was cut short by the professor. That gentleman came forward with a beaming smile. He had to relinquish Mr. Selby's shoulder to come forward, and the master of the Third looked relieved. He cast a longing glance at the school buildings, as if meditating escape from his dear old friend; but apparently he decided that politeness debarred him from that.

"Thanks—a thousand thanks, courageous lad!" said the professor warmly.

He slapped Skimpole upon the back as he spoke.

"Ugh!" gasped Skimmy, and he began to cough.

But he was pleased, for he smiled modestly even while coughing.

"To you also thanks, my worthy friend!" boomed the professor to Taggles. "If you will allow me——"

He thrust his hand into his trousers-pocket. Taggles allowed him. Taggles never felt any dread of being pauperised; and with gin at war-time price the two half-crowns which now passed were more than welcome.

"I am glad that some of your schoolfellows should have witnessed your deed of derring-do, Hop-pole——"

"Skimpole, if you please, sir," corrected the hero.

"Quite right! Pardon me, Skimmilk! Ha! Wrong again? As a rule, my memory for names is quite a good one; but at the moment I am somewhat flustered. It was a surprise to me that this usually eminently tractable animal should have transgressed in such a manner. Peter—Peter, I am really ashamed of you!"

The professor wagged his head. The piebald pony drooped his, as if he were rather ashamed of himself.

"I trust that on the next half-holiday you will do me the favour of paying me a visit at the Moat House, Skip-rope," the professor went on, turning to the hero again. "And bring our obliging and courteous young friend with you."

He nodded towards Baggy Trimble.

"Oh, I'll come, sir, whether Skimmy does or not!" said Baggy eagerly.

"Pity the pony didn't run over the cow, by gad, Levison!" said Cardew aside.

"Why, ass?"

"The professor would have had to pay for the carcase. He would naturally have taken it home. There would have been beef for Baggy's comin'. An ox, or a cow—same thing, with a slight difference, y'know—roasted whole, would be just about the dear Baggy's mark. Better than the meat-ration—what?"

Levison and Clive and Durrance all grinned. Baggy, who had heard, glowered. The professor, who had not, smiled. Mr. Selby, to whom smiling was difficult, looked his usual glum self. The hero of the hour beamed, and the red

face of the hero's trusty aid glowed as he chinked those half-crowns in his pocket.

The four Fourth-Formers lifted their straws to the professor, and passed within gates. Skimmy, also politely capping his new friend, followed them, and Baggy waddled after Skimmy.

"Will you take charge of Peter, my good man?" said the professor, collaring Mr. Selby by the arm.

"Yessir," responded Taggles.

"Come for a stroll down the road, and let us talk of boyhood's days, Henry!" chirruped Mr. Selby's dear old friend.

"Friend of Selby's?" inquired Levison, grinning.

"I should rather think he is!" said Baggy eagerly. "Why, he remembers when the old Hun was taken up by the police, and he had to bail him out! He was going to tell us all about it, but——"

"Really, Trimble, I am surprised that you should repeat——"

"Oh, rats, Skimmy! Why shouldn't I? Any yarn about old Selby——"

"No scandal about Queen Elizabeth, prithee, Baggy!" said Cardew, with a solemn shake of the head. "Especially as you have told us all that you heard. Cousin George here has a vivid imagination, an' I don't doubt that he will fill in the framework to our satisfaction."

"Ass!" said Durrance, smiling.

He was used by this time to Cardew's random, chaffing talk, as Clive and Levison were.

"Old Selby ain't Queen Elizabeth," grunted Baggy, who always laboured long leagues behind when his mind tried to keep pace with Cardew's.

"True, oh, Baggibus! But Skimmy is a hero; don't forget that. How does it feel to be a hero, Hop-pole—beg pardon, Skim-milk?"

"I do not experience any undue elation, my dear Cardew; but, on the whole, I find it rather pleasant than the reverse to be regarded in that light."

"My hat!" gasped Levison. "He thinks he really is a hero, Clive!"

Skimmy did not hear that.

"Well, let him go on thinking so if he likes; it won't hurt him," replied Clive, always fair-minded. "Come to that, he was, in a way. I dare say he thought it was no end dangerous to grab at the rein of the foaming steed. Skimmy ain't half a bad old sort, you know, and he's got pluck."

"Look at those two!" said Levison, swinging round in time to catch a last glimpse of the professor and his boyhood's ally.

"If you ask me, old Selby would just as soon the other old buffer had stopped away," Clive said, grinning.

It certainly looked rather like that. The two old pals were arm-in-arm, but that was the professor's doing. Mr. Selby's share was merely passive. To disengage his arm would have been too marked. But he was not used to walking arm-in-arm with anyone, and he did not feel at all happy.

CHAPTER 3.

An Adventure at the Moat House.

"PAX!" said Tom Merry.

Gordon Gay and the four Grammarians with him—Frank Monk, the two Woottons, and Carboy—grinned.

"It's all very well, Tommy, now that you're outnumbered——"

"Oh, if you want a scrap, come on!" snapped Tom. "You're five to three, and——"

"At present," remarked Monty Lowther, in his blandest tones. "But when Talbot, Kangaroo, Dane, and Glyn come up——"

"Why, you know very well——" began Manners.

Lowther nudged him. But it was too late.

"We know very well, as you do, that they aren't anywhere near," said Gordon Gay cheerily.

"Besides which, five Grammarians are a fair match any day for seven saintly Jimmies!" said Carboy.

"We'll let you three off this time," Frank Monk told them. "You scored last, and we don't mind admitting that it was a biggish score."

"Too big to be wiped off by rubbing your little noses in the dust," said Wootton major.

"I'd jolly well like to see you try that on!" snapped Manners.

"Well you shall see it, if you're keen on it!" retorted Wootton minor.

"Peace, children, peace!" said Gordon Gay. "Tommy, we owe you chaps one. We pay our debts! But we're not paying this one just now, so 'pax' let it be."

"Right-ho!" replied Tom. "I say, who's that merchant?"

It was Professor Pompey Burnham who passed them, swinging along at something like five miles an hour, his white hat stuck at the back of his head,

the perspiration slaking the dust which his white whiskers had gathered.

"Don't know him from Adam!" answered Gordon Gay.

"More like Methuselah than Adam!" remarked Wootton major.

"He's not really old," said Carboy. "Shouldn't wonder if those white flappers of his were false. He ain't old in the mug, and his hair's hardly a bit grey!"

"My hat! That must be the old josser from the Moat House!" said Frank Monk.

"Oh, let me get at him! Let me get at him, that's all!" yelled Wootton minor, doing a wild war-dance, and shaking his fist at the professor's back.

The professor glanced round at that moment, and turned in astonishment. The Australian junior, a trifle shame-faced, dropped his fist, and ceased his dance. The professor resumed his march.

"What's he been doing to you, dear boy?" inquired Lowther.

"Oh, well, come to that, he didn't really do anything himself; but I s'pose the bow-legged beast there obeyed his orders! Tell 'em about it, Monky!"

"Must be the chap!" said Frank Monk. "He's living at the Moat House, out there, off the Westwood Road, not far from the marshes, you know. There's no end of talk about him in the village and round about.

"Not much use taking notice of village gossip!" said Manners.

"Well, mostly it's not! But there's something behind it in this case. He's fitted that old tumbledown place up with all sorts of queer gadgets, they say—a lift, and electric wangles, and—oh, I dunno! And he's had the old drawbridge repaired, so that when it's up you can't get to the house without swimming the moat."

"What's that for?" asked Lowther. "Sounds as if he were starting in on a robber baron kind of career!"

The Terrible Three were all interested now. They had not yet learned that the professor was an old friend of Mr. Selby's. Only twenty minuts or so had passed since Levison and Clive had watched the two go down the road arm-in-arm. The professor, having clean forgotten the piebald pony, was hurrying homeward on foot. Tom Merry & Co. were on their way back from Rylcombe.

"Some people say he's no end of a scientific sharp, and is busy with some invention that's going to settle the giddy Huns straight off the reel when it once gets to work on them," said Gordon Gay.

"Oh, rats!" snapped Harry Wootton—Wootton minor. "The old fossil's mad, that's the long and the short of it. And, as for that beast of a man of his, he's the most horrible old wowser I ever ran against, bar none!"

"What's a wowser?" asked Manners curiously.

"My hat! Don't you chaps understand plain English?" demanded Jack Wootton.

"They don't know Australian, that's what's the matter," said Gordon Gay, grinning.

"Interpret to them!" suggested Frank Monk.

"Well, a wowser really means a disagreeable person of the long-faced type—kind of anti-everything, you know—thinks it sinful to be happy, and so on. But the word's come to be used for any sort of merchant that most other people bar. See?"

"Then the johnny with the white weepers is a wowser?" said Lowther.

"Nunno! He may be, but I shouldn't think so. It's his man—Silas Stout, the rotter's name is—that Wootton says is a wowser," replied Monk.

"What's the man done?" asked Tom Merry.

"What hasn't he done?" snapped Harry Wootton.

"That's rather a wide question!" said Lowther blandly. "But I shouldn't imagine he's killed anyone, or he would have been buried in quicklime or given free apartments for the rest of his life by now! I shouldn't think he committed bigamy——"

"I wouldn't trust him!" said Wootton minor morosely.

"But you might trust the ladies," Frank Monk said, grinning cheerily. "If dear old Silas ever could have persuaded one of them to marry him, it's a wonder. If two—why, it would be a giddy miracle, no less!"

"Well, he didn't appear to have a lot of wives about at the Moat House, anyway!" remarked Carboy.

"You've been there, then?" Tom Merry said.

"We have—we has!" replied Frank Monk.

"Let Harry tell the yarn," Carboy suggested.

"Blessed if I do!" snorted Wootton minor.

"Poor old chap!" said Monk, slapping him on the back. "He hasn't got over it yet. Well, it's a solid fact that you did get the worst of it, old top!"

"I should jolly well think I did! My

word, I'll be even with that bow-legged old sinner yet, though!"

"Let's hear the yarn?" said Manners. "You were all in it, I suppose?"

"No, we weren't!" answered Frank Monk. "Only Carboy and Wootton minor and myself. Gordon and Jack Wootton were in detention."

"For behaving too well in Form," put in Gay.

"Well, that didn't seem to be quite Adams' idea; but have it your own way, old chap. We three toddled up the Westwood Road a bit. There wasn't much doing at our show, owing to an epidemic of good behaviour in the Fourth. We'd been hearing a lot about these queer merchants at the Moat House, and when we came in sight of the place Harry suggested——"

"I didn't!" snapped Wootton minor.

"Somebody did, anyway!" said Frank Monk.

"It was you, Monky," Carboy said.

"Was it? I dare say you're right. Anyway, we thought we'd have a look round. The drawbridge was down, and we walked over it. No harm in that. Eh?"

"None at all, I should say," Tom Merry agreed.

"There's a big iron gate in the wall that runs round the house; the blessed old house is like a giddy fortress, you know;"

"And the gate was open, so——"

"Wrong, Lowther, it wasn't! But Carboy happened to tumble up against it——"

"You shoved me up against it, Monky!"

"Did I? Well, perhaps I did! A chap can't remember everything. Anyway, it swung open, and we wandered in, kind of absent-mindedly, you know."

"Monky's a very absent-minded beggar!" said Gordon Gay.

"You're all that way," remarked Lowther sweetly. "A complete absence of anything in the nature of minds, even of the most embryo type, is, I have observed, a marked characteristic of the Rylcombe Fourth!"

"We ain't potty enough to talk like that, anyway!" growled Wootton major.

"There was a dog in the yard—most ferocious-looking beast I ever clapped eyes on," Frank Monk continued.

"Couldn't be worse than that rotten bulldog your chap Herries thinks so much of!" put in Wootton major.

"Oh, old Towser's all right!" said Tom Merry.

"He may be a friend of yours—he's no friend of mine!" Jack Wootton replied.

"And yet I have seen him cling to you affectionately," said Monty Lowther.

"If you chaps don't want to hear my yarn——"

"We do, Monky! Dry up, Lowther!"

"Certainly, Thomas. To so polite a hint——"

"But the dog was chained up," went on Frank Monk, without waiting for the humorist of the Shell to finish. "He growled some, and tried to strangle himself with his chain; but it wouldn't have been our funeral if he had, so we didn't mind that. We strolled on. Then a weird-looking object burst out of the house——"

"Just as if he was shot from a cannon," said Carboy.

"With a gun in one hand and a whip in the other," added Harry Wootton.

"Brandishing a cutlass, with two pistols between his teeth, shouting his war-cry, and wagging the Jolly Roger," put in Lowther.

"You potty ass! We're giving you a straight tale!" howled the Australian junior.

"I was only adding picturesque and probable details," said Lowther meekly.

"He really had a gun and a whip," said Frank Monk. "And he was a curious specimen. About five feet high, and six across the shoulders, you know, and——"

"Feet or inches?" inquired Lowther.

"Yards, chump! But he really was about as broad as he was long, and his legs were like sickles, and his arms like a gorilla's. As for his face——"

"Worse than Carboy's?" queried Lowther.

"Oh, shut up, ass!" snorted Manners.

"Your face wants a little decoration, strikes me, Lowther!" said Carboy hotly. "I'm a bit in the way of that, you know——"

"Wrong, dear boy! Nothing could possibly improve yours. The alteration of a single feature would be fatal to its perfect and unique ugliness!"

"I mean, that I'm in the face-decoration line, you silly idiot!" hooted Carboy, putting a clenched hand within an inch of Lowther's nose.

"You surprise me," answered Lowther, quite unperturbed. "I had imagined that Nature wrought on your behalf. If you did it yourself—well, there's no accounting for tastes, as our friend Herries remarked when he found Towser with an irregularly-shaped trousers-pattern in his mouth!"

"If you're getting at me, Lowther, I'll——" roared Wootton major.

"My dear fellow——"

"Oh, do shut up, you asses!" snapped Tom. "Go on, Monky!".

"Stout's got a face on him like nothing earthly," said Frank Monk. "We'd heard about him in the village; but nothing living can describe a mug like that. He howled something about spies, and came for us at the double. We bunked."

"It was discreet," murmured Lowther. "Discreet, if not courageous."

"I'll bet you'd have bunked, fathead!" snapped Harry Wootton.

"Carboy and I got through the gate all right," continued Monk. "But Wootton here fell over his own feet, or something."

"The alternative is unnecessary. No one, looking at Wootton's feet, would doubt——"

"It wasn't, then, you silly idiot! I caught my foot in an old kettle——"

"Some kettle!" Lowther murmured.

"Anyway, he blundered over," Frank Monk said. "We were half-way across the drawbridge before we tumbled——"

"More old kettles?" inquired Lowther, with deep interest.

"Before we tumbled to what had happened, you fathead! We'd just turned round when the drawbridge began to rise. I thought such things had to be wound up with a chain and ratchet arrangement; but there wasn't anything like that about this one. It seemed to work by magic. Carboy and I jumped just in time!"

"In time for you!" growled Carboy. "You jumped clear of the moat—I plopped into it!"

"Well, it was a hot day, and a bathe didn't hurt you!"

"Thanks! I prefer water to bathe in, not mud!"

"There was some mud, certainly!" said Monk, grinning. "Old Carboy fairly stuck. I had to yank him jolly hard before he came out with a pop."

"And there was I, with the rotten drawbridge up, and no way across!" growled Wootton minor. "But that wasn't the worst of it. The beastly Hun was upon me before——"

"Where did the Hun come from?" asked Lowther. "First we've heard of him."

"I mean Stout, you silly idiot! He dropped the gun, and laid into me like one o'clock with the whip. I bolted for the gate——"

"And did the gate bolt, also?"

"That's just what it did! It slammed in my face—with nobody near enough to slam it, either! The Hun was laying into me with his whip all the time. I dodged back, and snatched up the gun, with him after me. He kept on swiping at me with the whip. I got the butt of the gun to my shoulder; but, of course, I couldn't shoot the rotter."

"Of course, you couldn't, fathead!" said Gordon Gay. "The gun wasn't loaded."

"How do you know? You weren't there, chump!"

"If it had been, the chap wouldn't have dared to get to close quarters with you."

"Not so sure of that. He's a fierce beast—more than half-mad, I reckon. I grabbed the gun by the barrel then, and gave him a jolly good swipe across the shins with it. He howled like a hyena; but it checked him for a moment, and I made a bolt for the wall. It's a bit out of repair, and I got foothold and handhold somewhere in the crevices."

"Some crevices!" murmured Lowther, with a glance at Wootton minor's feet.

"They really were not more than average size; but that fact did not matter to the humorist of the Shell.

"Ass! Next thing I knew the dog was barking, and jumping up at me. That rotten Stout had unchained him! Jolly nice posish for me, with the dog leaping and the whip lashing, wasn't it?"

"But you came through it alive?" asked Lowther anxiously.

"Of course I did, or I shouldn't be here, should I? You're potty, Lowther! I made a desperate spring, and grabbed the top of the wall. That rotter Stout gave me a last stinger right across the seat of the trousers, and——"

"The dog didn't reach you, then?"

"No, chuckle-head!"

"Of course not! I deduced that. If he had, you would have lacked a seat to your trousers, I apprehend."

"You silly ass! I fell off the wall—right into the moat! Oh, crumbs! If ever I get a chance to score off that Hun—but I will—you bet I will!"

"Is that all?" asked Tom Merry.

"Well, he waded and slipped across the moat somehow, and we pulled him out," answered Frank Monk. "We went home then—it was time!"

"Our best thanks for an interesting yarn, dear boys!" said Lowther sweetly.

"It's true, you silly chump!" hooted Wootton minor.

"It's equal to anything in 'The Arabian Nights' Entertainments," anyhow, true or not!"

"But it's true, every word of it, Lowther!" said Frank Monk.

"Then truth is indeed stranger than fiction! The dog and the bog—that is, the muddy moat—the Hun and the gun—the whip and the slip—Wootton minor's slip, you know—all these are within the four corners of my credulity. But the magic gate and the enchanted drawbridge——"

"If you don't believe it, go and see for yourselves!" howled Carboy.

"We will! Thomas, this is an adventure worthy of our arms—an enchanted castle—an ogre—doubtless an imprisoned princess—a magician with a white top-hat and white weepers to his dial! We will go, Thomas—we will go, Henry!"

"Not just now, we won't," said the practical Manners. "We shall have to

shift ourselves pretty sharply if we're not to be late for dinner."

Gordon Gay glanced at his wrist-watch.

"My hat! So shall we!" he said. Come along, you chaps!"

They separated, and bolted. Far down the road, unnoticed by them, Professor Pompey Burnham, his face turned to St. Jim's again now, plodded back, perspiring. He had just remembered the piebald pony and the chaise.

"What have you got there, Taggy?" asked Tom Merry, as the Terrible Three reached the gates.

Taggles held Peter by the bridle, and was contemplating him morosely.

"Which this animile 'as been left be'ind by a gen'l'man——"

"Who didn't want to have it dving upon his hands. I see! You've been had, old top!" gibed Lowther.

Taggles grunted disdainfully, and the Terrible Three darted across the deserted quad. The dinner-bell had already sounded.

CHAPTER 4.

A Visit to the Moat House.

"HOLD on, Skimmy! I'm coming with you!"

It was Baggy Trimble who puffed these words, hurrying through the gates some twenty or thirty yards behind Herbert Skimpole, the philosophic genius of the Shell.

"Really, Trimble, I cannot——"

"Hold on, I say!" repeated Baggy. "The old fossil asked me as well as you, and I'm jolly well going; so don't make any mistake about that! You can't slink off without me!"

Skimmy halted, with a sigh. At no time had he any desire for Trimble's company; and just now he barred it particularly.

But Trimble wronged Skimmy when he suspected him of trying to steal a march upon him.

The guileless Skimmy was hardly capable of that. In truth, he had completely forgotten that Trimble had been asked. But for the fact that the professor had aroused an unusual degree of interest in him he would have forgotten his own invitation.

Baggy puffed up, his fat face perspiring and comforted.

"I dare say you thought you were no end clever," he squeaked. "But I was one too many for you! I've been looking out for you half an hour or more!"

Skimmy blinked at him.

"In a person whose regard I found it possible to value, Trimble, I should consider that a compliment—perchance above my modest deserts, but still a compliment. As it is, however——"

"Oh, rats! I knew you'd be going to see that old fossil——"

"It is highly improper of you to speak of the learned and famous Professor Burnham in that manner, Trimble! I consider it most reprehensible, indeed!"

"Rot! He is an old fossil, ain't he?"

"I really cannot conceive what is your motive for wishing to visit him if——"

"Grub!" said Baggy simply.

"Eh? I fear that I fail to understand——"

"Oh, you always were a silly ass, Skimmy—everybody knows that! The old fossil asked us to tea, didn't he?"

"I really cannot recall that he made any mention of——"

"Well, I like that!" broke in Baggy, in injured tones. "You can't ask a chap to visit you and not give him a decent meal, I suppose?"

"I have no doubt whatever that Professor Burnham, who appears to me a most estimable and open-hearted man, will act all that the laws of hospitality dictate, Trimble. But——"

"Well, then, that's what I'm after! I dare say he'll have a ham in cut—ham ain't rationed now. I could eat a pound or two of ham. And, of course, there'll be sardines, and things of that sort. Not so sure about jam—he wouldn't eat jam, with whiskers like that!"

"Certainly not, Trimble! I have never yet heard of anyone eating jam with his whiskers! The customary method——"

"Oh, you needn't be funny, or sarcastic, either! I s'poso you call that being sarcastic—eh? You can't tell me anything about eating jam that I don't know!"

Cadet Notes.

Most of the Cadet Corps which have been in camp this year returned to their ordinary civilian life some weeks ago. On the whole the camps, although not so numerous as in many previous years before the war, seem to have been extremely successful. For one thing, the weather was very much better this year than last, and, indeed, very much better than at one time seemed probable. From every quarter of the country comes news of the splendid times the lads had in the beautiful parks and other places where their camps were situated. Among others, we may perhaps specially mention the South-West London Cadet Battalion, which had 800 members encamped in one of the Eastern counties, this forming one of the largest of all the Cadet Corps camps. In most cases the camps wound up with an inspection by the lord-lieutenant or some distinguished officer, who generally congratulated the lads upon their appearance and drill, and the excellent time they had been able to have in their summer camp this year.

Speaking generally, the amount of training put in during the camps this year was rather greater than usual. On the other hand, the training was always well diversified with recreation, and there are constant reports of football matches, boxing and swimming competitions, shooting for prizes, etc. Our only regret about the camps is that it is impossible, under present conditions, for all the lads on the various Cadet Corps to obtain the advantages of a week or two under such delightful conditions. When the war is happily over we hope that these camps will become more numerous and more largely attended, and, if necessary, that steps will be taken to insist upon compulsory holidays for boys wishing to put in a week or two at a Cadet Corps camp. Preparations are now being made for the autumn and winter programmes in all the Cadet Corps, and lads who are not already members should seize the opportunity to join now. Full particulars will be sent on application to the Central Association Volunteer Regiments (Cadet Dept.), Judges' Quadrangle, Royal Courts of Justice, W.C. 2.

Doubtless this was true.

Skimmy's devotion to learned pursuits had possibly saved him from any temptation to devour jam as Baggy often devoured it—licking it from his own fat, unclean fingers after they had been thrust into a jar belonging to someone else.

"This conversation, Trimble, is not to my taste!" said Skimpole sedately. "My object in accepting the invitation of the professor was not in the least like yours——"

"Yah! Tell that to anyone who'll believe it! I don't! You're after grub, just the same as I am!"

"I assure you, Trimble, that you are completely mistaken. A continuance of such insinuations on your part will be calculated to disturb the philosophic tenor of my mind. I have no desire whatever for your company, and I entirely fail to perceive any sufficient reason why you should so sedulously seek mine!"

"Well, I ain't jolly well going alone!" growled Baggy. "I might lose my way!"

"I shall be but an indifferent guide, Trimble, as I myself do not——"

"You can ask, can't you?"

"That course is also open to you."

"No, it ain't! It's jolly well too much fag, on a day like this! You can say what you like Skimmy, but I'm coming with you! The professor asked me—you know he did—and he thinks I'm a friend of yours, too! Shows what a potty old ass he is, to think I should pal up with a skinny freak like you!"

Skimpole gave it up. It began to dawn upon him that Baggy had a leech-like capacity for sticking to a fellow whom he elected to honour with his company. Everybody else in the Shell and Fourth was perfectly well aware of this. But Skimmy often made great new discoveries of facts that were ancient history to others.

Together the ill-matched pair tramped along the dusty road. It was not until they had reached the grateful shelter of the trees in Rylcombe Lane that either spoke.

Then Baggy, mopping his moist face with a dingy handkerchief, said:

"He didn't tip you, Skimmy?"

"Er—who, Trimble? I really do not——"

"The old fossil—the professor, I mean."

"But why should he bestow upon me any gratuity?"

"Dunno about that, but he ought to have tipped you!"

"I entirely fail to perceive——"

"You stopped his blessed pony when it did a bunk, didn't you, fathead?"

"I had that honour. It was a pleasure as well as an honour to be of assistance to a man of Professor Burnham's celebrity!" replied Skimpole stiffly. "I certainly did not desire anything in the nature of remuneration for——"

"He tipped Taggles—I saw him! It was jolly mean of him not to tip you, too!"

"There is a difference between Taggles and myself, Trimble!"

"You bet there is! Taggy's an old hunks, but he's got some sense!"

"No one deprecates class distinctions more than I do. Nevertheless, in matters of this sort there is naturally——"

"Oh, chuck all that rot! Tell you what. I believe the old fossil's going to make you a present this afternoon—that's why he asked you to go and see him!"

"I am convinced that you are entirely mistaken, Trimble. If he cherished any such purpose, why should he also extend an invitation to you?"

Baggy's fat face fell somewhat at that. But a cheery grin irradiated his podgy features as he answered, after a moment's thought:

"Oh, I dare say I shall come in for something, too! He can't very well tip you and leave me out; it would look too stingy. Anyway, there'll be the tea."

Skimmy did not answer that. He felt quite annoyed with Baggy. While he desired nothing but philosophic converse with the learned professor, Baggy's low and mundane mind was busy with possible profit.

It remained to be seen whether either of them would get what he hoped for.

The way to the Moat House was not really very difficult to find, although it lay well off the high road, down a lane that led only to the marshes. To judge by the look of the lane, few people ever went to the marshes; and, indeed, there

was no very special reason why anyone should ever want to go. Skimmy and Baggy did not travel more than half as far again as they needed to do before reaching their destination, though they might have covered more ground had not Baggy, in sheer desperation, taken the task of inquiring the way out of his companion's hands. The rural population seemed to have an unaccountable difficulty in understanding Skimpole.

"I don't like the look of this place much," said Baggy, as they stood together contemplating the Moat House. "It's all very well, you know, but it looks to me like the sort of show it might be a heap easier to get into than to get out of."

For once Baggy seemed endowed with prophetic gifts, for the Moat House was to prove a place by no means easy for him and Skimpole to get out of. And he spoke only from a vague feeling of uneasiness which the gloomy aspect of the old house gave him. He had not heard of the Grammarians' escapade, which the Terrible Three had kept to themselves.

"You are perfectly at liberty to stay outside if you choose, Trimble," said Skimmy coldly.

"Yah! Afraid of sharing—that's what's the matter with you, Skimmy!" snorted Baggy.

And, made bold by the hope of a plenteous meal and a possible liberal tip, Baggy scuttled across the lowered drawbridge to the gate.

Skimpole followed more sedately. Something of the stories told in the village about the professor had reached him. He inclined to the inventor rather than to the madman theory. This seemed to him just such a place as a man who had important secrets to keep might choose as a habitation.

The professor had seemed to discern in him a kindred spirit. Perhaps he needed an assistant, and had marked out him—Herbert Skimpole—for the post. Skimmy would not have hesitated to accept it. He had firm faith in his own inventive genius, and he could have said good-bye to St. Jim's without really regretting anyone there except Talbot. There were a few others for whom he

felt a certain measure of placid liking, but it was only for Talbot he had any strong affection.

But it was hardly likely that the professor had need of Baggy—unless as an object for experimenting upon. And if he had wanted him for that purpose he would scarcely have lured him to the Moat House under the cloak of hospitality. It would not have lowered the professor greatly in Skimmy's esteem if he had desired, say, to vivisect the obese Baggy; that would have been merely scientific curiosity. Skimmy might even have been willing to assist at the vivisection. The interests of science were far more to him than Baggy Trimble. But it would be highly improper for the professor to vivisect a guest!

Altogether, it seemed very puzzling that Baggy should have been asked.

"The gate's locked," said Trimble impatiently, as Skimmy ranged up alongside him.

"Dear me! But there is some means, I apprehend, of communicating with the interior?" returned Skimmy.

"No, there ain't, then! We shall have to shout, I s'pose. Hallo, though, here's a bell!"

"Yes, that is undoubtedly a bell," Skimmy said, gazing at the pull as if he had never seen such a thing before.

"Are you going to ring it, or shall I?" asked Baggy, with a lingering doubt.

"As you like, Trimble."

Baggy thought of the expected feed, summoned up all his courage, and gave a lusty tug at the bell-pull.

"Can't wait a week while you make up your mind!" he snarled. "I believe you're funky, Skimmy!"

From some distance away sounded a tinkle. From somewhere much nearer at hand sounded a low, vibrant, savage growl.

"There's a beastly dog!" burbled Baggy, his knees shaking under him.

"But I see no sufficient reason to anticipate danger from any canine quadruped kept by our friend the professor, Trimble," replied Skimmy, not at all daunted.

"Oh, don't you? I'm not jolly well going in until I know that dog's chained up! I'll see the professor jolly well hanged first!"

"You are absurd, Trimble! If a dog of violent temper is kept here, it can only be as a safeguard against spies or intruders. We——"

The gate swung open at that moment, and Baggy backed in alarm, his eyes goggling. Skimmy merely blinked.

Neither of them had ever before set eyes upon quite so queer a personage as Silas Stout. The professor himself, who was distinctly out of the ordinary run, or Mr. Pepper, the Rylcombe miser, a sufficiently eccentric figure, would have appeared quite normal individuals beside him.

Frank Monk's description of Silas was correct enough, as far as it went. But Skimmy and Baggy had not heard that description, and so were not prepared for the reality.

The man was of unusually low stature, but very broad across the shoulders. His short legs were so bowed as to be almost half-circles, and he had enormous feet. His arms were very long; when he lowered them to his sides the finger-tips dangled well below his knees. His great head was furnished with a shaggy mop of hair, and he had a very bush of beard and whiskers, while each of his eyebrows was like a stiff moustache.

"What d'ye want?" he growled, swinging a big key on his right fore-finger, and looking at the two juniors in a very hostile manner.

The fact was hardly sufficient to account for his hostility; but still it was a fact that, just as Skimmy and Baggy had never seen a man like Silas Stout before, so the worthy Silas had never before seen two boys at all like Skimmy and Baggy. St. Jim's could not have furnished another such complete contrast as the obese Trimble and the lean, bumpy-browed Skimpole.

"We have come to see Professor Burnham," said Skimmy politely.

"Ho, have you?" snorted Silas. "Come inside, then!"

"I say, Skimmy, let's cut!" puffed Baggy into the ear of his companion. "I don't like the look of him; I ain't going inside, I tell you! There's a dog, too. I—I—— Oh, let's cut!"

"Do not be ridiculous, Trimble! I—I—— Ow-yow! What are you doing, my good man?"

— — —

CHAPTER 5.
Imprisoned as Spies!

SKIMPOLE'S surprise was not without reason.

It was all very well for Silas Stout to welcome his master's guests, but the manner in which he made certain of their obeying his injunction to come inside was not exactly pleasant.

For he had suddenly whipped round behind them, thrust one hand against Skimmy's back, the other against Trimble's, and given them a sudden push forward.

He must have been immensely strong. To shift Skimmy was easy enough; but the weighty Baggy was a different matter.

Yet it was Baggy who was shifted farthest. Skimmy reeled a yard or two, and then pulled up standing. But Baggy plunged forward double the distance, and came down heavily upon his face.

He struggled up in a fury. The gate clanged to behind the three of them as he regained his feet.

"You beast!" he howled. "I'll let the professor know how you treat his visitors! You shoved something in my back—there's a great bruise there, I'll bet! And my nose is bub-bub-bleeding! Oh, you beast!"

"It was nothin' but this key as you felt in your back!" growled Silas, showing the key. "An' a key down the back is the best thing for nose-bleed, so they say. Jest come along here, you fat young rascal, an' I'll put it down yours, if you ain't had enough of it to be goin' on with!"

"You touch me again, and——"

"Be silent, Trimble! You had better

allow me to deal with this person. I am quite sure that Professor Burnham will not approve of his extreme rudeness when he is made acquainted with it. And I shall most certainly report it to him. Lead us to your master at once, my man!"

Skimpy spoke with dignity. He was astonished, but not as yet at all alarmed.

Silas Stout grinned at him.

"Old Pomp ain't at home!" he said coolly.

"You mean that the professor——"

"I said old Pomp, an' I mean old Pomp!" repeated Silas doggedly.

"The professor is not at home?"

"Old Pomp's gone to London. He won't be back to-day, and he mayn't be back to-morrow. As for the next day, there ain't no sayin', an' the day after that's Sunday, when the trains is bad an' slow."

"Then we will not come in," said Skimmy.

"That's your error, young feller! You are in, an' you ain't a-goin' out!"

"We are most certainly going out!" snapped Skimmy, his spirit roused now.

He marched to the gate, and strove to open it. But it resisted all his efforts.

Silas had not locked it, that was certain. Nevertheless, it was fast locked.

"You may pull an' you may turn till the sweat runs off of you," said Silas, with a grimace. "Old Pomp an' me, we know a bit too much to have gates an' doors as open all that easy. There's secrets about this place, an' we've got to guard them agin spies—spies, d'ye hear, skinny-legs? D'ye hear, fatty?"

"You are really an extremely rude and objectionable person!" snapped Skimmy, thoroughly up in arms now. "Do you really imagine that we are spies?"

"Didn't I hear you say so when you was outside?" snarled Silas.

"My good fellow, you must really be insane!"

"Not much, I ain't! Come along, both of you! You're a-goin' to stay here till old Pomp comes back, that's what you're a-goin' to do, me lads!"

"We shall do nothing of the sort!" retorted Skimmy.

"Ow! Yow! Don't make the beast savage, Skimmy! He—he's dangerous!" wailed Baggy. "Oh, let's get out of this! Give him something—he'll let us go if you do. I can't—I haven't got anything on me but twopence, and he's sure to want more than that!"

"You can't bribe me," said Silas grimly. "Old Pomp knows that! He trusts me, old Pomp does. See that there dog?"

They had heard the dog all through the altercation. He had kept up a low, rumbling growl, rather like distant thunder. Now, as Silas pointed to him, and the two juniors turned to gaze upon him, he ran forward, dragging at his heavy chain as if he would break it, and barking furiously.

He was a savage-looking beast, apparently a cross between bulldog and mastiff—not as ill-favoured as Silas, it is true, but a dog could hardly be that.

"I see him," replied Skimmy, paling a little, but still resolute.

"I'm goin' to unloose him in about ten seconds. Grip's his name an' Grip's his nature," said Silas. "He's a friend of mine; but he'd sooner bite anybody else than look at 'em. Even old Pomp thinks twice before he goes too near him."

"Yaroooh!" howled Baggy; and he bolted for the open door of the house.

Skimmy stood his ground. But his knees were trembling now. As Silas moved towards Grip they trembled still more. The man stooped, as if to unchain the fierce animal. Skimmy gasped, and ran.

Caught by the Grammarians!
(See Chapter 9.)

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" wailed Baggy. "It's all your fault, Skimmy. What ever made you drag me to this rotten place? We shall never go back alive, I'm sure!"

But Silas, seeing that they were inside, left the dog chained. In another moment he was beside them. The man possessed an activity at which no one could have guessed from his appearance.

He did not pull the door to; but it closed behind him. Baggy gasped in awe and terror. The click of the door as it shut was to him as the knell of doom. But Skimmy, who knew more of mechanics, was not so shaken that he could not guess at automatic closing or some spring of which Silas would, as a matter of course, know the secret.

Nor was Skimmy so shaken as to accept the situation meekly.

"I protest against this outrage!" he said, his voice quavering a little.

"You can protest till you're purple!" replied Silas pleasantly. "You've come to see old Pomp, ain't you? Well, Pomp's away, but I'm his locon tenings, as they call it, an' I'm a-goin' to entertain you in his absence—see? He's sure to be back some time this side of Christmas, I should say; an' then he may let you go, or he mayn't—'tain't for me to say. Old Pomp's master when he's here, all right; but I'm master when he's away. Will you be so good as to step into this here room, gen'lmen?"

The words were polite enough, but the tone was threatening. The two unfortunate juniors had no choice but to obey. Silas was far more than a match for their joint strength.

They stepped into the room indicated. It was barely furnished, and what furniture there was did not serve to make it more cheerful, for it was of the ugliest description. Nothing about the place spoke of regular or even frequent occupation. A musty smell pervaded it, and not a book, a paper, or a pipe was there to give it any touch of homelikeness.

Silas did not step inside. One moment his bushy-bearded face leered at them from the doorway, the next moment the door closed, and they were prisoners.

Baggy threw himself face downwards on a horsehair couch.

"Ow! Yow!" he wailed. "We're done for, Skimmy, and it's all your fault, you silly idiot! Oh, dear! I wish I hadn't been such a fool as to come with you!"

"I also wish that, Trimble!" said Skimmy warmly. "As for our being in any real danger, I utterly refuse to admit that such can possibly be the case. This man is evidently insane!"

"Well, if that ain't a danger, I'd like to know what is!" howled Baggy, sitting up and showing a face upon which dust from the couch, tears, and perspiration had produced quite an "Old Master" effect.

And, when Skimmy came to think of it, the theory that Silas was a madman was not precisely reassuring.

For, quite plainly, they were absolutely in the man's power.

His master was away. Skimmy could not doubt that. Had the professor been anywhere in the house Baggy's howls must have reached his ears.

And now Skimmy remembered that no one at St. Jim's knew where they had gone. Levison or one of his chums might possibly guess, having heard the invitation given. But that was a mere chance. Nobody knew.

CHAPTER 6.
An Exciting Time!

BUT Skimmy, though uncomfortable, was not completely dismayed. Things were bad, but they were not hopeless. What must be done was to find some means of escape.

He began a tour of the room, while Trimble lay upon the couch and bewailed his dreadful fate.

Something that Skimmy took for the

door of a large cupboard drew his attention. He tugged it open.

It was not exactly a cupboard, as he saw at once. For a few seconds he was puzzled. Then he cried:

"Eureka! Here, Trimble, is the means of deliverance! This is a lift—an elevator!"

Baggy tumbled off the couch and waddled across the room.

"What's the good of it?" he snorted, gazing over Skimmy's shoulder.

"That remains to be seen. At least, if the apparatus is in order it will take us out of this apartment, I should judge; and as that particularly objectionable person evidently intends that we should remain here, I have a distinct preference for doing otherwise. By the way, Trimble, can you see the apparatus? It is exceedingly dark in here."

"Oh, I'll soon find it for you!" answered Baggy, trying to squeeze past.

"Yaroooh!" he howled, as his foot caught the floor of the lift, which was a couple of inches or so above the level of that of the room.

He pitched forward, clutching desperately at Skimmy, and they both fell into the lift together, fortunately with their legs inside.

At once, as if their weight had provided the necessary motive-power, the lift descended.

But it descended a few feet only. Then it stopped, but only for a second. Before they had time to scramble out it began to rise again with a considerably swifter motion.

Up it went, sometimes in darkness, sometimes giving a glimpse of a room as it sped.

"Yoooop! Stoppit! Oh, you silly ass, Skimmy!" howled Baggy.

Skimmy had got to his feet now. He was blinking round for means to stop the lift, which was now descending again.

He had never before known a lift which could not be managed from inside. But he could not see any way of managing this one.

And the pace was still increasing. There was quite a perceptible bump as the lift reached its lowest stage. Then at once, before the two victims could scramble out, it rose again, almost as if it had some of the properties of an india-rubber ball. There was a distinct suggestion of bouncing about the way in which it changed from descent to ascent.

"I cannot find—— Really, Trimble, if you cannot keep still you will—— Yoop!"

The ungainly Baggy, in his clumsy struggles to get up, had barged into Skimmy behind the knees.

Few people have so firm a footing that a sudden impact in that region will not shake them. It did more than shake Skimmy. It shot him forward, clear out of the lift, and he descended with a bump on the floor of the uppermost room. As he smote the floor the door of the lift clanged to.

A second later the lift descended again.

As it went down Baggy saw a strange sight.

Skimmy, uprearing himself on hands and knees, was smitten by the pincers-like end of a weird apparatus that hung from the ceiling beams. It was, as far as Baggy's very slight knowledge of mechanics enabled him to judge, something in the nature of a crane; and it may have been designed to lift from the floor articles too heavy to be readily turned over in order that work upon their lower parts might be made easier.

It smote Skimmy a painful thwack, and he collapsed under the blow.

"Wharrer doing? Ow-yow!" he howled.

"Lemme out!" squealed Baggy, beating at the door of the lift.

Skimmy's plight, though it astonished Baggy, did not appal him. Perhaps nothing that could have happened to Skimmy would have appalled Baggy; the acute fear induced by his own peril would not allow of his worrying about anyone else's. But he was concerned about Skimmy, nevertheless, for, as far as he could see, he might remain a prisoner in the lift for any length of time unless his comrade released him.

The pincers had smitten Skimmy, but had not gripped him, no doubt because the tightness of his nether garments in the position in which he then was gave no chance of a grip.

But as he collapsed, howling, upon his stomach, his trousers naturally slackened somewhat; and the startled eyes of Baggy, just above the level of the floor at that instant, beheld the claw open, as if moved by an intelligence of its own, and grip firmly the trousers seat of the hapless Skimmy.

Baggy's eyes goggled almost out of his head, and he made strange noises as he went down. For the moment articulate words were beyond him.

And for the moment they were also beyond Skimmy.

"Ah-yah-ah-yah! Gooor-oor-ooroo!" gasped the philosopher, beating the air with his helpless hands.

"Oooooop! Oooooh! Yah-yah-yah!" burbled Baggy.

The bump the lift gave as it reached bottom sent Baggy blundering against the back, and thence against the door. But the shock did not open the door.

Up, up, up went the lift, faster than ever now, and as it reached the top floor Baggy got another glimpse of his companion in misfortune.

Skimmy hung well clear of the floor, his legs dangling helplessly, his head and arms squirming. He had not yet been able to make out what had happened to him, for in his helpless position he could not get his neck round to see the claw.

"Come down, you silly fool!" howled Baggy. "I—I'm getting giddy! If I don't—— Oh, dear!"

The lift was descending again, and in another second Skimmy was lost to sight.

"Help!" he roared, squirming and struggling. "Leggo! Wharrer doing? I shall certainly inform the professor——"

There came a rending sound, and Skimmy smote the floor with a huge thwack. His trousering might have stood longer the strain of his weight, for that was small, but the added strain of his struggles had proved too much for it.

Half dazed by the fall, Skimmy was yet aware of a roaring noise that struck loudly upon his ears. It was the noise of Baggy Trimble, growing ever louder as the lift drew near.

"Lemme out! Skimmy, you silly fool! Oh, dear! I can't go up and down in this beastly thing for ever! I'm giddy, I tell you! I—I—— Oh, dear! I shall die!"

The lift had come and gone. The roaring went on, but words were no longer to be made out.

"Dear me! This is indeed a painful and humiliating experience!" moaned Skimmy. He turned round upon his side and got a glimpse of the apparatus which had dealt with him to such painful effect.

Instantly all thought of pain and humiliation was banished from his mind. Pain was of little account; and a philosophic mind cannot be humiliated by a mere inanimate mechanism. Curiosity reigned supreme in Skimmy.

He struggled to his feet. Just as he regained them the lift appeared again, with the frightened and bewildered face of Baggy pressed close to the grill-work.

"Skimmy, you fool! Help! Hellup! I shall die! I know I shall!" moaned Baggy.

The lift went up, farther than it should have done, as it seemed to Skimmy, for there was surely no use in its travelling beyond the floor of the room he was in, since the raftered roof above showed that he was at the top of the house. His surprise at this so occupied his mind that the lift, with its howling occupant, passed him on its downward course before he could do anything, or even think of anything to be done.

"Yoooop! You beast, Skimmy! You want me to be killed! I know you do!" burbled Baggy, as he disappeared once more.

That, of couse, was not true. But it was a fact that Skimpole's scientific curiosity overpowered for the moment any desire to aid Baggy.

The problem of the crane and its method of working—the problem of the lift and its motive-power—these were far more interesting to Skimmy than Trimble's plight. He had no liking for Trimble, and he had not wished for the foolish fat fellow's company. It really did not matter much to him what happened to Baggy.

But it was only for a few seconds that he felt thus. Skimmy was not really hard-hearted.

The scientific problems could wait. Baggy, it appeared, could not. His howling had ceased now, and as he came swiftly up for the seventh or eighth time Skimmy could see that his face had taken on a livid hue, and that he was no longer able to cry out.

Skimmy made a really heroic dash at the lift. He clutched the grill-work, striving to find the catch which would open the door.

The lift continued to ascend, and he was lifted off his feet.

"Yooooop!" he roared. And he let go.

He fell all asprawl on the floor.

The lift came down again, and as it passed him Skimmy had a glimpse of Baggy huddled up on the floor, his face queerly contorted.

That sight worked upon his sympathy, and woke again his courage.

There was not really much the matter with Baggy apart from sheer funk. But funk can have a very powerful physical effect, and the unlucky Fourth-Former began to retch violently as the lift bumped and went up again.

Up, up, up! Skimmy awaited its coming. If he could only devise some means of arresting its downward course he might be able to get the door open and release Baggy.

Then a brilliant idea flashed into his mind. The crane—if crane it was—swung a foot or so above his head. He grabbed at it, and with all his force dashed it at the door of the lift as it came past.

It was a chance whether the pincers would grip the bars—a chance whether they would hold even if they did—a chance whether the crane would stand the strain of the lift's velocity—a chance whether the whole heavy apparatus might not be dragged down upon Skimmy's head and smash him.

But Skimmy took all those chances. Once having made up his mind that he must do something to help Baggy, he thought little of risk to himself.

The pincers clashed; they swung; one half of the claw passed between the bars! The lift went on its upward course, carrying the claw with it.

Then it began to drop again. The claw still held. But would it hold when the strong cable to which it was attached was pulled down to its farthest extent,

and the strain of the lift's weight and velocity came fully upon it? That was the question.

Skimmy got a blow from the cable that sent him flying half-way across the room. But as he fell he saw that the claw was holding!

The lift stopped, with a mighty jerk that shook the floor. The claw was dragged up the bar it gripped, right up to the roof of the lift, but it held there like a vice.

The progress of the lift was stopped, but poor Baggy was still a prisoner!

Less than a foot of the upper part of the lift appeared above the floor of the room. The rest was below, out of Skimmy's sight, out of his reach. And, of course, the door remained shut.

It had been a very exciting and unpleasant few minutes for Skimmy and Baggy; but, on the whole, there seemed little prospect that the immediate future would be any more pleasant, even though it were less exciting.

CHAPTER 7.
The Prisoners of Silas.

SKIMMY crawled to the lift. The fall had so shaken him that he did not feel equal at the moment to getting upon his feet.

He peered down, but the interior of the lift was in gloom. That part of its shaft which ran down the side of the room must be shut up, Skimmy decided.

Unable to see Trimble, he could hear him quite plainly. Baggy was making noises that were loud, if not nice.

"Trimble!" quavered Skimmy. "I trust, my dear Trimble——"

"Shurrup! I'm being sus-sus-sick!" gasped Baggy.

Then the noises began again.

Skimmy arose uneteadily. It was plain to him that the sooner Baggy was got out of the lift the better it would be for him.

But nothing he could do up there would help Baggy. He could only be reached from the floor below, and even then the door of the lift could not be got open while the lift remained in its present position. And to detach the claw, even if Skimmy could effect that, which was doubtful, would probably mean that the lift would start its journeying again.

Skimmy tottered to the door, but he found it locked.

He cast a glance around the room. At another time it would have interested him extremely, for it appeared to be used as a workshop, and there was plenty of evidence in it that the stories concerning the professor's scientific pursuits were not without a foundation in fact.

But just now all that Skimmy cared about was to bring upon the scene as quickly as possible somebody who would release him and aid him to release Baggy.

"Ah! Here is the solution of my difficulty!" he murmured, as his eyes fell upon an electric bell-push near the door.

His right forefinger fell upon it the moment after. From somewhere below came the whirring and clanging of the bell, but it was not at once answered.

Skimmy continued to press the button, and the whirring and clanging went on. Through the noise came other sounds—the sounds made by Baggy in his extremity.

"Dear me! I greatly fear that Trimble may expire before relief——"

But at that moment heavy footstops sounded on the stairs, and an instant after the door was pushed open violently.

"Ho! What are you a-doing up here?" roared Silas Stout.

Skimmy took his finger from the bell-push. It had dawned upon his great mind that its use was now over. The bell had summoned Silas Stout. On the whole, Skimmy would very much have preferred the advent of someone else—anyone else, in fact. Silas was not a person with whom one could hope to hold cool and reasonable conversation. He had a way of jumping to conclusions, and treating those conclusions as established facts—a way fatal to argument.

But it seemed quite likely that Silas was the only person whom the bell could have summoned, and the philosophic mind of Herbert Skimpole, accepting that probability, regarded Silas as better than no one at all. He must at least know something about the working of the lift.

"Excuse me if I postpone a full and explicit account of the curious concatenation of circumstances which——"

"Talk English!" snarled Silas.

"My worthy sir, I assure you that I was expressing myself in——"

"What are you a-doing up here?" Silas yelled.

He looked so threatening that for once Skimpole's polysyllables failed him.

"No harm, really!" he faltered.

"You're a spy, that's what you are—a Hun spy, I'll wager a shillin'! Else why for talk German?"

"Dear me! How can I possibly explain matters to so extremely obtuse and prejudiced an individual as this?" muttered Skimmy to himself, almost in despair.

"Where's the fat young beast?" roared Silas.

"Down there, being sick," answered Skimmy feebly.

He pointed to the small part of the lift which showed within the shaft. Silas saw, gave a howl of rage, and jumped forward, aiming a heavy, back-handed blow at Skimmy's head as he leaped.

Skimmy ducked to avoid the blow. It was well he ducked, for the next second the heavy claw of the crane apparatus passed within a couple of inches of his head.

How Silas had released the clutch so easily he had no chance to see. But it could hardly have been by main strength, powerful though the man was. No doubt the fellow knew exactly how the mechanism worked.

The top of the lift disappeared. A heartrending groan came from Baggy as he felt himself carried down again.

But it was for the last time, and there was no rush on this occasion. The lift descended quite slowly.

Silas swung round.

"Come out of this, you rascal!" he hooted.

He hurried out of the door, and Skimmy followed him with all speed, by no means loth to be gone. He did not care at all for the notion of being left alone with that claw.

As he fled downstairs in the wake of Silas he clapped his hand behind him, and realised, with a pang of dismay, that he had left behind him a considerable section of his trousers. But he did not go back.

It would have taken a good deal to induce him to do that. Fortunately, the claw had spared his shirt. There are portions of a shirt which it is usual to show, and portions which it is not usual. The mind of a philosopher, however, should rise above such small considerations. Anyway, Skimmy was thankful his shirt had been spared.

Silas reached the ground floor a winner by at least seven steps, although Skimmy had moved as fast as he knew how. The door of the room into which the two juniors had been hustled at first flew open at a mere touch from Silas, as it seemed to Skimmy, and the lift was disclosed, with the miserable Baggy crouching in it, his hands pressed to his waistcoat, his face horrible in its pallor.

"Yow-ow! I'm dying!" howled Baggy.

But Silas did not appear to credit that statement, or possibly he did not care whether it was true or not.

"You dirty young tike!" he roared. "Come out o' that this minute!"

"I—I c-c-c-can't!" wailed Baggy.

Stout touched a spring, and the door flew open. Baggy stumbled out, groaning heavily. Professor Burnham's factotum contemplated the state of the lift with evident disgust. Under his bushy eyebrows his deep-set little eyes gleamed luridly.

"You nasty young hound!" he scowled. "Being si——"

"Well, what about it? I wasn't sus-sus-sick because I wanted to be fuf-fuf-funny, I s'pose, was I?" protested Baggy feebly.

"I dunno about that. I shouldn't wonder but what you was. My word, if you ain't a pretty pair! Come here a-spyin', with a yarn as old Pomp asked you to come, an' then bein'——"

"My good man," broke in Skimpole, "you labour under the most extraordinary delusions! We are not spies. It is absolutely true that your master, to whom you refer in a disrespectful manner of which I disapprove extremely——"

"I always have called him old Pomp when he couldn't hear, an' I always shall!" growled Silas. "Just you leave me an' old Pomp to settle things betwixt ourselves by ourselves, young feller!"

"I should be perfectly content to do that," replied Skimmy. "But there are other matters which require to be put upon a proper basis. Trimble may speak for himself, but I firmly refuse to have my motives and actions thus misinterpreted. It is not in accordance with the truth to aver that we are spies. Why should we engage in any such——"

"What were you a-doin' of in the top room where me an' old Pomp does our secret work, then? Tell me that, my lad!"

"I was taken thither by the lift, without volition of my own, and hurled forth in a manner——"

"But what were you a-doin' of in the lift?" roared Silas.

"You had illegally and quite unjustifiably cast us into durance——"

"Eh? Nothin' of the sort! I only locked you up in a room, you young liar!"

"My mind, strengthened by philosophy, is proof against vulgar abuse," answered Skimmy mildly. "Nevertheless, as a matter of duty, I shall certainly report your violent language to the professor. I have more than that to complain of, however. That mechanical atrocity in the upper room has inflicted considerable damage to my garments in a place to which false delicacy might prevent another person from referring. In short——"

Skimmy had no time to explain the exact nature of the damage. Silas, with one thrust of his hand, sent him spinning round, and saw.

It seemed that Silas had some sense of humour, though hitherto he had shown no sign of it.

"Haw, haw, haw!" he howled. "Bust your breeches, have you?"

"Do not be coarse, my good man! This is no matter for risibility. In the present state of society I should incur ridicule and contumely by appearing in public with the rear of my nether garments in a condition of disintegration, and——"

"Don't you worry, young feller! You ain't goin' to appear nowheres just yet, so don't you think it!"

"We shall have to be back for calling-over," faltered Baggy.

"If that's about next Christmas, I dessay you'll be back for that all right," replied Silas.

"There will be a beastly row if we ain't in by bed-time to-night, you know. Oh, I say, you can't keep us here! Oh, dear!"

"You won't be there for no row, so that's nothin' to worry about."

Baggy did not find much comfort in that. He was desperately anxious to get outside the Moat House.

So was Skimmy. But he was not in such an abject condition as Baggy.

"When I demand to know what you mean to do with us I do not in the least admit that you have any warrant for interference with our actions," he said firmly. "We are at liberty to go——"

"Oh, are you?" snorted Silas.

And, taking everything into consideration, Skimmy had to admit to himself that it really did not seem that they were.

"The professor——" he began.

"What old Pomp says goes—when old Pomp's here," Silas interrupted him. "When he ain't, Silas Stout is boss. He's too easy-goin' by half, old Pomp is; I ain't!"

Baggy groaned dismally. They were certainly not finding Mr. Stout too easy-going.

The man was not actually mad, but he had a bee in his bonnet, as the Scottish saying goes. His value to the good-natured and absent-minded professor was considerable. Silas had enormous physical strength, and a real aptitude for mechanics. He was Professor Burnham's right-hand man in all his enterprises. And, in spite of his familiar manner of referring to him, he regarded the professor as the most wonderful man in the world. He thought himself free to take such liberties with his master's name because he was quite sure that he, Silas Stout, ranked next to the professor among mankind.

In fact, Silas regarded the rest of the human race as enemies. He distrusted men; he hated boys; and he simply loathed women. There was no woman at the Moat House, and the only other man there was deaf and dumb.

"You come along with me!" said Silas commandingly.

He hustled them out of the room into the wide hall. The front door was shut. There was no chance of escape. Even if there had been, Baggy was in such a state of collapse that he would not have dared to attempt a bolt; and Skimmy, much as he despised his companion, would not have dreamed of leaving him to the tender mercies of Silas.

But Skimmy made one more protest.

"My good man——" he began.

"See this?" roared Silas, and he snatched a gun from the wall. "Ho, You do see it, do you? Well, get a move on you, then!"

"Ow-yow! He's going to shoot us, the beast! Don't cheek him, Skimmy, you silly ass!" howled Baggy.

Skimmy said nothing, but he quickened his pace.

An open cellar-door showed ahead of them.

"Down there!" commanded Silas, patting the gun-stock.

"I—I daren't! It's all dark!" burbled Baggy.

But Skimmy went, and Baggy followed him.

Silas pushed open another door, at the bottom of the flight of damp and slippery steps. They saw a small, stone-walled room, lighted dimly by a barred window up in the wall, and quite unfurnished—unless empty and broken wine-bins can be considered furniture. There was also a quantity of clean, dry straw on the floor.

"You ain't going to shut us up here, are you?" wailed Baggy. "Oh, crumbs! I shall go mad! Oh, dear!"

"This is where you're goin' to stay for the present," replied Silas. "Look here, thin 'un, so sure as ever the fat 'un starts howlin', you just sit on his face, d'ye hear? 'Cause if I hears too much noise from down here I shall come along with my gun. I don't want to have to shoot you both. Old Pomp might not like it. But, swab me, what's a boy more or less, when nobody's to know what's come of him? Nothin' at all!"

"Bub—bub—but what about grub?" pleaded Baggy.

"Grub? Why, you couldn't keep down what you'd got, you fat rascal!"

"Nunno—yes, I mean; that's just why I need more, of course. I'm empty! I shall starve! Look here, you know, you can't starve us—can he, Skimmy? Speak to him, Skimmy, you fathead!"

"I have already protested——"

"What's the use of that, you silly ass? He's going to keep us here, anyway. But I can't be kept here without grub. I can't and I won't, I tell you!"

"We'll see about that," replied Silas, with a malicious grin.

And he disappeared. The door slammed to, a lock clicked, and the two were left in their prison.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Yow-ow-yow!" howled Baggy.

"Cease those absurd and useless lamentations, Trimble!" snapped Skimpole, throwing himself down upon the straw.

CHAPTER 8.
Rival Adventurers.

"IT'S a weird old place," said Tom Merry.

"Makes you think of Mariana," Lowther rejoined.

"Who is she? And what's she got to do with it?" growled Manners.

"Well, this is a moated grange, isn't it?"

"It's moated right enough; and I suppose you can call it a grange if you want to. Not sure what's the difference between a grange and another house myself. But I don't see what Mary Ann's got to do with it, anyway."

"Not Mary Ann—Mariana," said Talbot.

"Same thing, ain't it?"

"Not at all. Lowther's thinking about a poem of Tennyson's——"

"Oh, might have known he was thinking about some rot! See any way of getting in, Tommy?"

"I don't," confessed Tom. "Matter of that, I'm not at all sure that it would be the thing to try."

"Well, the Grammarians had a shot at it," said Manners.

"It was hardly a bullseye, though," murmured Lowther.

"They certainly didn't get much change out of it," Tom said. "But, after all, it was different in their case. They just clicked over the drawbridge. Anyone might do that, if it was down. But it's up now. And they found the gate ajar. We sha'n't do that, because we can't get to the gate."

"I fancy we could get across if we had to," Talbot remarked. "There's too much mud in the moat, or swimming would be easy enough. But other ways might be found. The thing is that we not only haven't got to, but, in a sense, we've got not to."

"Say that all over again," said Lowther. "It sounds a bit mixed."

"Oh, it's as clear as mud!" answered Tom. "Old Talbot means that we've really no excuse for intruding. I said the same, and yet—and yet——"

"I don't see why we shouldn't have a look round," said Manners.

"I should think His Whiskers ought to be very pleased to see us," Lowther said. "He can't have many visitors here."

"Looks to me as though he didn't exactly want them," Talbot remarked drily.

It was later in the same afternoon upon which Skimpole and Baggy Trimble had paid their unfortunate visit to the Moat House. The St. Jim's junior eleven had had a home match on the card for that day, but a wire scratching it had reached Tom Merry only a few minutes before the game should have begun.

Those who been included in the team, and those who had meant to watch the game, thus had the afternoon thrown on their hands, without any plans made in advance. Impromptu picnics were difficult in this time of food shortage. The river lured some, and the Wayland Cinema others. But the Terrible Three, whose curiosity had been stirred by the story they had heard from Gordon Gay & Co., made up their minds to pay the Moat House a visit; and Talbot, having been told what was in the wind, came with them.

They reached the lonely house to find the drawbridge up and the moat full of sloppy mud. It formed thus a far more effective barrier than had it been full of water. For the average St. Jim's or Grammarian junior swimming across would have been a mere trifle. But swimming was out of the question. Wading was the only way, and there were unpleasant doubts as to how many feet down a hard bottom might be found.

The only token of life about the place was a deep, rumbling growl that came at intervals from behind the wall. No other house was in sight. The marshes lay on two sides of the house, and on the other two were rush-grown meadows, little better than marshland.

"We'd no right to worry him if it's true that he's an inventor at work for the Government," said Tom.

"Just as likely to be some beastly plotting Hun!" suggested Manners.

"I don't think he can be a Hun," Talbot said. "He's an old friend of Selby's——"

"Talbot, old top, your logic is badly at fault," chipped in Lowther, with a grin. "What more likely—almost certain, in fact, than that any old friend of Selby's would be a Hun? Isn't Selby himself the very quintessence of Hunniness?"

"What's so, of course. But I meant a real Hun," replied Talbot. "Now, Skimmy says the professor's a man of European celebrity, and a very jolly, friendly old bird into the bargain."

"Talbot, Talbot, you seek to deceive us!"

"Well, those weren't Skimmy's exact words, I'll grant, Lowther. I was translating. But it's a fact that the old chap asked Skimmy and Baggy to come over here and look him up some afternoon."

"Asked Skimmy and Baggy!" gasped Manners.

"Yes; so Skimmy says."

"My hat! Then he must be potty!"

"Rather!" agreed Tom.

"That's one theory about him in the neighbourhood, I believe," said Talbot. "Another is the invention gadget, which seems to me the likeliest. And there's the third, which is Manners'—that he's some desperate, plotting Hun agent. I don't fancy that's right. A fellow of that sort wouldn't attract attention by taking a lonely old house like this."

"Well, I didn't really mean it," admitted Manners.

"If he can stick Skimmy—not to mention Baggy, who is the absolute limit—

he ought to be jolly pleased to see us," said Tom. "Anyway, I vote that we get across and see if the gate's unfastened. I don't mind owning I'm curious about this place."

"Have Skinny and Baggy been along?" asked Lowther.

"Not that I've heard of."

"Just as well. If the merry old professor had received a visit from those two he might be feeling that he was a bit fed up with St. Jim's. We should have to waste time explaining to him our superior merits. As it is, if we happen to see the old bird, we can tell him we've come instead. The compliments of Professor Herbert Skimpole, A.S.S., M.U.F.F., and the Honourable—or otherwise—Bagley Trimble, of Trimble Hall, and they were unavoidably detained, but have sent in their stead——"

"The thing is, how are we going to get across the moat?" struck in Manners, ruthlessly interrupting Lowther's flow of eloquence.

"Yes, that's the thing—if we mean to go across," said Tom.

"Well, we do mean to, don't we? Not much sense in fagging out here, looking at the mud, and fagging back again, I think," Manners rejoined.

"Let's have a look round," said Talbot.

They moved slowly round on the outer edge of the moat, which made a complete ring, oval rather than circular, enclosing—firstly, a narrow strip of ground, wider in some parts than in others; secondly, the wall, in which the only break was the gate near the drawbridge; and thirdly, the wide courtyard and the ugly old house.

As they came round to the back of the house, farthest from the drawbridge, five heads bobbed down behind a straggling screen of bushes a stone's-throw or so away.

"Told you so!" whispered Carboy, in the ear of Gordon Gay. "Those bounders are on the same game as we are."

"We'll give them first move, then," replied Gay, with a grin.

Frank Monk and the Wootton brothers nodded assent.

The Grammarians were keen to get even with Silas Stout. But Tom Merry & Co., though they might be more friendly enemies than the professor's man, were older enemies, and mattered more.

If, after what they had heard about Silas, they had come along seeking trouble at his hands, it was good strategy on the part of the Grammarians to give them a chance to start in first.

The green-and-black Rylcombe caps scarcely showed among the leaves, even when one of the five popped up his head to reconnoitre. They were far less conspicuous in such circumstances than the red-and-white of St. Jim's, which explains why Carboy, on a solitary scout, had sighted Tom Merry & Co., while they, though not by any means in the way of going about with their eyes shut, had failed to twig him.

"Mud, mud, mud!" said Manners discontentedly. "Just the same width all the way round—a yard or two too wide for Tommy or Talbot to jump, and about five yards too wide for me or Monty. Drawbridge up, and nothing to get over on. Looks to me as if we should have to chuck it!"

"Not so sure of that," replied Talbot. "See that willow?"

"The one out of 'Hamlet,' growing 'asiant the stream'?" returned Lowther.

"I don't know about 'Hamlet,' but that's the one I mean, old chap."

"'Hamlet' and 'Mariana' be blessed!" snorted Manners. "This old ass is mad on Shakespeare and stuff. What about the willow, Talbot?"

"Easy enough to swarm out along the trunk, and jump from the top to the other bank," replied Talbot.

"H'm!" murmured Lowther, measuring the distance with his eye. He was no duffer and no funk, but both Tom and Talbot could do things that were a trifle beyond him and Manners.

"I shouldn't say it was easy," remarked Manners. "But it looks possible."

"Question is, once we're over there, how are we going to get back?" said Tom practically.

"You lack imagination, Thomas! From the other side of the moat it will be simple enough to lower the drawbridge."

"Yes, that's an idea, certainly. Well, I'm on, if you chaps are."

Not one of the four had any scruples left as to the propriety of intruding upon the professor's domain. The difficulties in the way challenged them. A trespass it might be, but it was also an enterprise.

Talbot was first to swarm along the slanting trunk of the big pollard willow. That trunk was wide, but it was also rather slippery, and care had to be exercised. With spikes one might have gone upright; but Talbot thought it safer to straddle the trunk and work himself up.

Tom followed him, and Manners followed Tom. Lowther, awaiting his turn, grew impatient.

Behind the bushes that sheltered the Grammarians five pairs of hands were busy. Rushy tussocks, with enough earth adhering to give them weight, were pulled up, and Gordon Gay & Co. grinned cheerfully as they prepared the ammunition.

"This," murmured Frank Monk, "is where we score, I rather fancy!"

"They can't get drowned," said Gay. "They can all swim."

"Not in that moat!" returned Harry Wootton. "I know. I've had some!"

"There's no danger," Carboy said, poising one of the missiles in his hand.

"Not likely! We'll pull them out all serene if they're getting smothered," Jack Wootton answered.

"They can jolly well pull each other out!" growled his brother.

"You fellows are too jolly careful for anything!" remarked Lowther, stepping on to the trunk of the willow. "Easy enough to walk. See me! Sure-footed as a goat, my pippins!"

"And a silly goat in the head as well as the feet!" snapped Manners, glancing round. "Oh, look out, you chaps! Grammar School bounders!"

Talbot and Tom were standing on the broad polled top of the willow, ready to jump, when that warning came. Here there was fair foothold, with stout branches to grip. But Lowther, a yard or so out from the bank, was very insecurely balanced, and had nothing at all to clutch at except Manners! And Manners, straddling the wide trunk, though he was safe enough from falling while left alone, was not too well balanced.

CHAPTER 9.

A Grammarian Triumph!

TOM and Talbot whipped round at Manners' shout. Lowther took a step forward in haste, slipped, and clutched at Manners.

"Fire!" roared Gordon Gay, and five missiles flew through the air.

Every one of those Grammarians was a dead shot, and not a single clod was wasted.

One smote Lowther in the back of the neck; another took Manners full and fair in the face; two hit Tom; and the fifth, a heavy one, burst all over Talbot.

"Yaroooh! You fathead!" howled Manners.

Even without the missiles neither he nor Lowther would have stood much chance. Lowther's swank had put them in peril. But both might possibly have clutched the trunk and hung on till Tom and Talbot could help them.

The fusillade settled that, however. The surprise of it caused them to lose their balance completely, while their comrades were too fully occupied to give them aid.

"Yooop!" roared Lowther, as he and Manners plunged down together.

Splash!

Mud and water—but more mud than water—flew up. Tom and Talbot were plentifully bespattered. Lowther and Manners disappeared below the surface.

"Hurrah!" yelled the Grammarians.

"Charge 'em! Shove 'em all in!" yelled Gay.

The five dashed forward, each with a clod in his right hand.

The heads of Manners and Lowther bobbed up side by side. Their faces were plastered with mud, and their hair streamed with it. A deft shot from Wootton major reached the head of Manners, and, with a howl, he disappeared again.

"We'd better jump, Tommy!" said Talbot.

And he jumped, landing on the inner side of the moat.

But as Tom followed his lead three clods smote him, to his great confusion. His left foot struck a branch, he plunged forward, and flopped right into the moat!

"Hurrah!" yelled the Grammarians, in ecstasy.

"Our score this time, saintly Jimmies!" howled Carboy.

"Pax!" spluttered Lowther.

Tom Merry's head appeared above the surface, then sank again. He was in deeper water than his chums. But the worst of it was that it was scarcely water at all; it was far too thick to give anyone a chance of swimming. Tom was in no real danger of drowning, however.

"Pax be hanged!" retorted Gordon Gay. "We've fairly cornered you this time, my tulips!"

Carboy darted back to cover, and came running up again with an armful of the ammunition.

"Pelt the bounders! Make them duck!" he yelled. And a well-directed shot from his hand found the head of Lowther.

Tom emerged, spouting liquid mud. He struggled desperately through the clinging stuff to the willow, and clutched an overhanging branch. The tree served him as some sort of a shield from the Grammarian artillery. But Manners and Lowther had no such protection.

Their feet were on the bottom of the moat; but it was not firm enough to afford them sure support, and, forced to struggle in order to keep their mouths clear, they scarcely realised that they had a footing.

"We give you best, you rotters!" spluttered Lowther.

"Yes, of course! Stop it, and help us out!" yelled Manners.

"Do you give us best, Tommy?" chortled Gay.

"Show your ugly mug and say that you give us best, Merry!" shouted Monk.

"Yes, hang you!" roared Tom, his head appearing from behind the shielding branches. "Yow!" he howled next moment. For Wootton minor had scored a bull on his face.

"'Tain't good enough, unless Talbot does, too!" said Gay decisively.

Talbot faced them from the other bank. He was a target for their missiles, but those he could dodge, and he was quite beyond reach of their hands.

"I don't see why I should!" he said coolly.

"Stick to that, old man!" cried Tom.

"Let him stick to it, and you'll jolly

well have to stick where you are!" said Wootton major.

"You're trespassers, you know," Gordon Gay said, shaking his head reprovingly. "When we told you about this place the other day we didn't expect you'd have the cheek to butt in like this."

"Tain't your mystery—it's ours!" said Frank Monk.

"Hasn't Wootton minor had enough of it?" gibed Lowther.

"Right-ho, you funny ass! You just wait till you get out, and I'll show you!" snapped Harry Wootton.

"When I get out, dear boy, I shall have much pleasure in embracing you," replied Lowther blandly. "You could hardly believe what a spring of affection I feel welling up within me for all you chaps! I long to hug you all!"

"Shurrup, fathead!" muttered Manners. "They'll never let us out if you— Ow! Yow!"

Carboy's last missile had got home upon Manners.

"You'll have to own up that you're trespassers, and that it was like your rotten cheek to butt in, before we let you out!" Gay said.

"And Talbot's got to come through the moat," added Monk.

"And you've got to promise that you won't touch us when you're out, you dirty little rascals!" said Carboy.

"Oh, don't be such asses! We can't keep up much longer," pleaded Manners. "My feet are sinking now, and I'm getting sucked under."

"Stand on your head for a change, then!" suggested Wootton minor unfeelingly.

If there had been only half a chance to get out by means of a rush the Terrible Three would have taken it.

But there was no such chance. The clogging mud made the very beginning of a rush impossible. And now, Wootton major had found two broken branches of willow wherewith to keep the unfortunate three in the moat if they tried to clamber up the bank.

On the face of it, Talbot's situation was better. But only on the face of it, as he saw.

If he bolted round the wall, and managed to lower the drawbridge, he would not escape. Three of the enemy would be enough to hurl him into the mud there, and two could easily keep his comrades where they were.

"Duck, ducky!" shouted Wootton major, thrusting the leafy end of a branch into the face of Lowther. The humorist of the Shell slipped, and went under again bodily, and the enemy roared.

"Are you coming, Talbot?" inquired Gordon Gay.

"Yes, if I can agree to the conditions!" answered Talbot.

"Don't, old man!" snapped Tom. "They haven't got you, and—— Yoooop!"

Wootton minor, lying along the trunk, had taken a hint from his brother, and Tom had taken a muddy branch of willow-twigs full in the mouth.

"Conditions are that you all admit that we're top-dogs, and sheer off without bothering us!" answered Gay. "That's all, I think. We'll forgive you for butting in, as you haven't got any change out of it. Ha, ha, ha!"

The conditions were hard; but what could the Shell fellows do but accept them? Talbot's case was the hardest of all. It could scarcely be said that he really plunge into the moat of his own free will, for he had little chance of escaping the muddy passage at best. But he had to plunge in himself, whereas the Terrible Three had all been shot in without time to think about it.

"You agree, Tommy?" asked Gordon Gay.

"Oh, I agree! Our turn will come!" snapped Tom.

"One good turn deserves another, old top! You agree, Talbot?"

"Yes!"

"And you two?"

"Yes, hang you!" spluttered Manners.

"Yes, bless you!" rapped out Lowther.

Talbot plunged in, and, half-wading, half-swimming, made his way across.

Then the four hauled themselves out.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the enemy. "Is that the way you like it done, saintly Jimmies?"

"Don't stand in the way, Carboy. That's rude!" said Frank Monk reprovingly. "Besides, they didn't promise not to shake themselves, and——"

"Yaroooh!" howled Carboy, as Lowther shook himself like a Newfoundland dog, spurting liquid and smelly mud all over the one Grammarian near enough to get it.

"Silly ass, Monky! You put that into the bounder's head!" snapped the victim.

"Well, 'tain't there now. It seems to be all over you!" replied Monk.

"Good-bye, dear boys!" said Gay, with a wave of the hand.

The four gritted their teeth, and gouged mud out of their eyes and ears. But they could not resist practically and on the spot even the most dire insult. They were bound by the terms forced upon them.

"That willow dodge ain't half a bad notion for getting across, and having a squint round!" said Wootton major. "We'll use it when you dirty little scrubs have cleared off!"

"My hat! Ain't they disgusting infants, playing about in the mud like that?" chuckled Gay.

"Oh, come along, you fellows!" said Tom, desperately. "I can't stand much more of this without breaking truce!"

"Wait till our turn comes, that's all!" shouted Lowther, as the four departed.

CHAPTER 10.
The Tables Turned!

"WE can't go back to St. Jim's like this," said Talbot, when they were a quarter of a mile or so away, and out of sight of the enemy.

"We've got to!" answered Tom, shrugging his shoulders. "What else is there for it?"

"Oh, crumbs! Here's some of our chaps coming!" groaned Manners.

"Hang it! Let's get out of their way!" snorted Lowther.

But it was too late for any chance of that. They had been sighted.

"Cheerio, water-babies!" sang out the mocking voice of Ralph Reckness Cardew.

"Mudlarks!" Ernest Levison corrected him, with a grin.

"Somebody's been putting those chaps through it!" remarked Clive.

"Rather!" agreed Roylance.

"It's too bad!" said Durrance, his forehead drawing into a frown.

As yet George Durrance was scarcely used to the rough practical joking which was part of the friendly feud between Grammar School and St. Jim's juniors.

"Oh, by gad! It's the great Thomas, the magnificent Talbot, the humorous Lowther, an' the renowned Manners!" exclaimed Cardew. "Ha, ha! Who could have dreamed——"

"Grammarian cads!" snorted Levison.

"And not much dreaming about it, either—more doing, I should say!" rejoined Roylance.

"We ought to get even with them!" snapped Durrance.

By this time the four Shell fellows and the five Fourth-Formers had approached one another so closely that the vanquished quartet heard Durrance's words.

"There's a jolly good chance to do that!" said Manners eagerly.

"I'm on, if there is!" replied Roylance at once.

A smile showed through the mud which was beginning to crust the face of Manners. Perhaps there was no one at St. Jim's, except Tom Merry and Lowther and his own young brother, whom Harry Manners liked so much as Dick Roylance. They were not in the same Form, and the bond of union which knit the Terrible Three kept others just a little on the outside; but, even as Talbot was more than a mere friend to Tom Merry, so Roylance was a chum to Manners. There is a real difference. Levison, Clive, Cardew, Durrance—they were all friends of the Shell quartet; but Roylance was the only fellow among the five whom any of the four counted as quite a chum.

"So am I!" said Durrance readily.

"Same here!" Clive said eagerly.

"Well, I don't mind helping!" Levison said, in his cool, detached way. "What say you, Cardew?"

"Oh, by gad! Is it necessary to get as muddy as that, if we're to help?" inquired Cardew, blinking at the four unfortunates.

"Don't do anything if you don't want to!" snapped Tom.

"Tommy's lost his little temper!" drawled the dandy of the Fourth. "'Tisn't often our Tommy does that!"

"Oh, stop your silly rotting!" snorted Lowther.

"And Lowther can't see that it's funny. That's queer, too, as he's such a humorist!" went on Cardew.

"Oh, chuck it, ass!" growled Levison. "See here, tell us all about it, Talbot, and we can judge for ourselves then."

"Half a jiffy!" Tom said. "Where were you chaps off to?"

"Shall we tell them, Levison?" asked Cardew.

"Yes, dummy! They'd twig, anyway. They wouldn't think we were going down into the marshes to harvest frogs, I suppose?"

"Moat House?" queried Tom.

"That's it!" said Clive. "We've heard a lot of yarns about the professor and his man, and we wanted——"

"I don't think you'll see the professor, or his man either," broke in Talbot. "But if you hurry up you may come upon five of the Grammarians; and if you can steal on them without their twigging you can turn the tables for us."

"Come along, dear boys!" said Cardew, keen as anyone now. "Show me a Grammarian, an' I see an enemy! Uncas—Chingachgook—Red Cloud—Curumilla—watch me put 'em all into the shade when I'm once on the silent, stealthy, secret war-path!"

Lowther was probably the only fellow there who could identify the four renowned Indian chiefs of fiction to whom Cardew referred; and perhaps Lowther did not know them all, for his taste in books did not run exactly parallel with Cardew's.

But they all saw the slack, easy-going

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dandy transformed at once into a keen and resolute scout. It was Cardew who led the way, with a nice instinct for every possible bit of cover, and drew up close to the moat quite unperceived by Gordon Gay & Co., with Clive and Roylance, Levison and Durrance hard upon his heels.

The Terrible Three and Talbot hung back. They could bear no hand in this game, for they had made conditions, and must stick to them.

Victory or defeat depended upon the Fourth-Formers!

The drenched and mud-caked Shell fellows watched with bated breath what followed.

Gordon Gay & Co. had caught on to the dodge of getting across the moat by the help of the pollard willow. No doubt they were keener upon it because they had robbed the enemy of that dodge, so to speak. And they were very keen on seeing more of the Moat House. Probably they had some scheme for getting their own back on Silas Stout.

But if they had any such scheme it had to be postponed.

They still chuckled over the complete defeat of Tom Merry & Co. Gay and Monk stood where Tom and Talbot had stood, the Wootton brothers straddled the trunk, and Carboy was just about to follow when the attack broke upon them.

"St Jim's!" yelled Cardew, leading on his bold brigade.

"St. Jim's!" shouted Clive and Durrance, Roylance and Levison.

"Stock it to them!" howled Tom and Talbot, Manners and Lowther, uprearing themselves from behind the very bushes which had screened the Grammarians a short time before.

The Rylcombe fellows had no chance. Clive and Roylance snatched up Carboy between them and fairly hurled him into the moat. The branches which had served to torment the Shell fellows were now turned to another use. Cardew had one, Durrance the other; and they wielded them to good effect.

Splash!

"Ow! Yow! Gurrrg!" came from Wootton minor as he soused in.

"Chuck it! Yoop!" yelled Wootton major.

Splash! Jack Wootton had followed his brother.

Levison, with a sardonic grin on his face, fronted Gay and Monk.

"In you go, Monky!" he said. "Feeling gay, Gay? You won't feel quite so gay in a second or two! In with you!"

"Rats!" snapped Gay. "Come and chuck us in!"

"That's the game!" gibed Monk. "Take a bath with us, dear boys!"

"Thanks!" retorted Levison drily. "But I fancy I know a trick worth two of that!"

He collared the long branch from the hands of Durrance, and thrust its leafy end fall into the waistcoat of Monk. Cardew thrust at Gay.

Frank Monk grabbed at the twigs; but they broke in his hands.

Splash! Monk was also in the soup!

"Hurrah! Go it, Cardew!" yelled Monty Lowther.

But Gordon Gay had secured a firmer grip. He and Cardew struggled hard, each holding one end of the branch. The St. Jim's fellow had the advantage of being on terra-firma; but Gay was the more muscular of the two.

Gay reeled, and had to use one hand to steady himself. But Cardew slipped at the same instant, and the balance was evened.

"Let me get hold!" yelled Clive.

"No!" panted Cardew. "I'll have the bounder in on my own!"

Over the bank, unseen by anyone, stole a muddy hand. It gripped Cardew's ankle, and tugged hard.

"Yaroooh!" howled Cardew as he toppled over right on top of Harry Wootton.

"Yoooop!" howled Gay, and there was a mighty splash as he went in.

Wootton minor and Cardew emerged together, spluttering and struggling.

"Shove him under again! Smother the bounder, Harry!" yelled Jack Wootton.

But Levison used his branch to push Wootton minor off, and Cardew scrambled up the bank, streaming mud from every part of his body, and full of rage. The dandy of the Fourth had not counted on this.

"You rotters!" he stormed. "Oh, by gad, I'll——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the Terrible Three and Talbot.

"Hu, hu, hu!" spluttered the Grammarian quintet.

"Is that the way you like it done, old top?" shouted Lowther.

Cardew's wrath broke. He grinned through his mask of mud.

"Your tables are turned," he said. "For that good end I can endure martyrdom. Come on, dear boys, an' leave the mud-larks to it! Cousin George, let me first embrace you! You wrought doughtily, kinsman!"

"No, thanks!" replied Durrance in haste. "Here, keep off, you madman!"

He dodged behind Levison.

"You'll get a thick ear if you come within a yard of me, Cardew!" snapped Levison.

"Then I won't, dear boy, havin' no use for luxuries! Tommy, are you satisfied now? Has the Fourth done better than the Shell this time, my hero?"

"The Fourth has!" answered Tom solemnly. "But it's all St. Jim's, you know. Good-bye, you chaps! This is a drawn game, after all—not a victory for the Grammar School!"

"Best thing we can do is to get along to the river and bathe, while these fellows fetch us clean clothes," said Talbot, as they wended their homeward way. Levison, Roylance, Durrance, and Clive taking care not to go too near their muddied companions, of whom Cardew and Lowther displayed a desire to be much too neighbourly with them.

"Oh, not likely!" chuckled Levison. "Why should the school miss the giddy treat of seeing you chaps come in like this?"

"By Jove, you bounder!" began Cardew in wrath. "Let me get near you, an' I'll soon bring you round to that plan! I'm not goin' to show myself——"

"Levison doesn't mean it," put in Talbot, smiling behind his mask of mud.

"Oh, doesn't he?" snapped Levison.

But if he did, Clive and Roylance and Durrance were more mercifully disposed.

The five took a dip in the river at a lonely spot, and lay on the grass in the sun till their comrades returned with towels and bags containing changes of clothes.

Then they had another quick plunge, and came out and wiped themselves dry; and the muddy clothes were hidden in the bags, and the nine hurried off with fine appetites for tea. Whether the war-time teas would fit those appetites was another matter, however.

"But we haven't done with the Moat House," said Tom, as the four Shell fellows sat down to the table in No. 10.

And, curiously enough, in Study No. 9 in the Fourth passage Cardew was saying much the same thing to his companions, while Clive made tea, and Levison opened a big tin of sardines, and the two visitors laid the cloth and set out the crocks. Cardew, of course, saw no reason why his hands should help in the preparations. Indeed, as he looked ruefully at the mud which he had found it impossible to get out of his nicely-kept nails, he was thinking that those hands had done more than enough for one day!

CHAPTER 11.
Mr. Selby Goes to See!

"SKIMPOLE!"

No reply came.

Mr. Railton was taking call-over. He looked up sharply.

"Skimpole!" repeated the Housemaster.

"He's not here, sir," said Gore.

Mr. Railton passed on.

A few more names followed; then:

"Trimble!"

No reply of "Adsum!" in the bleat of Baggy came.

"Is Trimble there?"

"No, sir!" answered Mellish. "He hasn't been in since dinner—at least, I haven't seen him."

Nobody thought much about the absence of either. Certainly nobody at the time connected it in any way with the Moat House. The general notion was that the two would toddle in some time before they were due to go to bed, and would receive lines for being late. They were expected to toddle in separately; not many fellows at St. Jim's had imagination enough to picture Skimmy and Baggy going off together, and only four had heard the joint invitation extended to them by the professor.

And only one of these four remembered it. That one was Durrance.

A thunderstorm had rolled up and broken overhead during prep. It was all over before the Fourth were in bed. But Baggy's bed was empty.

"The fat lout hasn't turned up yet," remarked Jack Blake.

"I wonder whether he's gone to the Moat House?" said Durrance.

"Eh? Why should he? And where is the Moat House, anyway?" inquired Herries.

"We've been there this afternoon!" chuckled Levison. "Cardew will tell you all about it!"

"Dashed if I will!" came from Cardew's bed.

"I will, though!" said Clive, grinning.

"If you've been there I should think you'd know whether Baggy's there or not," observed Digby.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Not at all," Roylance said. "When you've heard our yarn you'll see that Baggy and Skimmy might both have been there and we never get a squint of them."

"Begorra, let's hear it, then!" said Reilly.

Clive told it briefly, to an accompaniment of laughter and chuckles.

"I don't see why Cardew need mind. He's got nothing to be ashamed of this time" said Herries, when the narrative had reached its end.

"Oh kindly go and eat coke!" snapped Cardew.

"My hat! Tommy and his little lot ought to own up that the Fourth are ahead of the Shell after this!" said Blake.

"But what is it about Baggy and Skimmy?" asked Julian.

"Oh, I forget," said Clive. "The professor johnny asked them to go over and take tea with him, or something. Very likely they went."

"And were kept there by the storm," suggested Lumley-Lumley. "The old chap may have put them up for the night."

"I'll go to the Shell dorm and see whether Skimpole's come back," said Blake. And he cut off.

"I don't believe the professor's there," Tom said. "And I don't think they'd

dare to stay, anyhow. Besides, the storm was over an hour and a half ago."

"That chap Stout must be something like a maniac, by the yarn the Grammarians told us," said Manners.

"I don't half like it!" Talbot remarked thoughtfully.

"I shouldn't lose a wink of sleep if I thought they'd both been done in, by gad!" said Crooke.

"I don't suppose you would!" answered Tom Merry contemptuously. "But no one here cares a rap whether you get any sleep or not; so we won't argue. I say, Talbot"—Tom's tone changed markedly as he broke off his speech to Crooke and spoke to Crooke's cousin—"if old Selby's a friend of the professor's he might be able to tell us something!"

"Just what I was thinking," replied Talbot.

"Shall we go down and speak to him?"

"Better go to Railton," Talbot said. "Selby won't do anything for us—very likely won't answer."

"I'll go with you!" volunteered Blake. "Must go and get a little more on me first, though!"

Less than ten minutes later the three were in Mr. Railton's study. Toby, the page, was rung for, appeared rubbing his eyes and looking sleepy, and was sent for Mr. Selby.

That gentleman came, looking decidedly unpleasant. But it would have been a surprise almost amounting to a shock to both his colleague and the juniors had he looked otherwise.

"Skimpole of the Shell and Trimble of the Fourth are missing, Mr. Selby," said the Housemaster.

"Well, what of it?" snapped the tyrant of the Third.

"Professor Burnham, who is living at the Moat House, is an acquaintance of yours, I believe?" said Mr. Railton.

"He is an old friend—a very old friend. What of it? I fail entirely to perceive at what you are hinting, Mr. Railton!"

"I am hinting at nothing, I assure you. But I understand from these boys that the two missing juniors had been invited to go and see the professor."

"Good gracious, Mr. Railton! Do you mean to suggest that my old friend has kidnapped Skimpole and Trimble? Pooh, pooh! I never heard anything so absurd in my life!"

Mr. Railton's face grew stern.

"I am suggesting no more than that they may have gone to the Moat House, and have failed, for some reason or other, to return," he said. "If it was a certainty that they were there I should see no cause for alarm. It is the doubt which naturally worries one."

"Better send somebody to find out!" snapped the master of the Third. "You do not wish me to go, I suppose?"

"Certainly not, unless you desire to do so. It merely occurred to me that as it is late for any stranger to go to the Moat House on such a doubtful errand—the boys may not be there at all, you know—and as you are a friend of Professor Burnham's——"

"The long and short of it is, Railton, that you do wish me to go!"

"Not unless——"

"I will go!" snarled Mr. Selby, looking like an Early Christian martyr with severe internal pains.

"You must drive, of course. I will arrange——"

"I am my own master, I suppose—at least, as far as the method of locomotion I adopt is concerned, for I seem to have little choice about going! If I do not return by one o'clock, Mr. Railton, you may take it for granted that the missing boys are not at the Moat House, and that my old friend has been kind enough to offer me a bed. If they are there, I shall, of course, bring them back, and dispel your natural anxiety!"

"Very well, Mr. Selby. I will sit up. Thanks, boys! You were quite right to come to me."

The three retreated. Mr. Selby turned at the door.

"No need to sit up, Railton," he said, a little less ungenially. "If the two juniors should be there, and have been accommodated with beds——"

"I shall sit up till one in any case, Selby. After that, I really do not see what I can do until morning. It would be idle to institute a search so late."

"Very well! You will do as you please, of course," replied Mr. Selby ungraciously.

The master of the School House sat up till one. But neither Mr. Selby nor the two juniors returned. Mr. Railton was up early; but there was no news of the trio. Breakfast came, classes followed, and still there was no news!

There was excitement at St. Jim's, of course. The mystery was discussed from every possible point of view. But it remained, for the time being, a mystery!

THE END.

(Don't miss next Wednesday's Great Story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's—"THE PRISONERS OF THE MOAT HOUSE!"—by Martin Clifford.)

THE TWINS FROM TASMANIA.

Hail and Farewell!

Merton and Tunstall had come to the station alone. But outside Flip found Frank Courtenay and the Caterpillar and a dozen more. They gave him the heartiest of welcomes.

Before he reached Highcliffe he learned that Pon & Co. had been going through a very unpleasant time. They had been in Coventry ever since Chiker's visit.

"Oh, better chuck that," said Flip carelessly. "I was going to give Gaddy a hiding, but I shan't now, unless he asks for it. As for Pon, I've one bit of business to do with him, and then I shall cut the three of them for good and all."

"Best way," agreed Frank Courtenay.

Smithson & Co. thought Flip meant to fight Pon. But that was not his intention.

He walked up to the leader of the nuts in the Common-room, and, without preface, said:

"You hold some I O U's of mine, Ponsonby."

"I'd forgotten them, dear boy," replied Pon graciously.

"I hadn't. What's the amount?"

"Never mind that, Derwent! I——"

"Can't stand being in your debt. I'm cashing up now."

Pon took out his pocket-book, and handed over the papers.

"Here you are! That's correct, I believe," said Flip, passing over some currency notes.

"Quite correct. But——"

"We've done with one another for good now!" snapped Flip. "I shall be obliged if you'll remember that."

He turned to Gadsby.

"I owe you a hiding, Gadsby!"

"Well, you can't expect me to take it lyin' down."

"I don't. I know you'd show fight. But is it worth while?"

"If you don't want to fight, I don't, that I know of."

"Right-ho! Consider yourself dead as far as I'm concerned. Vavasour!"

"Oh, I say, Derwent, I'm sorry absolutely!"

"Can't say I am. I've found out things worth knowing. We were never chums, but you might have tried to play the game, for I've done you a bad turn. You're dead, too! Come on, you chaps!"

"Am I in this?" growled Monson.

"Not as far as I'm concerned," replied Flip. "But I shan't be seeing much of Ponsonby's pals, I expect."

"You can count me in with them, by gad!" said Monson surlily.

"Right-ho! I shan't worry. No objection to your noddin' to me when you want to, but we needn't embrace every morning."

Flip Derwent's manner was light, but he meant what he said. For good and all he had done with Ponsonby & Co.

. . . . . .

Goggs went later that day. He had a big escort to the station.

Flap and Marjorie came to see him off, and they were nearest, with Flip, as he leaned out of the window at the last moment.

Behind were Merton and Tunstall, the Caterpillar and Courtenay, Phyllis Howell and Clara Trevlyn, Smithson & Co., and quite a number more.

Flip's face was very serious. It was really a heavy disappointment to him that Goggs should be going so soon after his return.

All the good-byes had been spoken except those of Flip and the two girls near him. Now Goggs, his glasses put aside for once, smiled down at Marjorie as she spoke farewell.

Then Flip put out his hand. He wanted to say something, but the words would not come.

"Kiss the bounder, Flippy!" gibed Tunstall.

"Goggs would rather be kissed by someone else," said a voice that might have been Smithson's—though he vowed afterwards that it was not.

Flap faced round, her cheeks flushed. Then, obeying a sudden impulse of gratitude and very real affection, heedless for the moment of what anyone might say or think, she held up her face to him who was going.

Goggs still held Flip's hand. He did not grin or even flush; but he bent his face to Philippa Derwent's, and their lips met. The whistle sounded. Flip relaxed his grip, with one last squeeze. But Flap's hand was still in Goggs', and in the sight of them all he bent his bared head, lifted her hand, and kissed it.

"Like a true and loyal knight!" murmured the Caterpillar. And Marjorie flashed a smile, though her eyes were dewy, and Flap turned, and said, simply, and yet with dignity:

"Thank you, De Courcy! You understand, anyway."

"My dear child," said the Caterpillar, as if he was old enough to be her father, "I think everyone here understands, an' I'm sure everyone admires."

Not a single chuckle of derision had come from the small crowd; not a grin showed on any face. For in all there was something of the true chivalric spirit, and that made understanding easy.

Goggs had done much for Philippa Derwent's sake. He had fairly earned the reward she had given him so ungrudgingly, and no other reward could have meant so much to him.

"Good old Goggs! Come back to us again!" howled Yates.

"Come back to us!" yelled the chorus.

Goggs did not answer in words—scarcely by looks. For his eyes were on Flap as the train steamed out; to the last moment they were on her, where she stood with Flip's arm around her.

But perhaps that was an answer in itself. If he could come back they might be sure he would, for Flap was there!

"Three cheers for dear old Goggs!" cried the Caterpillar.

The cheers rolled out loudly, lustily. To their music Goggs was hurried away, and Flip and Flap, who owed him so much, watched, with lumps in their throats, till the train was a mere speck in the distance.

THE END.