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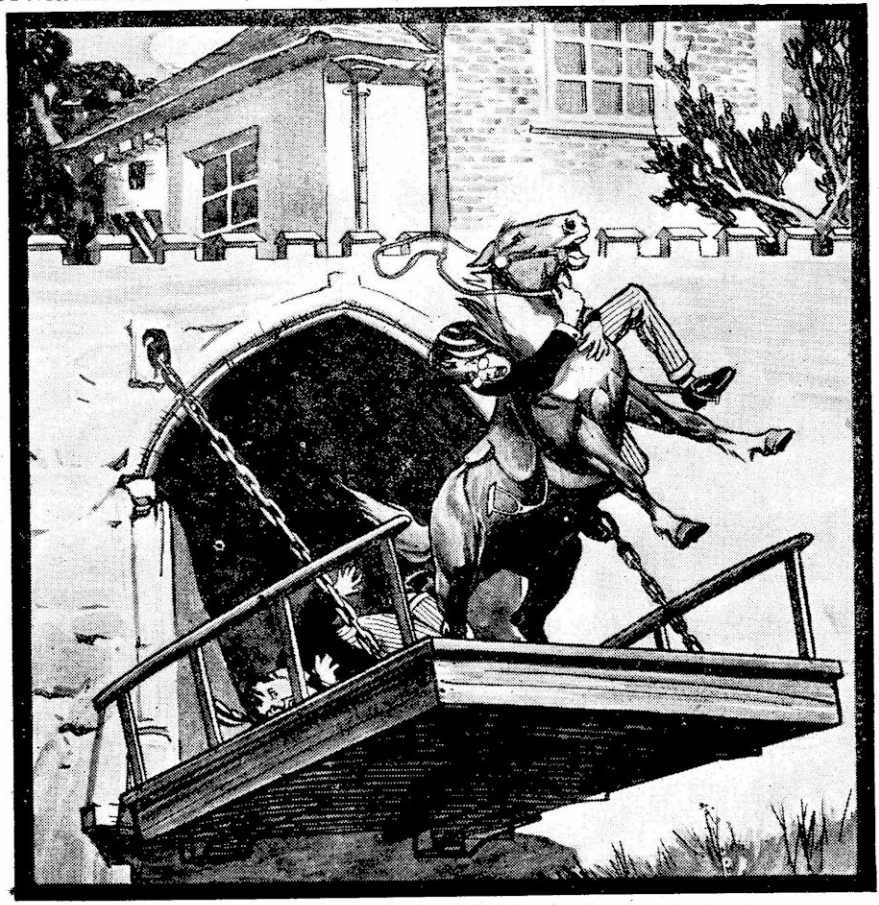
THE PRISONERS OF THE MOAT HOUSE!

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



THE FIERY UNTAMED STEED!

28-9-18

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

THE PRISONERS OF THE MOAT HOUSE!

By Martin Clifford.

CHAPTER 1.
Another Captive!

"I CAN'T stand this, Skimmy! I shall die; I know I shall!"

It was Baggy Trimble, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, who wailed these words.

"My dear Trimble," replied Herbert Skimpole, stretching a point in his mode of addressing Baggy, who was by no means dear to him, in his desire to show sympathy—"my dear Trimble, I am prepared to admit that our present condition is by no means conducive to a settled or happy state of mind. But our duty is to bear it with what resignation we may, and to hope for the best!"

"Brrrr!" growled Baggy, without any appreciation of Skimmy's sympathy or Skimmy's philosophy.

Their condition was certainly not a pleasant or enviable one.

They had gone to visit the Moat House, the abode of Professor Pompey Burnham, on the invitation of the professor himself. They had been maltreated by Silas Stout, the professor's right-hand man, and they were now, in the absence of the professor, imprisoned in a disused wine-cellar by Silas, who took them for spies. Silas had spies on the brain.

Moreover, Skimmy had had an encounter with a terrible pincers-like apparatus, and had lost the seat of his trousers, while Baggy had been whirled up and down an automatic lift till quite overcome by sickness.

"Besides, it's tea-time—past tea-time, and I'm starving!" said Baggy, after a short pause.

"You can hardly be starving as yet, Trimble, as only a few hours have elapsed since dinner, of which you partook plenteously; and the human frame can sustain——"

"Rats about the human frame—mine's different!" burbled Baggy.

Other people had said that. More than one fellow at St. Jim's had said plainly that Baggy more resembled the porcine than the human race. But that was not quite what Baggy meant. What he felt was that, while he could bear with resignation Skimmy's going short of food, it hurt him in his tenderest feelings to think of going short himself.

It was not really very late; but the conduct of Silas Stout had been such that it was little to be wondered at that Baggy should dread starvation. Stout seemed to him a very terrible person, who would shy at no iniquity.

But starvation was not to be their fate. About six o'clock Silas opened the door, and a little, grey old man brought in a tray. Baggy brightened up at the sight of that; but his face fell again when he saw that the meal was very plain, and by no means plenteous.

The little grey man said nothing, for the excellent reason that he was dumb. Neither Skimmy nor Baggy tumbled to that, but they perceived that he stood in awe of Silas. So did they, for Silas carried his gun under his arm, and there was an ugly gleam in his deep-set eyes.

Such as the tea was, Baggy dealt with it very effectively—so effectively that gave Skimmy very little chance of doing more than sampling it.

The hours crept on. The cellar, never very light, grew gloomier and gloomier. Skimmy sat in the straw and meditated; Baggy lay on the straw and grizzled. So the darkness crept upon them, and Baggy wailed that he was frightened—which was hardly news to his fellow-victim by this time.

Suddenly the door opened again, and Silas reappeared, the gun under his left arm, a lantern carried in his right hand.

"Oh, I say! We're going home now, I suppose," said Baggy.

"You ain't!" growled Silas. "Come this way, you rascally young spies, an' none of your games, or this here gun of mine will get playin' games, too!"

He marched them in front of him, upstairs, and into a barely-furnished bedroom on the second floor. There were two beds, and a single candle shed a feeble light.

"You'll sleep here!" grunted Silas.

"Ow-yow! I can't sleep—— I—I—— Oh, let me go, please!" wailed Baggy.

"I really think, my good man——" began Skimmy, his resolution firm, but his voice less so.

"Don't you get thinkin'. It might give you a pain in the head!" snapped Silas.

And he went out, slamming the door. Skimmy tried it as soon as his footsteps had died away. But it was fast locked.

"Taking into consideration all the circumstances, Trimble," said Skimmy, "I cannot perceive that there is anything for us to do but to retire to rest."

"You! We shall be murdered in our beds, you silly ass!"

"I am not of that opinion, Trimble."

Perhaps Baggy hardly believed it himself. Anyway, he got into bed, groaned and wailed for an hour or so, and then began to snore.

Skimmy also slept. But he had not slept long before he was awakened by the whir and clang of the electric bell.

"Someone has fortunately come to our rescue," he murmured, and sat up.

For fully five minutes he sat listening. Then footsteps and voices approached.

The door was flung open.

"Here they are, the young hounds!" growled Silas.

The light of his lantern revealed the face and form of Mr. Selby.

Next moment, as the master strode into the room, the door shut with a slam.

"Got you!" howled Silas. "You wicked old spy, I've trapped you as well as the young 'uns!"

"What does this mean? Good gracious—— Upon my soul—— Come back, man! Of all the artounding—— What does it mean?"

Silas did not deign reply. His heavy feet clumped down the stairs.

It was Skimmy who answered.

"I really think, sir," he said, "that that most extraordinary man has imprisoned all three of us!"

Baggy snored on.

"But, upon my soul, Skimpole, this is impossible—a sheer absurdity—an unparalleled outrage! What can the man mean?"

"It is my belief, sir, that he takes you for a spy! That is the light in which, I regret to say, he regards both myself and Trimble, though I cannot even conjecture what——"

"You two boys must have annoyed the fellow—some foolish practical joke, no doubt——"

"Excuse me, sir, but I never play practical jokes. Such things are quite outside the scope of my activities. I will not say that they are always and necessarily reprehensible, but——"

"Oh, be quiet! What we have to consider is the very unfortunate position in which I find myself—not your ridiculous opinions! I came here, at Mr. Railton's request, to inquire of Professor Burnham, who is an old friend of mine, whether you two juniors had paid him a visit—to discover, in short, whether you were here. I find you here. I do not find the professor, but I meet a madman with a firearm, who lures me into his room, accuses me of being a spy, and locks the door upon me. I really am quite at a loss to know what to do!"

"I should think that the best thing you can do is to go to bed, sir," replied Skimmy, with an unusual rush of common-sense.

He looked as he spoke towards Baggy's bed, with a vague idea that Mr. Selby might share it. Baggy had collared the bigger of the two beds.

Mr. Selby hardly seemed to catch on to Skimmy's notion.

"Yes!" he said. "That might be best. Nothing can be done to-night. In the morning, of course, I shall have to bring this foolish fellow of Burnham's to reason. You can turn in with Trimble, Skimpole, and I will occupy this bed."

Skimmy got out with something like a groan. It was of no use to argue, he knew; but perhaps politeness had more to do with his silent acceptance of the situation than any unwillingness to enter into argument.

"Will you have the goodness to move up a little, Trimble?" he asked, as he tried to get into the bigger bed.

A snore was Baggy's only answer—if answer it could be called.

"My dear Trimble, I must really ask you to move up!" said Skimmy, planting a bony elbow in the fat ribs of Baggy.

"Wharrer want?" mumbled Baggy illtemperedly.

Then, without waiting for an answer, and without moving an inch, he dropped off to sleep again.

"You had better put out that candle, Skimpole!" rasped Mr. Selby.

"But you have not—er—disrobed, sir!"

"I have no intention of undressing. Good gracious! How can one go to bed in the ordinary way with a dangerous maniac like that on the premises? I think you had better pile some furniture in front of the door before you put out the light."

"There is no furniture to pile there, sir, unless we move your bed!" said Skimpole mildly.

"My bed?" roared Mr. Selby. "Why, the rascal might fire through the door and kill me!"

After that he could scarcely suggest that the other bed should be put against the door, though it was plain that he had thought of the possibility of doing that.

Skimmy returned to an even narrower couch than that he had left. Baggy had taken advantage of his absence to spread himself out a little more. It was useless to protest, so Skimmy bore it with philosophic calm.

But he got little sleep, with the fat and perspiring Baggy snoring on his left, and Mr. Selby giving vent to hollow groans every few minutes on his right.

It was a big relief to Skimmy when dawn showed faintly through the dirty window of the room. He was up some time before Baggy gave any sign of stirring, or Mr. Selby awakened from the troubled sleep into which he at last had fallen.

CHAPTER 2.
In the Morning!

"LET us go into this matter thoroughly, Skimpole! You evaded the issue last night," said Mr. Selby, sitting on the edge of his bed, and looking very frowsy and dishevelled.

"Excuse me, sir, I never evade an issue. The laws of truth are the laws of science, and science is the paramount factor in my life. I desire always and everywhere to be candid and explicit."

"Then tell me at once, and without all this flummery of circumlocution, what was done by you and Trimble—or by either of you—to offend this man of Professor Burnham's?" returned Mr. Selby sourly.

"In all earnestness, I assure you, sir, that I know of no better or more valid reason why this extremely eccentric individual should have made us prisoners than I do for his treating you in a similar manner."

"Do you mean to insinuate, Skimpole, that I——"

"I never insinuate, sir! To do so is unworthy of a scientific mind!"

"Upon my word, you talk as though you were on a footing of intellectual equality with me! Do not forget, Skimpole, that our positions are very different. I am a master, and a man of middle age; you are a mere boy in a junior Form. Remember that!"

Skimpole smiled—a queer, lofty, inscrutable smile.

He was not in the least danger of regarding Mr. Selby and himself as being on a footing of intellectual equality.

He did not regard anyone at St. Jim's—not even the Head himself—as being so.

Herbert Skimpole was certain that there was no brain in the school—not many in the world, in fact—within measurable distance of his.

"You must positively have been guilty of some folly which annoyed this madman!" went on the master, in his snappiest tones.

"May I point out, sir, that your logic is strangely to seek in that speech? You infer that the man Stout is mad; and at the same time you assume that he would not have acted as he did without provocation. But surely it is characteristic of the insane to act without reason or provocation? Is it not precisely in that their insanity is displayed?"

"Do not bandy words with me, Skimpole! I will not permit it! And do not make grimaces at me!" snarled the angry master.

"I never make grimaces, sir!" replied Skimmy, really hurt.

"You were grimacing then. You are doing it now! Do not prevaricate!"

Skimmy, with a vague, sad notion that there must be something unfortunate about his face, thought it best not to answer that.

"Tell me exactly what occurred when this man trapped you. Bless my soul, is it impossible for you to tell a plain story in simple words?"

It was. If Skimmy had ever been able to do that he had quite grown out of the way of it now. His reply showed that.

"I will endeavour to be precise, concise, and perspicuous, sir!" he said, as a hopeful start.

Then he went on to tell the story in many long words.

Mr. Selby did not allow the narrative to flow on without interruption.

"You allude to Burnham as my friend!" he snapped, early in its course. "Not after this—not after this! Burnham shall hear what my opinion of him is, I promise you!"

"I do not believe, sir, that the professor, for whom I entertain a sincere admiration, can be in any way responsible for the vagaries of the individual he has left in charge here."

"Nonsense! Good gracious! He must know what the man is, I suppose?"

"Yawwwwp! What's old Selby doing here?"

Baggy Trimble sat up in bed, rubbing his eyes, as he asked that question.

"Trimble! How dare you!" thundered the master.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, sir! I didn't know it was you—I mean—that is—— Oh, I'm jolly glad to see you, sir! You've come to fetch us away, of course!"

"I regret to say, Trimble, that Mr. Selby is, like ourselves, a victim of the man——"

"Do not speak of me as a victim, Skimpole!"

"Not if you object to the term, of course, sir. It seemed a natural and veracious method of conveying the facts——"

"Yah! You're a silly ass, Skimmy! Mr. Selby ain't going to be a victim. Are you, sir? I should go for that bow-legged rotter if I were you, sir! I'll hold your coat—I mean, we'll back you up, sir! Not that Skimmy's much good, you know!"

"Silence, Trimble! Proceed with your story, Skimpole; and, pray, do not be so extremely long-winded!"

Skimmy proceeded, without abatement of his long-windedness, however. And at long-last he reached an end.

"It is a quite impossible situation—the very height of absurdity!" said Mr. Selby peevishly. "Here am I, a captive in the house of a friend, through the crass folly and misconduct of you two juniors! And Railton will imagine, no doubt, that I shall hold myself responsible for your safety. Nothing of the sort! I disclaim all responsibility should anything untoward happen to either of you. I have enough to do in looking after myself."

It was in a curiously superior manner that Herbert Skimpole looked at the master. Mr. Selby's courage seemed to Skimmy as conspicuously lacking as Mr. Selby's logic.

Skimmy detested Baggy, in so far as his philosophic and equable mind allowed of his detesting anyone. But he had not refused to do his best for the fat wastrel, and had in some sort taken upon his shoulders responsibility for him.

"I think if you were to talk to the fellow, sir," said Baggy fawningly, "I—I think it might do some good, you know, sir. He doesn't take a scrap of notice of us; but he'd be bound to listen to you, sir!"

"I shall most certainly talk to the man, and that in a very severe manner, Trimble! He must learn——"

"Don't be afraid of his gun, sir! I don't a bit believe it's loaded!"

"Ridiculous, Trimble—positively preposterous! Do you suppose that I fear the fellow? Though, if he is really insane—and he certainly appears to be so—it would be as well—er—not to tempt him to any deed of violence. I must not forget that I have others besides myself to think about. I must not let my native courage run away with me!"

Skimmy thought that Mr. Selby's legs were much more likely than his courage to run away with him, had he only the chance to use them. The master's funk was as gross and evident as Baggy's. Skimmy did not feel easy or comfortable, but he was not as they were.

"I see no—er—arrangements for washing," went on Mr. Selby. "And you two boys are really in a disgracefully dirty condition!"

They were really not so very much dirtier than Mr. Selby. But he could not see himself.

"It doesn't matter so very much about washing, sir!" said Baggy earnestly. "A chap can get along for a bit without that, you know. But there's breakfast. You can't get on without grub, now, can you, sir? I should speak to the beast about that, sir! The tea we had last night was awful rotten stuff, and not half enough of it. I'm not going to stay here to be starved; 'tain't jolly well likely!"

"Here is a bell, sir," said Skimmy. "Shall I ring it?"

"Yes—er—— On second thoughts, no, Skimpole! Certainly not!"

But Mr. Selby was too late. Skimmy had already rung the bell.

"Dear me, how exceedingly reckless of you!" quavered the master. "If that madman appears with his lethal weapon, and any damage results, I disclaim all responsibility. Your blood be upon your own head!"

And, evidently not wishing to have his blood upon his own head, Mr. Selby looked hastily under the bed, with a view to taking cover on the approach of Silas.

But the bell was not answered. Down below, Silas Stout heard it ring, and muttered to himself:

"Take this for a hotel, I s'pose? Well, 'tain't nothin' of the sort, an' the sooner they understand that the better for them, an' for me, too!"

Before there was any sign of breakfast Mr. Selby had grown so famished that he had almost—not quite—conquered his fears of the armed madman.

When Silas did at length show up, accompanied by the little, old grey man carrying a tray, Mr. Selby heroically refrained from taking cover. Which was as well for him, since the meal was not a very ample one for three; and Baggy was desperately sharp-set!

CHAPTER 3.
A Mystery for St. Jim's.

"OLD Selby's not here, Talbot," whispered Tom Merry at the breakfast-table in the hall of the School House.

"And Skimmy and Baggy didn't turn up," answered Talbot. "Looks queer, I must say!"

"Yes; it looks very like rain," murmured Monty Lowther.

"Why, I never saw a finer morning!" Talbot said, in surprise.

"Oh, it's the morning you're talking about? I thought it was the coffee!"

"Ass! The coffee's all right!" said Tom.

"We were talking about the lost sheep," Talbot said.

"Eh?"

"Selby, Skimmy, and Trimble."

"Oh! Didn't the wolf bring the

donkey and the pig home?" asked the humorist of the Shell.

"Don't be funny!" snapped Manners. "I don't quite like the look of things myself."

"This bacon certainly is——"

"Shurrup, chump! The bacon's all right."

"What there is of it," returned Lowther. "Bacon—'Much Ado About Nothing'—Shakespeare. I wonder whether he did write them, after all?"

"Oh, you're potty—clean potty! What do you think can have happened to them, Tommy?"

"Well, it's early to say anything has; but I'm going to speak to Railton when breakfast is over. He may have heard something."

"Yes," said Lowther brightly. "He may have heard that Trimble's been slaughtered in mistake for somebody's pig, Selby's been boiled in oil, and Skimmy—well, I don't wish Skimmy anything worse than having his tongue clipped; he's not a bad old idiot!"

But, though Lowther might regard the whole affair as a joke, the other three were not disposed to accept it in that manner.

The Fourth, on the whole, worried little about Baggy. And the Third, when the news leaked out that Mr. Selby had not returned from an expedition undertaken overnight in search of Skimpole and Trimble, were full of joy.

"Never thought much of either of them," said D'Arcy minor. "But, by Jingo, we owe them a vote of thanks if this keeps the old Hun away from classes this morning!"

"Rather!" agreed Levison minor and Manners minor.

When the rest trooped out from breakfast, Tom Merry and Talbot approached Mr. Railton.

The Housemaster looked rather worried. It struck him—as it had struck Tom—that it was queer nothing at all should have been heard of the two missing juniors and the master who had gone in search of them.

"No, I do not think it advisable that you should go to the Moat House," he said. "Professor Burnham might regard it as an intrusion, and our anxiety might impress him as absurd. Mr. Selby vouches for him; and Dr. Holmes, with whom I have already discussed the matter, knows him by reputation as a man of considerable eminence in the scientific world, and of irreproachable character, though inclined to eccentricity."

"But suppose the professor isn't there, sir?" asked Tom.

"Then Skimpole and Trimble can hardly be there," replied the master.

"But where can Mr. Selby be?" said Talbot.

"That question I cannot answer; but Mr. Selby, at his age, should be capable of taking care of himself," Mr. Railton said drily.

"Don't you think it would be as well to start a search for them, sir?" inquired Tom.

"Certainly not, as yet, Merry. If they are at the Moat House we shall doubtless hear something from Mr. Selby before long. He may walk in with them at any moment. If they are not there, it would be useless to make inquiries; and the field for a general search is so wide that really I hesitate to embark on such an undertaking."

It was reasonably argued; and, of course, there was no appeal from the Housemaster's decision. But Tom and Talbot did not feel satisfied.

Skimmy and Baggy had gone out, whether separately or in company no one knew. They had not returned, though in an ordinary way both would have been back for call-over.

Mr. Selby had gone seeking news of them late at night to the Moat House, where it was thought both might be. He also had failed to return.

If he had not found them he would surely have been back before now, for he would then regard their absence as a serious matter. If he had found them there was every reason to expect him back with them before morning classes began.

But, somehow, Tom and Talbot and Manners did not expect either him or them. They could hardly have explained why; but they had a feeling that something had happened—that there was some mystery in this triple disappearance.

Lowther scoffed. No one else got the chance to do so, for they did not discuss the matter with anyone else. The Fourth took the absence of Baggy with a continuation of the philosophic calm that had been their attitude at breakfast; and the Third rejoiced exceedingly when Tom Merry, deputed by Mr. Railton, came along to their Form-room to act as substitute for Mr. Selby, the Sixth and Fifth not having anyone available owing to exams.

"I say, Tommy, do you think the Huns have got him?" asked Wally eagerly.

"Get on with your work, D'Arcy minor!" snapped Tom. "I wasn't sent here to discuss Mr. Selby with you, but to see that you didn't waste the morning. Cæsar's the line, for the present."

"If the giddy old Huns have got him, they'll jolly well wish they hadn't!" said Reggie Manners, grinning. "I'll bet there isn't a bigger old Hun in all Germany than old Selby—not the blessed old Kaiser himself!"

"Not likely!" Curly Gibson said fervently.

"Whoever's got him won't keep him," remarked Frank Levison.

"No such luck for us!" said Jameson.

"Unless someone's knocked him on the napper for a start," suggested Butt.

"Hope so!" said Hobbs.

"Sure, an'——"

"Be quiet, Hooley! Be quiet, all of you, or I'll give you a couple of hundred lines each to begin with!" said Tom sharply.

"But Railton say you might give us impots?" asked Wally innocently.

But Tom did not answer that, and the talk ceased. It was too much to expect absolutely perfect behaviour from the Third; but nearly all of them liked and admired Tom Merry, and all felt it a pleasant change to have him in command instead of their tyrant.

Tom had plenty of time for thinking during the morning, and the more he thought the more he felt sure that the three missing members of the little world of St. Jim's had met with some misadventure at the Moat House. Mr. Selby was known to have started out to go there; the two juniors were believed to have gone out with the same object. The inference he drew was really not a very wild one.

The three were still "non est" at the break in the middle of the morning, and after that few expected to see them. When classes were over at twelve o'clock excitement had seized both Shell and Fourth.

George Alfred Grundy was holding forth on the subject to a group which showed a constant tendency to diminish. Grundy's eloquence was not so highly thought of by others as it was by Grundy.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy also tried to make himself heard. But he found that difficult where everyone wanted to talk and no one to listen. At any rate, no one wanted to listen to Gussy.

Levison, Clive, Cardew, Durrance, and Roylance were besieged with questions, for they were supposed to know something more about the Moat House than the rest.

Tom and the three who had accompanied him on the expedition of the day before might also have had to undergo interrogatory; but they avoided that by clearing off at the earliest opportunity, and making their way out of gates with their bicycles, unperceived by the crowd in the quad.

CHAPTER 4.
A Reconnoitring Expedition.

"WE may go along there; but I don't see how we're going to find out anything, unless we can get over the moat," said Manners.

"There's the willow," returned Tom.

"H'm! Yes," Lowther said drily.

"We've had enough of the willow," Manners objected. "Anyway, if we are to try that again, we'd best make sure that the Grammarian bounders are a hundred miles—more or less—off before we do it!"

The other three grinned. That plunge off the willow into the muddy waters of the moat had been taken by all four, but it rankled more in the mind of Manners than in that of any of the others.

"I've a dodge," said Talbot quietly.

"I trust, old top, it's a better one than that of the willow, or we will owe you something for the notion after we've tried it," said Lowther.

"You should say 'we shall,'" Manners corrected him.

"Why, you silly ass, that would spoil the joke!"

"Was there a joke?" Manners asked innocently.

"Yes, fathead! Don't you see——"

"What's the dodge, Talbot?" asked Tom Merry.

"Leaping-poles, Tom!"

"Oh, good—jolly good!"

"Not so sure," said Manners. "All very well for you two; you're up to anything in the jumping line. But I'm not so blessed sure that I or this chump here can——"

"Speak for yourself, Henry, my son! Where Tommy leads I follow, even though it be into the jaws——"

"That wouldn't hurt you!" growled Manners. "You couldn't find a worse jaw than your own. You're all jaw!"

"It's a ripping wheeze!" said Tom. "And it won't be necessary for more than two of us to go across, you know. The great thing about it is that it's a way back, as well as a way over. The willow wasn't quite that."

"A beastly trap!" Manners said sharply.

"We were certainly in the cart through it," rejoined Lowther blandly.

"Brrrr! Will someone muzzle that—that——"

"I did not mean a dogcart, Manners."

"Don't take any notice of the chump, old chap! Where are we going to get the poles, Talbot?"

"I saw some in the wood the other day that would do all right. Ash, and tough enough for anything. We could borrow one or two. Easy to take them back, and not far out of our way."

"Right-ho! Cheer up, Manners! We sha'n't be in the soup this time."

Twenty minutes or so later the four reached the Moat House. Tom and Talbot, one behind the other, carried a long pole from the wood.

The drawbridge was up, the gate was shut, and there seemed no sign of life about the old house. Grim enough it looked, too; it might have been a fortress or a prison. And, in a sense, it was both.

"Better leave our bikes a bit farther off," said Tom. "That is, if you

two mean to come over as well. It wouldn't do to have that queer merchant the Grammarians talk about pop over and chuck them into the moat while we were on the other side."

To that all agreed, though Manners expressed doubts as to the very existence of the "queer merchant." The Grammarians might have invented him, he said.

But, as Tom pointed out, the existence of the fellow was vouched for by others beside Gordon Gay & Co. The village tradesmen had seen him, and rumour told many tales concerning him and his master.

The bikes were hidden behind bushes at the back of the house. Then Tom took the leaping-pole in his hands, ran a few yards, thrust it forward till it reached the bottom of the moat, and in the same instant vaulted easily and lightly over by its aid.

"It looks as easy as eating pie," said Lowther.

"It is," answered Talbot.

Tom tossed the upper end of the pole back, and Talbot caught it.

He, in turn, went across as though the feat was nothing. It really was nothing much to fellows who had often used leaping-poles.

Manners received the pole as it came back again.

"I'll go next," said Lowther.

"Blessed if you will!" snapped Manners.

He set his teeth, ran, and jumped.

It was lucky for him that aid was at hand as he landed, for he did not make a good landing. He stumbled backwards, lost his grip of the pole, and was only saved by the strong arms of his chums from floundering into the moat.

The pole fell in, quite out of their reach.

"You silly idiot!" roared Lowther. "How am I to get across now?"

"Wade!" snapped Manners.

"And how are we to get back?" inquired Tom.

Manners' jaw fell.

"I never thought of that," he said humbly. "My hat! I've mucked things up above a bit!"

"You've put all three of you fairly up the pole by dropping the pole!" gibed Lowther.

"Never mind, old fellow," said Talbot. "After all, there's the drawbridge. We ought to be able to work that from this side."

"Better go and made sure, to start with," suggested Tom. "Best to have a way of retreat open, you know. That's only decent generalship."

"On the other hand, if we get monkeying with that to start with, we may attract attention to ourselves before we've had a fair chance to look round," objected Talbot.

"Tell you what. You fellows give me a bunk on to the wall," said Manners, anxious to redeem his credit.

"That's a notion," replied Talbot, just as anxious to give him a chance to do it. That was one of the things that made Reginald Talbot so generally popular. He never rubbed it in.

"Right-ho!" said Tom. "I say, Monty, old son, you might have a shot at fishing that pole out."

"It is not a fishing-pole, I believe," answered Lowther.

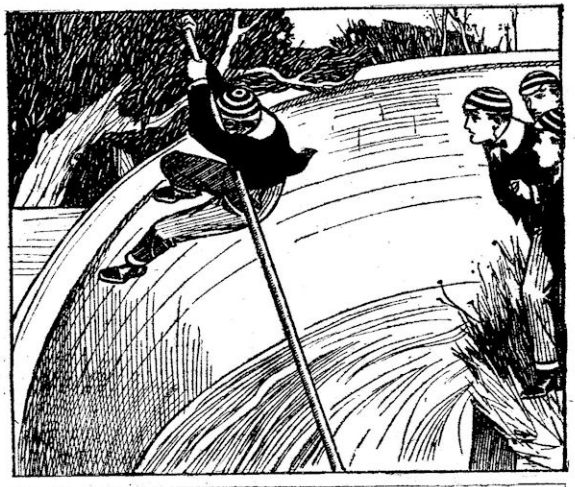
"If you call that a joke——"

"Oh, come along, Manners! Never mind that chump's silly cackle!" said Tom.

Talbot and he gave Manners a lusty bunk-up, and he pulled himself to the top of the wall.

"Brrrr!"

Grip, Silas Stout's dog, growled ferociously, and strained at his chain.



Over the Moat!
(See Chapter 4.)

"There's a dog," said Manners, rather unnecessarily.

"I thought perhaps the growling didn't come from you this time," Lowther said.

"Oh, dry up, fathead!" snapped Tom. "Talk to yourself, if you must talk. Someone on the other side of the wall may hear you if you keep gassing to us."

"There doesn't seem to be anybody about," Manners reported. "Not a face at a window even. I don't believe there's anyone in the house at all."

"Must be," replied Tom.

"Oh, my hat! There's someone at an upstairs window! It looks like old Selby!" gasped Manners, in high excitement.

"Surely it's not so far away that you can't see for certain?" said Talbot. "Didn't know you were short-sighted."

"I'm not. But the windows seem to be beastly dirty, and I can't be sure. If it ain't old Selby it's a monkey!"

"Look again, Sister Anne!" said Tom.

"I'm looking all the time, idiot!"

Manners was not only looking, but also trying by gesticulations to draw the attention of anyone who might be peering through the dingy panes. But the face at the window had disappeared.

Now something else showed, however. It was apparently a handkerchief. No doubt it had once been white. If it had still been so it might have shown up better behind the dirty glass. As it was, one could only guess at its being a handkerchief.

"They've run up a flag of distress," said Manners.

"Who have?" asked Tom.

"Why, Selby and those chaps, of course."

"You're sure they are there, then?"

"Why, no, can't say I'm sure; but if——"

"If you don't know they're there you can't possibly tell."

"Somebody's put something up to the window that looks like a handkerchief. And I saw Selby—at least, if it wasn't Selby it was——"

"Somebody else!" chipped in Lowther, from the other side of the moat.

"Ass! I'm jolly nearly certain it was the old Hun. My hat! There's Ba—— Oh, look out, you fellows!"

CHAPTER 5.
Silas Runs Amok.

BANG!

Manners descended in such a hurry that Tom and Talbot could not save him from a fall. He came down to earth with a crash that shook him badly, and lay there, panting.

"Are you hit?" asked Talbot anxiously.

"By Jove, this is getting thick!" said Tom, his face darkening with anger. "When it comes to firing at anyone like that it's a bit off. But he isn't hit—are you, old chap?"

"No. I don't believe the gun was loaded," replied Manners. "But the tumble shook me up a bit."

"Who was it?" inquired Tom, as Manners struggled to his feet with Talbot's help.

But there was no need for an answer. Silas Stout himself appeared by the wall at that moment, his face contorted with fury.

"More of you!" he howled. "More spies! Get out this moment, or I'll shoot you!"

The bow-legged, bushy-faced Silas, almost as broad as he was high, armed with a gun which he evidently had no hesitation about using, though Manners might be right in thinking that he used only blank cartridge, was a spectacle calculated to scare nervous people. None of the four was a nervous person; but it must be admitted that none of them quite liked the look of Silas, and none of them wanted to come to close quarters with him.

"Here you are!" yelled Lowther at that moment.

Tom turned, and the wet pole fell into his hands. Lowther had been at work while they were at the wall, and had managed to fish it out by means of a crooked branch.

Now he had thrown it deftly across, and Tom had caught it as deftly.

"Go on, Manners!" cried Tom, handing the pole to his chum.

"You first, Tom! I'm not sure I can!"

The doubt of Manners was justified. The leap was a distinctly more difficult matter from this side of the moat, for there was very little space for the run which gives the impetus. Talbot and Tom might swing themselves across by strength and knack; but Manners was not so strong as they were, and he had not the knack.

"Go on!" snapped Tom. "If you can't get across we're staying!"

Manners clutched the pole, took what run he could, and flung himself rather awkwardly forward.

Tom swung round again, for he heard the heavy footsteps of Silas thud along the bank.

The fellow was coming towards them in a shambling run, brandishing his gun as he came.

Talbot had turned to face him.

"Get across, Tom," he called cheerily. "Leave this merchant to me!"

"Yooop!" howled Manners.

He had fallen short in his leap, but not so far short as to souse right into the moat. His hands clutched the bank; the pole, which he had involuntarily released, partly pinned by his chest, was slipping down into the water, which reached to the knees of Manners.

Monty Lowther showed coolness and presence of mind then. With one hand he grabbed the pole, only just in time. With the other he clutched his chum by the collar.

Half-choked, Manners scrambled up the bank, and Monty, releasing him, hurled the pole across again without a second's delay.

"Look out, Tom!" he shouted, as he hurled it.

But Tom Merry was yards away. Fortunately, the pole fell clear over the moat.

Tom was almost on the heels of Talbot as Silas met him.

Silas, using the gun like a bludgeon, struck at Talbot's head with all his force. Rage had completely got the mastery of him.

Talbot ducked, and the gun-stock barely grazed his shoulder. Then he straightened suddenly and hit out.

Full on the bearded chin the blow took Silas, and behind the blow there was the force of muscles better than those of many men and the skill of the highly-trained boxer.

Silas went down with a howl like the howl of a wolf.

One of his great feet was thrust between Talbot's legs as he fell, and Talbot sprawled on top of him. Big, hairy hands clutched at his throat. It was well for him that Tom was at hand.

Silas had dropped the gun to grab Talbot. Tom seized the weapon and hurled it into the moat. Then he brought his fist down with all his force just above the man's right elbow, which was thrust upwards by his clutch.

One hand ceased to grip, and Silas gave a snort of pain and rage. It took both Tom's hands to drag away Silas' left, and when he had done that Talbot could only roll off the fellow, gasping, so near to suffocation that he was out of the fray for the moment.

Silas was on his feet at a single bound. His yellow teeth showed in a hairy frame as he sprang at Tom and gripped him round the middle.

Now was Tom Merry glad of the wrestling practice that he had had a few weeks earlier. Without the knowledge that had given him he would have stood little chance against this formidable antagonist, whose hug was like the hug of a bear. Tom was exceptionally strong for a fellow of his age, and as fit as it was possible for anyone to be. But Silas Stout had the strength of two ordinary men; and at that moment something very like the frenzy of madness reinforced his normal strength.

But he knew nothing of wrestling. Tom could guess that. And his back was to the moat. Tom saw that.

It was the chance he needed, and he took it.

"Hurrah!" yelled Lowther and Manners together as Silas staggered, lost his hold on his supple young opponent, and splashed right into the moat.

"Well done, Tom!" gasped Talbot, getting to his feet.

His face was almost purple.

"Over with you, old fellow!" said Tom hastily, and he thrust the pole into Talbot's hands.

Talbot wasted no time in argument. Silas was already gripping the bank not three yards from them.

Scarcely waiting to run for the leap, Talbot thrust in the pole and swung himself across. His feet had hardly touched

the ground before the end of the pole was hurled back, to fall into Tom's ready hands.

Silas scrambled up, and dashed at Tom with an angry roar. Within the wall Grip barked frantically. Lowther and Manners were yelling to their chum to come on.

Tom did not lose his head, or risk anything by undue haste. He took the shortest run possible, and leaped even as Silas clutched at him.

Silas' grabbing hands failed by only an inch or two, but they failed. Tom cleared the moat in great style, and landed easily.

"You come near here again an' I'll make cold meat of the lot of you!" roared Silas, shaking his fist at them.

"You've been doing your little best this time, haven't you?" shouted Tom.

"When we come back we shall bring a warrant to search the place!" shouted Talbot. "This is a matter for the police, my fine fellow! You've admitted that you've some of our people shut up there, and——"

"Blister my tongue, what's the young fool talkin' about?" howled Silas. "D'ye think I'd turn old Pomp's house into a prison for the likes of you while I'd got a gun about the place to shoot you with—eh?"

And the four looked at one another in doubt.

After all, Silas' reference to spies did not necessarily indicate what they had taken it to mean. He had not said that Mr. Selby, Baggy, and Skimmy were prisoners at the Moat House; he might not even have meant that.

"You saw Selby, didn't you, Manners?" asked Tom doubtfully.

"Well, I couldn't swear to it, Tom," replied Manners honestly. "I do believe it was Selby; but the window's so blessed dirty that I couldn't be sure. It was a man—I'm sure of that much."

"And it couldn't have been that maniac, for he could hardly have got downstairs in the time," Talbot said.

"Not so sure of that. He's pretty active," Tom replied.

"Go away, you young villains!" roared Silas, shaking his fist at them, and fairly gnashing his teeth in his rage. His dip into the muddy moat had not improved his appearance, and it hardly seemed to have cooled his temper.

"Well, isn't that a handkerchief?" said Manners, gazing up at the window, which was visible from where they now stood, though Tom and Talbot had, of course, been unable to see it while close up to the wall.

They paid no heed to Silas. He was only a few yards from them; but the moat's sluggish waters were between, and his gun was at the bottom of the moat.

Four keen pairs of eyes—as keen as any at St. Jim's—were fastened upon the window. But nothing could be clearly discerned.

"I can see some sort of a rag hanging up, I fancy," said Tom.

"It wasn't there when I first looked," Manners said.

"Sure, old chap?"

"Well, almost sure. It makes it so beastly confusing when you can only half see things."

"The chap whose face you saw may have hung it up," suggested Talbot.

"So he might; but what would he do it for, if it wasn't Selby?"

"If he was, why didn't he open the window and shout?" asked Tom.

"Couldn't get it open, most likely," Talbot said.

"My theory is home laundry operations of a very amateurish kind," said Lowther. "Somebody's been washing something, and has hung it up to dry a little too soon, that's all."

"Will you clear off?" roared Silas.

"When we're ready!" Tom shouted back.

Silas began to dance with rage.

"Very pretty—very pretty indeed!" shouted Lowther. "You ought to go on the halls, old sport! You'd fairly bring down the house every time!"

"I think we'd better go," said Talbot. "We've got to get back in time for dinner, I suppose; and I really don't see what more we can do here just now."

"But we haven't found out anything, not to be sure of!" objected Manners.

"Are we likely to this time? We shall come back, of course—that is, if those two and old Selby haven't turned up yet."

"They're there, I'm certain!"

"I thought you said you weren't sure!"

"I can't prove it, I admit. But I'm sure, for all that."

"I feel the same," Tom said. "We've no real evidence, but there's any amount of suspicion."

"Where else can they be?" muttered Manners.

"Oh, anywhere!" replied Lowther airily. "Possibly at St. Jim's by now."

Manners glared at him furiously.

"Why, you potty idiot, don't you believe——"

"Matter of fact, I do!" confessed Lowther. "That's what makes me feel that I may be a potty idiot—believing the same as you do, old top! But for all that I believe it!"

"So do I," Talbot admitted. "But I

don't think they can be in any real danger, though that merchant certainly has a tile or two loose. We can't do anything to help them now, either; so the best thing is to clear off, and come back later in stronger force, and with better preparations."

"You're right, Talbot—you generally are!" said Tom. "Come along, you fellows!"

They had to make a half-circle of the moat to reach their bicycles. Silas followed them round, full of suspicion, and loud in threat.

But they took no further notice of him, except that, as they mounted and rode away, Lowther turned his head, kissed his hand, and sang out:

"Good-bye, Bluebell!"

"Yaroooch!" he howled next moment, as his front wheel slipped into a rut, and he came a cropper.

"Shall I come and pick you up, or will you pick yourself up?" asked Manners, grinning, as he turned to see what had happened. "I could have told you that this road was a bit too rough for— Yoooop!"

Manners had also come a cropper.

Tom and Talbot jumped off.

"If you kids get playing games of that sort you'll make us late for dinner!" said Tom severely.

"Ass!" yelled Lowther.

"Fathead!" snapped Manners.

CHAPTER 6.
A Plan of Escape.

FOR the three prisoners that morning was a weary time.

Breakfast was utterly unsatisfactory to two of the three. Skimmy, wrapped in profound meditation, heeded little what he ate, which was as well for Skimmy, as he got the chance to eat but little. Mr. Selby, grumbling all the time at the saltness of the bacon, the watery quality of the coffee, and the hardness of the bread, was only behind Baggy in greed. And that may have been partly because he was ahead of him in grumbling. Baggy only began to grouse when there was nothing left. Till then he was employing his jaws more profitably.

"Oh, dear!" he moaned, when he had finished. "Does the beast call that a breakfast? Why, I could have eaten it all myself, and then wanted more!"

"You did eat the greater part of it, Trimble!" snapped Mr. Selby.

"Well, I like that—blessed if I don't! When you collared——"

"Boy, how dare you!"

"Well, sir, you shouldn't accuse me of being greedy, when you're as greedy as any pi——"

"How dare you, Trimble! Say another impertinent word, and I will administer to you a castigation that——"

"Here, I say, you know, sir, you can't do that! We ain't at St. Jim's now, and, anyway, I ain't in your Form. You've got no right to touch me. Lemme alone, I say! Yaroooch! Wharrer doing?"

It was an unnecessary question. Mr. Selby was pommelling hard. Baggy writhed and groaned, and howled and squirmed; but he could not get out of the master's clutch. He kicked over the tray, and brought Silas thundering upstairs, with a threat to shoot them if he heard any more such noises.

Skimmy had looked on with high philosophic scorn. He hardly knew which of his companions he despised most. The little interlude did not even afford him amusement, which was a pity, for perhaps there was no other St. Jim's fellow whom it would have failed to delight.

Naturally, it did not add to the cheerfulness of Baggy, who sat apart and glowered for a full hour after it. And it did not even seem to have given Mr. Selby any real satisfaction. Silas coming on the scene frightened him. He was at least as much afraid of the fellow as was the craven Baggy.

"I cannot think what Railton is about!" snapped Mr. Selby, after a full hour of morose silence.

"I should imagine that at the present moment he would be dismissing the Sixth Form, sir," returned Skimmy. It is precisely twelve!"

"Are you trying to be funny, Skimpole?"

"Not at all, I assure you, sir. I merely answered the observation you threw out."

"If you are not a mistaken humorist, you are little better than a fool!" snarled the master.

"Are not the two things practically identical?" asked Skimmy mildly.

Perhaps he was thinking of Lowther's jokes.

"Anyone with a grain of commonsense would understand that I mean that it passes my comprehension how Railton can allow us to remain in this plight!"

"I really do not perceive how he can avoid it!" Skimmy said.

"He doesn't know where we are, or he'd jolly soon have us out of it," bleated Baggy. "I don't believe Mr. Railton's afraid of anything!"

This was plainly to Mr. Selby's address. But that gentleman chose to ignore it.

"There ought to be some means of letting him know," went on the master. "As this wretched window will not open, it is impossible to lower one of you boys to the ground, even if we could improvise a rope of sufficient length and strength. The door is locked, and when it opens that madman appears with his murderous weapon. I have no chance against a man with a gun, or I would certainly engage with him, and endeavour to make my escape—or, rather, to ensure escape for all of us!"

"He, he, he!"

"What are you sniggering at, Trimble?" roared Mr. Selby.

"Nothing, sir! At least, only thoughts!"

"Bah! You had better be careful! Skimpole, have you nothing to suggest? You, at least, are not quite such a fool as Trimble!"

"I thank you for your good opinion, sir, qualified though it be. I can only suggest the chimney. It appears to be of considerable width, but I doubt whether it is really wide enough to permit of your passage. Even were it so, there remains the doubt whether to get upon the roof would bring you actually nearer to the freedom you desire!"

"Do not be absurd! I could not think of clambering up a chimney!"

"He, he, he!" sniggered Trimble.

"Trimble, if you——"

"I was only thinking how funny you'd look all over soot, sir! Here, stoppit! There's no harm in thinking, is there? Yaroooh! You'll have that beast up here again, and he'll shoot us all!"

At that warning Mr. Selby ceased his savage assault upon the head of Baggy.

"As a matter of fact," said Skimmy, who had been peering up the chimney, "there is little or no soot. I should imagine that it is some very considerable time since a fire was lighted in this grate."

"You think that it would be possible to get up, Skimpole?" asked Mr. Selby eagerly.

"Most assuredly, I think so, sir. There would be some slight damage to your apparel, no doubt, but——"

"To my apparel? Do you fancy for one moment——"

"I regret that I should have misunderstood you, my dear sir. I fear that Trimble would be useless for the enterprise, owing to his obesity and clumsiness."

"Moreover, Trimble is an utter coward!" snapped the master.

"Yah! I ain't any bigger funk than some other people!" squeaked Baggy. "Don't touch me, now! You'll have that rotter up here with his gun if you do! Besides, I ain't going to stand it—I'll jolly well kick your shins if you don't lemme be!"

"Very well, Trimble—very well, indeed! Wait till we are back at the school; only wait till then! You shall learn a lesson that you will never forget to the end of your life!" gritted out the master.

"I don't care! I don't believe we shall ever get back!" puffed Baggy. "If we'd only Tom Merry or Talbot or Blake or some other chap with any pluck. Even old Grundy would be better than no one! He ain't a funk, anyway!"

Mr. Selby turned his back upon the rebellious Fourth-Former.

"Are you willing to take the risk, Skimpole?" he asked. "Not that there should be any great risk to one of your spare frame. You could hardly get stuck in the chimney."

Skimmy sighed. Acrobatics were not at all in his line, but he was not afraid. So far, at least, he was ahead of either of his companions, though it was a fair question whether the middle-aged and unathletic master, the fat Fourth-Former, or the weedy Shell fellow was the least fitted for anything that called for activity.

"I am willing to attempt it, sir," said Skimmy. "I can but do my best."

"You are a fine fellow, Skimpole!" said Mr. Selby warmly, in his relief. "I respect you, Skimpole!"

And he patted the philosopher upon the shoulder. Baggy could hardly believe his ears. The Third would have been struck dumb had they heard. Never had they known their tyrant to address to anyone such words as those.

"We must construct a rope from the bedclothes," said Skimmy. "With that I may be able to lower myself from the roof. It must be a lengthy rope, of course. I am not sure that I can descend by it even if I attain the roof. I have no experience of the kind of thing which I must now contemplate. Do I jump off with the rope in my hands, sir?"

"Dear me, no, Skimpole! You would infallibly kill yourself, and we should profit nothing by your attempt," replied the master crossly.

"You must swarm down the rope, you silly fathead!" said Baggy.

"And how is that done, Trimble? I do not recall the expression in connection with ropes. With bees, indeed, and with some——"

"Keep on letting yourself down an inch or two at a time, hanging on to the rope, of course, chump!"

"Ah, no doubt I can do that!"

"It will jolly well take all the skin off your hands!" Baggy added, without the least sympathy in his tones.

"That I must bear with fortitude. Shall we start at once on the labour of rope construction, sir?"

Mr. Selby agreed that to start at once would be their best course, and they started.

Escapes from prison have many times been made by such means as they intended, but never, it is certain, by such means as they used. Three more hopeless duffers can never in all the world's history have tried to construct a rope out of materials not easily turned to such a

Cadet Notes.

Those boys, and they are very numerous, who are greatly interested in the R.A.F., and hope some day to get into it themselves, will be interested to hear that further developments in regard to the relations between the Cadet Corps and the R.A.F. are likely to take place in the near future. We have already referred to the fact that the War Office has decided that any boys who are members of Cadet Corps may, under suitable conditions, be recommended for obtaining immediate entry to the R.A.F. on reaching the age of 17 years and 10 months. Beyond this, however, it is intended before long to endeavour to start in various parts of the country special Cadet Corps for boys who wish to specialise in aircraft work. Of course, it will not be possible to set up such corps in every little town or village, but there seems no practical difficulty in the way of having such bodies in all the principal towns of the kingdom.

The idea of these corps would be that the members, instead of being called on to spend their time in drilling, etc., as in ordinary Infantry Cadet Battalions, would be provided with facilities for making themselves acquainted with the construction of air-craft and its machinery, and the theoretical principles on which it is used for flight in the air, etc. No doubt large numbers of boys would be attracted by this, especially if, as is intended, membership of such corps should carry with it the right of entry into the Air Force when the lads attain a suitable age, say 17 years or so. This is the scheme which is now under the consideration of the Air Board and the War Office, and will, we hope, be brought to successful arrangement in the course of the next few months. Any of our readers requiring further particulars about this or any other of the Cadet Corps and movements should write to the Central Association Volunteer Regiments, Judges' Quadrangle, Law Courts, Strand, W.C. 2.

purpose by clumsy hands. Skimmy's fingers seemed all thumbs, Baggy was at least as clumsy as Skimmy, but Mr. Selby was quite the most hopeless of the three.

"It doesn't look as if it's going to be much good," said Baggy. "Glad I ain't going to risk my neck with it. He, he, he!"

"Assuredly it looks at present very little like a rope, and I really fail to see how my hands can possibly grip it," answered Skimmy. "I think that it will have to be cut into narrower strips, and that we must utilise the blanket from your bed, sir."

"But we have to spend another night in this abominable place I shall need the bedclothes!" said Mr. Selby sourly.

"I s'pose we sha'n't!" muttered Baggy.

"Be silent, Trimble!"

"'Tain't fair, sir!" said the bold Baggy. "Here, keep off, or that bow-legged beast will—— Yoooop! Don't say it's my fault if he comes up and catches us at this job, and jolly well murders the lot of us!"

"You are simply beyond endurance, Trimble!" snapped Mr. Selby.

But he desisted from his hostile operations, and crossed over to the window.

Skimmy went on with the work in hand, though from time to time he looked at it in a very doubtful manner.

Baggy stood and glowered.

Mr. Selby was getting almost beyond Baggy's endurance!

CHAPTER 7.
Lost Chances.

"OH, good gracious! Come here at once, Skimpole! Do my eyes deceive me, or is there really someone in a St. Jim's cap on the wall?" cried the master of the Third.

Skimmy hastened to the side of his leader—if such Mr. Selby could be considered by virtue of his authority.

But Baggy also hastened, and Skimmy's short sight and Baggy's clumsy hurry resulted in a collision. Skimmy sprawled on the floor, with Baggy on top of him.

"Gerroff!" panted Skimmy.

"You silly ass!" hooted Baggy. "What did you want to run into me for?"

"This window is really in the most disgraceful condition of dirtiness!" fumed Mr. Selby. "To look through it is like peering through smoked glass. Are you coming, Skimpole?"

"As soon as I can relieve myself, or obtain relief, from the incubus which now presses upon me, sir!" panted Skimmy.

Mr. Selby whipped round.

"Get up at once, Trimble!" he roared.

"I'm getting up, ain't I?" replied Baggy defiantly. "'Tain't my fault if that silly ass Skimmy knocked me over, I s'pose, is it?"

He got heavily to his feet, and Skimmy joined Mr. Selby at the window. But it was difficult even for Mr. Selby to discern anything, and Skimmy blinked helplessly behind his glasses, unable to see even as much as the master could.

"There certainly appears to be something on the wall, sir," he said, "but——"

"Oh, get out of the way, Skimmy!" puffed Baggy. "Let me stick my handkerchief up. They'll see that, I should think."

And he thrust Skimmy aside, and fastened the alleged handkerchief, by means of a convenient rent, to the catch of the window.

"Do you call that a handkerchief, Trimble?" snapped Mr. Selby.

"Yes, of course, I do. 'Tis a handkerchief, ain't it? I don't see what else you could call it," replied Baggy, without the slightest sign of respect.

"I should call it an exceedingly dirty rag!" said Mr. Selby, with crushing severity.

"He's gone!" cried Skimmy, alarmed for once out of his polysyllabic style of expression. "That was the sound of a gun. Dear me! I do hope that fellow has not shot anyone who was trying to help us!"

Neither Mr. Selby nor Baggy appeared to share Skimmy's alarm to any considerable extent. Both had turned pale when they heard the gun fired, but when they realised that it had been fired in the courtyard they speedily recovered colour.

"It is sincerely to be hoped that the individual on the wall, whoever he may have been——"

"Saw us!" Mr. Selby chipped in. "I really think he must have——"

"I was about to say, sir," said Skimmy mildly, "that it was sincerely to be hoped he was not hit."

"Bah!" ejaculated the master, with a contemptuous glance at Skimmy.

Only a dislike of agreeing with Mr. Selby about anything whatever kept Baggy from echoing that exclamation of contempt. Baggy cared no more than the master did about the safety of anyone but himself.

"I really think that I can perceive a figure on the other side of the moat, sir!" Skimmy said a moment later.

"I also see. If we could but attract his attention——"

"We might shout, sir."

"He could not hear; and if he did that murderous villain would also hear, and then——"

"I could break a pane, sir. We could quite easily make him——"

"Are you mad? Do you not realise that we are in the power of a maniac, that at the slightest annoyance he may shoot us dead? Already we know that he does not hesitate to use his gun. You must be mad, Skimpole!"

"That's right! You're potty, Skimmy—clean daft!" burbled Baggy, compelled at last to agree with Mr. Selby.

He snatched one of Skimmy's lean arms. Mr. Selby had already seized the other.

The philosopher shrugged his shoulders. Only his philosophy kept him from telling those two abject funks what he thought of them. Skimmy did not look much like a lion of courage, but by the side of Mr. Selby and Baggy Trimble he seemed a lion then. Of Skimmy, at least, St. Jim's, could St. Jim's have seen, would not have been ashamed.

What followed the descent of Manners from the wall was lost to the three prisoners. Once or twice Silas' wild-beast howling came faintly to their ears, causing the knees of the master and the Fourth-Former to tremble; once or twice they had a glimpse of moving figures on the other side of the moat, but glimpses so dim that they could gather nothing from them.

Then they heard the gate clang as Silas passed into the courtyard again, and after that no more was heard or seen for a time.

Mr. Selby went and sat upon his bed. He dropped his head upon his hands, with elbows upon his knees, and gave himself up to despair. Baggy squatted on the floor, and sniffed miserably from time to time.

Skimmy, using the article which Baggy called a handkerchief, scrubbed away industriously at a pane of the window in the hope of cleaning it enough to make a peephole.

There was so much grime on the outer

side that his success was only partial. But his efforts did make some difference. They made enough to render the figure of Silas, as he crossed the courtyard in answer to a ring of the outer bell, almost plain.

Quite a minute passed after he had gone through the gate before he reappeared. He had had to lower the drawbridge, it seemed, for he did not return alone. Skimmy gasped and rubbed his eyes as he saw who it was that accompanied him.

For it was Professor Pompey Burnham! Their troubles were at an end. Skimmy felt quite sure of it. He had unbounded faith in the professor. Nothing that Silas had done had shaken that.

He checked himself as he was about to tell the good news to his fellow-prisoners. A flood of contempt surged over him. It was not philosophical, perhaps, but it was very human. Mr. Selby and Baggy really had shown more selfishness and cowardice than was justified by their unpleasant plight. When once they were all free, Skimmy hoped never to be obliged to speak to either of them again.

So he waited. He had no doubt that within a few minutes the doors of their prison would open to them. He, at least, could await the moment of liberation with decent fortitude, and it would be time enough for them to recognise it when it arrived.

That was where Skimpole made a mistake. He did not count upon the cunning of Silas' partially insane brain.

The professor talked with his trusty follower as he crossed the courtyard.

"I have only come to fetch something urgently needed, the carriage of which I dared not trust to anyone else, Silas," he said. "I must return to London by the next train."

"All right, sir. How's things going with them old sticks at the War Office?" growled Silas.

No one hearing him would have suspected him of even partial madness. And, in fact, he was not insane apart from his mania as to spies. Even for that mania he had some excuse.

"I think we are really well on the way to convincing them at last," replied the professor, smiling urbanely.

"I wouldn't trust 'em, sir."

"Do you trust anybody, Silas?"

"Yes—you an' me. Nobody else. An' no call to."

"You have been quite quiet here during my absence, I apprehend."

"Yes, you might call it quiet," growled Silas.

The professor would scarcely have called it quiet had he been told all about it. But Silas had no intention of telling him just now. It might delay matters in town if the professor went into the affair seriously. But Silas feared even that less than his failing to take it seriously at all.

Silas and his master were in total disagreement on the subject of spies. The man saw them everywhere; the master was too apt to laugh at the very notion of them. Yet he had small cause to laugh. There had been trouble in the past—trouble still fresh in the mind of Silas, though it had not left so deep an imprint on the more volatile brain of the professor.

Both were brave enough. Professor Pompey Burnham, for all his absurdities, was a man of dauntless courage. Silas, though a brute, was a courageous brute, with much of the bulldog in his nature. They had faced peril together before now; they would probably have to face it together again.

The nature of that peril was indicated in the rest of their conversation.

"You haven't seen nothin' of Callis, sir?" inquired Silas anxiously.

"No. Why should you expect it?"

"Blister my tongue, to hear the man talk!" returned Silas, half in anger, half in uncouth affection. "Ain't he given us trouble enough, with all his schemes for stealin' your dodges?"

"But we have fairly given the rascal the slip now, Silas," the professor said good-humouredly.

"Think so, sir? That's you all over. I don't! Often an' often I says to myself: 'Old Pomp's——' Ere, what am I sayin'?"

"Oh, go on, Silas! It is not news to me that you are disrespectful behind my back!"

"Tain't not what you might call real disrespect," growled Silas. "It's only a manner of speakin'. Often an' often have I said to myself: 'The guv'nor, he's too easy, he is!' Now, I'd wager a year's screw as Callis is on our track afore this, an' has his spies all round us, waitin' his chance."

"Nonsense, Silas!"

"This is the safest place we've had yet, by long odds. But that ain't to say as it can't be broke into. An' you ain't careful enough, sir."

"I am careful enough as far as the enemy is concerned. There is no danger from the people of the neighbourhood, though I fear your behaviour may make enemies of them in another sense."

"Any of 'em might be his spies!" Silas growled.

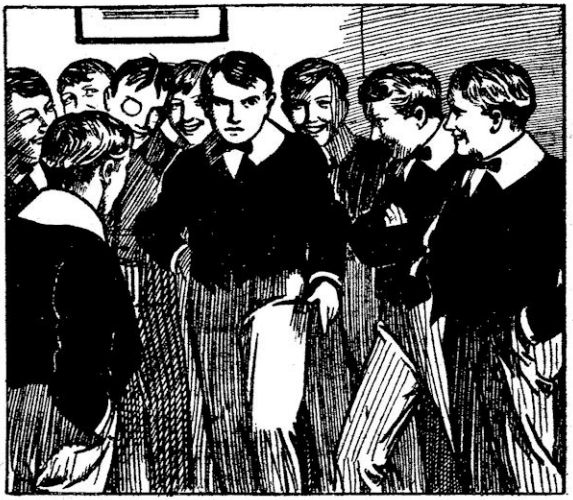
"Rubbish! You see spies everywhere! Hallo! What's this?"

They had passed into the house now, and the professor's eyes had fastened upon some exceedingly muddy garments lying in a heap in the passage behind the hall.

"I tumbled into the moat, sir," explained Silas gruffly.

The professor asked no further questions. Without the least suspicion that his house harboured three more inmates than its usual complement, he passed into a room on the ground floor, and began to pack carefully a strong portmanteau.

Something was wanted from the room upstairs in which Skimmy had had his adventure with the pincers-like crane. Silas went up in the lift and fetched it. The professor was scarcely in the house a quarter of an hour. He was very anxious not to miss the next up-train.



Grundy Calls for Volunteers!
(See Chapter 8.)

Skimmy, gazing through his peephole in the dingy window, saw him cross the courtyard again, the portmanteau carried in his right hand, the tall white hat pushed back on his head. Silas followed him, much as a dog might have done. The dog, Grip, came out of his kennel and wagged his tail. The professor flung him a word in passing.

For the moment Skimmy failed to realise what was happening. Then he grasped the situation.

"Professor! Professor Burnham!" he shouted, and he dashed his elbow at the pane, shattering it.

But the clang of the gate drowned alike his voice and the tinkle of the falling glass.

"What's that, Skimpole? Is the professor there?" shouted Mr. Selby.

Grip began to bark. Growling was more in his line than barking, but when he did bark he did it heartily. In the row he made Mr. Selby's screech from the window passed unheard by the professor, though not by Silas.

"I'll lesson 'em for this!" growled Silas.

"What's that? And what on earth is that dog barking at?" snapped the professor.

"Dunno, sir. Here's the drawbridge down for you. Look sharp, or you won't catch that train! I'll have it up as soon as you're gone, an' keep it up, you bet your dear life!"

The professor hurried across the drawbridge, glancing at his watch. Mr. Selby fairly shrieked in his anguish of mind; but Grip was still barking, and the professor did not hear.

They watched him go, and their hopes went down to zero. Silas was shaking

his fist at them from within the courtyard, drawbridge up and gate locked behind him. The professor, striding rapidly away, was quite out of hearing now.

Their chance had come and gone!

CHAPTER 8.
Plans for Rescue.

"SOMETHING'S got to be done," said George Alfred Grundy.

"Hear, hear!" exclaimed Gunn.

"There's no doubt about that," Wilkins said.

But he looked as if he thought there might be some little doubt as to whether Grundy was the fellow to do it. Gunn and Wilkins, though they were Grundy's closest intimates, or perhaps because they were, did not exactly believe in Grundy's leadership.

There was quite a crowd in the Common-room of the School House. The adventures of Tom Merry & Co. that morning had been told. It was impossible to keep them secret, for Jack Blake & Co. had met the four on the way back from the Moat House, and the five Fourth-Formers who had turned the tables on the Grammarians the day before had been talking; so that the whole junior school was agog with excitement.

Most of the Shell and Fourth Form fellows from the New House had come across.

Figgins and Kerr and Fatty Wynn were there, of course, and so were Redfern and Owen and Lawrence, with Pratt and Peench and Thompson, and others.

"Grundy says something's got to be done, therefore, let it be done at once," drawled Ralph Reckless Cardew.

"Oh, you shut up!" snapped Grundy. "If we waited for a slacker like you——"

"All very well to talk about doing something, Grundy," said Kangaroo of the Shell. "Question is, what?"

"Why, go to the blessed Moat House and fetch those silly asses out!" replied Grundy, as if in amazement that anyone should have any possible doubt about it. When Grundy had made up his mind that a thing was so, then for all practical purposes it was so—to Grundy.

"Whether they're there or not, I suppose?" gibed Lowther.

"Yes, of course—I mean, no, you potty idiot! Everybody knows that they are there!" hooted Grundy.

"Everybody doesn't! I don't!" said Clive. "All the same, I think they are. But that's not the same thing."

"It is, to Grundy, old top!" murmured Cardew.

"Where else can they be?" demanded Grundy hotly.

But that query remained unanswered. For just then Tom Merry and Talbot came in together. Both were looking puzzled.

"What's the news, Tommy?" asked Manners.

"Just seen Railton," replied Tom. "He says it's a certainty that those three aren't at the Moat House."

"But Grundy says they are, dear boy," said Cardew. "It's like Railton's dashed impudence to express a contrary opinion, I must say!"

"Oh, dry up!" roared Grundy. "There's too much piffle talked here!"

"I've noticed that myself, old bean!" returned Cardew blandly. "Why not try holdin' your tongue?"

"How does Railton know, Tom?" asked Jack Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! With the vewy highest wespect for Wailton, I cannot accept his opinion as settlin' the mattah," said the noble Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Wouldn't Railton feel snubbed if he could hear!" remarked Lowther.

"Let Tom Merry get a word in, can't you?" growled Levison.

"Railton's seen the professor," said Tom. "Met him as he came from the station. The old bird positively denies that Selby, Skimmy, or Baggy has been to the Moat House."

"He ought to know," said Roylance doubtfully. "But——"

"Rats! Of course, the professor would say that!" hooted Grundy. "He can't likely to admit kidnapping those three, is he?"

"Nor likely to kidnap them, I should say!" put in Clifton Dane. "Just fancy anyone on this earth wanting to kidnap Selby! I'd rather catch a sore throat myself; must less unpleasant!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But they've gone—disappeared!" said Figgins. "Whatever you say won't alter that."

"Of course, they're not valuable," remarked Kerr thoughtfully. "I have some regard for Skimmy, who lately testified his approval of me in a most flattering manner. But I can't weep any more weeps over him even; and as for Selby and Trimble—well, anyone who is ass enough to want them may keep them with my free and full consent; that's all about it!"

"Not quite all, Kerr," said Talbot quietly. "Something's happened to them, and it's up to us to give any help we can towards finding them, don't you think?"

"Well, yes, old sport, as far as that goes. Count me in. But, I tell you straight, if it was Ratty instead of Selby—not that I love your Hun—I wouldn't lift my little finger to help him!"

"Hear, hear!" came from nearly every New House fellow present.

Mr. Ratcliff had been even more tyrannical and sour of late.

"What do you think about the professor's guarantee, Tom?" asked Dick Julian.

"I don't know what to think. He ought to know. But does he?"

"Does he?" echoed Grundy scornfully. "Of course he does! Who should know if he doesn't?"

"Why, you, dear boy!" replied Cardew.

"Me, you silly fathead! How should I know anything about it?"

"Precisely what I was wonderin'," Cardew said, grinning. "Yet you certainly expressed yourself as bein' in the know a few minutes ago."

"The point is that he might not know," said Talbot.

"How could they be there and he not know it?" asked Kerruish.

"He might have been away when they were captured," Tom said.

"But he isn't away," said Levison. "Railton's seen him."

"Yaas, wathah! One must take Wailton's word for that, you know, deah boys."

"He was going to the station——"

"If he'd been coming away from it, Tommy, it would have suited your theory better," said Manners.

"I'll admit that. But you've seen something of the sort of brute that man Stout of his is. Granted that the professor might have been absent, don't you think he might have done this on his own?"

"It sounds feasible!" said Kerr. "From all we hear he doesn't exactly love visitors—takes them for spies. It seems likely that Skimmy and Baggy set out to visit the Moat House, and pretty certain that old Selby went there. He started to go; we know that. I must say there's some circumstantial evidence against Stout, all things considered. An inquiry at the station might not be half a bad move."

"At the station!" said Redfern, in surprise. "But that's right out of the way."

"I see!" cried Lumley-Lumley. "You mean an inquiry about the professor's movements lately, Kerr?"

Kerr nodded.

"That's an idea," said Tom Merry.

"I'll go," Kerr said. "After classes will be time enough."

"That be hanged!" snapped Grundy. "You fellows seem to think that any time will do."

"Well, you wouldn't start straight away, would you?" asked Durrance.

"Yes."

"What will Linton say when he notes the absence of his favourite pupil?" inquired Cardew softly.

"Linton be hanged! Who cares? It's much more important to rescue those chaps than to potter about over rotten dead languages, I suppose? Who's game to follow me?"

"To the station?" asked Gunn.

"The station!" snorted Grundy, in huge contempt. "No, ass; to the Moat House! What do I care where the professor—if he is a professor, but I should think he's much more likely to be a criminal—is? He's in this up to his wicked old neck, I'll bet. Who'll follow me?"

"Don't all speak at once!" said Lowther.

"Volunteers for the Grundy Brigade!" chirruped Cardew.

"Look here, old chap, you can't go now, you know," said Wilkins. "We have to go in to classes in a few minutes."

"Blow classes! Are you a set of funks? Who's coming with me?"

"Echo answers 'Who?'" murmured Lowther.

"But it ought to answer 'Me,'" objected Cardew.

"That would be ungrammatical on the part of Echo," replied Lowther. "Moreover, nobody's going to give Echo the chance."

Lowther appeared to be right. Not a single junior stepped forward in response to Grundy's thrilling appeal. Even Gunn and Wilkins remained mute.

The fact that Mr. Railton was satisfied that the missing master and boys were not at the Moat House had its weight, naturally. The next move ought to come from him or from the Head. Theirs was the responsibility.

Nevertheless, the majority were inclined to think that perhaps the Housemaster had been too easily convinced. He did not know as much about Silas Stout as they did, and it was likely that the fact of Mr. Selby's old acquaintance with the professor weighed more heavily with him than it did with them.

As Cardew remarked, it was quite possible for a man to be a bosom friend of Selby's and yet a complete Hun. Indeed, if he were not a Hun, why should he be friendly with Selby at all?

Grundy gave up his bold project for the present. Even the great George Alfred could hardly hope to carry through such an expedition entirely on his own.

But a dozen or so of the Shell and Fourth discussed the matter together during the few minutes left before classes, and were unanimous in the opinion that something ought to be done, and that speedily, whatever Mr. Railton might say.

"He didn't forbid us to go to the Moat House," said Tom.

"That was only because he didn't think of our going," replied Talbot. "Not that I'm kicking. I think we ought to go."

"So do I," Figgy said. "A night

raid, you know. We can take the garrison by surprise that way."

"But we can't take the whole Shell and Fourth with us," said Manners.

"No need for that," Tom answered. "A dozen or so will be quite enough."

"And we must keep Grundy out of it," Blake said. "He'd muck up everything."

"Keep him out, then, if you can!" said Lowther.

"Of course we can, ass!"

"Really! Then you know either a lot more or a lot less about Grundy than I do, old top!"

"He cannot force his pwesence upon us if we object," remarked Gussy sagely. "That would be howwibly infwa dig. even for old Gwundy."

"Think so, Gustavus? Well, we shall see!"

CHAPTER 9.
Skimmy the Defiant.

"I REGRET extremely that I should have been guilty of an error of judgment, sir," said Skimpole to Mr. Selby.

Skimmy looked really humble for once. He realised that he had made a big mistake in waiting for the professor to come up and release them.

"You have indeed done so," replied the master ill-temperedly. "The fellow Stout will probably make himself exceedingly unpleasant about the breakage of that window."

"I am not alluding to the breakage, sir. I do not regard that as a mistake. To me it seemed the only thing possible to be done, since there was little, if any, chance of making the professor hear otherwise."

"But, after all, you failed to make him hear, and the window remains broken, with the consequent reckoning to be met," snarled Mr. Selby.

"To my mind, sir, it is a gross and most unscientific error to judge actions by their results or want of result," answered Skimmy. "If it was correct to break the pane in order to effect our liberation, the fact that the purpose miscarried does not in any way impugn the correctness of my judgment in the matter. As for my failing to make the professor hear, you participated in that failure."

"You ought to have let me come!" bleated Baggy. "You didn't yell half loud enough. Oh dear! We've lost our chance all through you two silly asses—I mean, Skimmy's a silly ass, sir! Yoooop!"

"To what do you refer, Skimpole?" asked Mr. Selby snappishly, after boxing Baggy's ears. "I really do not know which of you two boys is the more insufferable—Trimble, with his gross and abominable impudence, the sure mark of a low mind, or you, with your jargon of philosophy and logic and your complete want of sense!"

"Ugh! I know somebody who's a jolly sight insufferabler than either of us!" mumbled Baggy.

"I regret that my philosophy and my logic fail to meet with your approval, sir," said Skimmy. "Perhaps you will allow me to remark, however, that it is possible your intellect may be at fault. I referred to my error of judgment in not trying to draw the attention of the professor when I first perceived him—that is to say, as he was entering the house."

"You saw him as he was going in?" howled Mr. Selby.

"I have already said—or, at least, inferred—that, sir."

"And did not tell me! Miserable boy, what have you done?"

"The fault was one of omission rather than of commission, sir, and I made what endeavour——"

"You have undone us!" cried Mr. Selby, turning almost green. "A worse betrayal of trust I have never known. Now we may all be murdered through your overweening self-conceit, your pragmatical cocksureness, your—— Oh, I cannot find words for your utter folly!"

"He's gone now, and very likely he'll never come back again!" yelled Baggy, advancing furiously upon Skimpole. "We shall all be killed in our beds before to-morrow morning, and after that we shall be kept locked up here for the rest of our lives! Oh, you silly ass, Skimmy! You beastly idiot! You—you—— Oh, take that!"

And Baggy, made hot with rage by his baffled hopes, punched at Skimmy's head.

But not alone in the broad bosom of Bagley Trimble was the spirit of combat roused. Upon Herbert Skimpole the rage of the warrior came at that unexpected blow, and next moment Baggy measured his length and breadth on the floor.

Talbot would have taken joy in that blow. Straight from the shoulder it came, as he had taught Skimmy to strike, and on the fat chin it took Baggy, and Baggy crashed down.

Behind Skimmy's spectacles Skimmy's eyes glimmered with a baleful gleam.

Mr. Selby had abused him unmercifully. Mr. Selby looked as if meditating an attack upon him. Let Mr. Selby beware!

"Really, Skimpole——"

"I refuse to listen to you, sir! Trimble struck me first, and I will not suffer assault without retaliation—not from anyone!"

"Do you dare to defy me, boy?"

"I certainly shall not allow you to strike me without striking back, sir! And I warn you that I can strike hard!"

And Skimmy looked in triumph upon the prostrate form of the squirming Baggy.

"You dare to defy me—me, Skimpole?"

"Yes, you! I've stood enough from you! Come on, if you jolly well want anything!"

It was as though a miracle had happened. The elderly young philosopher had suddenly been transformed into a combatant eager for the fray. His very speech had changed. Perhaps he knew not what he said.

With a face convulsed with wrath and surprise Mr. Selby rushed at Skimmy. Those defiant words were as oil to the fire of his anger, already hot.

His arm swept round, and his hand should have descended heavily somewhere in the neighbourhood of Skimmy's left ear.

But it did not! It was Mr. Selby himself who descended heavily. A bony fist smote him about the region of the second highest waistcoat button. The punch should not have felled a man of Mr. Selby's weight; but it came with such a shock of surprise to him that he went staggering backwards, and dropped to the floor with a mighty bump.

"Now you've done it, Skimmy!" hooted Baggy, half in fear half in exultation. "Serve the old beast right, anyway! But it'll jolly well serve you right, too, when he gets at you! My hat!"

The brief madness passed from Skimmy. He looked down at the angry master, and he felt sorry. But he did not feel exactly repentant. Mr. Selby really had been too much for even a philosopher's patience.

"Allow me to assist you to your feet, sir," he said politely.

"Do not think that I shall permit this gross assault to pass unpunished, Skimpole!" fumed the master, accepting the proffered hand. "You shall pay dearly for this! Such absolutely unparalleled impudence is—is—is absolutely without a parallel in the whole of my scholastic experience! Oh, you shall suffer for this!"

"May I point out, sir, from no desire to put an unduly favourable aspect upon the unfortunate affair for myself, but purely in the interests of veracity, that the assault was, ab origine, yours? I merely resisted it to the best of my ability," replied Skimmy, in his most precise manner.

"Bah!" was all Mr. Selby could find to say.

"Now then—now then, what's all this row up here?" demanded Silas, thrusting his head in at the door.

No one answered him. Mr. Selby cast a glance towards the bed, as if meditating a dive under it. Baggy rolled over behind it. Both were afraid of the gun: But it is hardly likely that they would have given Silas bold defiance even had they known that the gun was at the bottom of the moat.

"Go breakin' our winders, will you?" growled Silas. "Good thing for you, my fine fellers, as old Pomp had to go off agin in a hurry, or I ain't sayin' what might not have been done to you for that! Old Pomp's a bad 'un to cross, an' spies he can't bear nohow! 'Leave me to deal with them, Silas!' says he, looking very stern. 'Keep 'em under lock an' key till I come back,' he says, 'an' whatever you do, take care o' that rascal as calls himself a friend of mine,' says he. That's you, ugly mug!" roared Silas, shaking a hairy fist under the nose of Mr. Selby.

The Third Form master staggered back, his teeth fairly chattering.

"D-d-d-d-do you m-m-mean to s-s-s-say that Professor Burnham knew of my presence here and went away giving you instructions to prolong this illegal and unjustifiable detention?" he stammered.

"Ain't I sayin' so, you long-legged swab?"

Mr. Selby looked most completely flabbergasted.

"He knew—he knew, and did not hasten to my release?" he demanded.

"Do you want to call me a liar?" snapped Silas.

Had Mr. Selby done so he would have done Silas no wrong. To say the least of it, Silas was drawing upon his imagination. For the professor had gone away in complete ignorance of the prisoners of the Moat House, and even when answering Mr. Railton's questions he had not remembered the noises which had attracted his attention when at the gate. Professor Pompey Burnham was a very absent-minded man.

Silas had done queer things within the professor's knowledge; but the bagging and imprisonment of three supposed spies was his record achievement to date, and he was not quite easy in his mind as to how the professor would take it when he knew.

Mr. Selby sat down on the bed with a thud, and put a hand to his brow. Skimmy felt almost sorry for him. Skimmy, though not usually suspicious, did not believe the yarn told by Silas; but he could see that Mr. Selby did.

"Old Pomp wouldn't let you have any dinner if he was here," said Silas, with a grin. "But I'm softer-hearted than him. You'll get it in two or three hours, I dare say. The cook's having a nap now, along of not sleepin' well last night."

With that he left them. Directly he had gone, Baggy bleated:

"Didn't you see, sir, he hadn't got his

ever!' If you'd gone for him you could have downed him easy!"

"Why did you not tell me that sooner, Trimble? What in the use of the information now? Of all the stupid and offensive boys I ever met you and Skimpole are undoubtedly the worst!"

"Well, you've got eyes, haven't you?" grunted Baggy.

Mr. Selby did not reply. A long silence followed, broken only now and then by a groan of anguish from Baggy, as he thought of the sleeping cook and the uncooked dinner.

But the sleeping cook must have been another of Silas' fictions, for when, about two o'clock, they got their meal, it was plainly not of that day's cooking, and none of it was hot, not even the potatoes.

Skimmy ate what he could get, which was not much, in dignified silence. Mr. Selby squabbled in the most undignified way with Baggy over the nine-tenths or so of the meal, which they managed to annex between them. Baggy got very little more than the master, and felt horribly aggrieved about it.

CHAPTER 10.

Skimmy the Adventurous.

IT was well on in the afternoon before any one of the three took any further step in the direction of the planned escape.

Mr. Selby lay on one bed, Baggy on the other. Skimmy sat in the window-seat. Mr. Selby groaned and tossed; Baggy dozed, snored, and woke to bedew the bedclothes with snivelling tears. Skimpole meditated. He could always do that, even with things at their worst. But he missed terribly his favourite light reading—the entertaining works of the renowned Professor Balmycrumpet.

All three were feeling at odds with one another, and distinctly sulky. But Skimmy, as became a philosopher, was the first to emerge from the cloud of sulkiness.

He disappeared for a moment under the bigger bed, and came back with the thing they had meant for a rope.

This he contemplated very thoughtfully. It did not strike him as quite the kind of rope he cared to risk his neck to; but he saw no way to improve it. From his point of view, therefore, the risk had to be taken with the thing as it was, since no better might be, for to take the risk his mind was made up.

"What are you doing with that, Skimpole?" snapped Mr. Selby, turning on his bed, and fixing a pair of lack-lustre eyes upon the genius of the Shell.

"At present, sir, I can hardly say that I am doing anything with it. I am not quite sanguine that anything at all calculated to help us in our present situation can be done with it. But only experiment can solve that doubt."

"Ah! You mean that you have not given up the hope of ascending by means of the chimney, and descending with the aid of that—er—article?" returned Mr. Selby.

A hopeful glow came into his eyes, and he looked quite interested.

"I have certainly not given up the project, sir!" replied Skimmy.

"Do it, my boy, and we will let bygones be bygones!" said the master, with an air of great generosity.

"That won't be much good to old Skimmy when he's broken his silly old neck!" spoke the voice of Baggy. "Don't you go, Skimmy! I ain't going to be left alone with that old—with Mr. Selby—so I tell you straight! He's pretty nearly as dangerous as that mad bute Stout!"

"Trimble, how dare you!"

"It's all very well, sir, but you ain't safe! I should be afraid of you without Skimmy. You fly off into one of your waxes, and go for a chap like—like old boots!"

"Do not be absurd, Trimble!" said Skimmy. "Mr. Selby has allowed himself to be betrayed into paroxysms of anger unworthy of a scholar and a gentleman; but I feel sure that he regrets them, and that there will be no recurrence of them in my absence."

If Mr. Selby was not on the verge of another unworthy paroxysm his face belied him. He was fairly gritting his teeth. But he said nothing. He did not want to choke Skimmy off his enterprise.

"It will be best to wait until after tea," said Skimmy, after a brief space of further consideration.

"Oh, I shouldn't, if I were you—not if you're really going," Baggy said. "'Tain't much tea we're likely to get—not more than enough for two, anyway. 'Tain't worth stopping for, really, Skimmy!"

"I was not thinking of food, but rather of the light," answered the bold adventurer. "I should like to time my attempt so that twilight shall supervene when I reach the roof. The ascent of the chimney would present difficulties in the darkness; but I would rather cross the courtyard under the friendly shades of oncoming night, I admit."

"How do you know when they're going to bring us our tea?" asked Baggy bitterly. "There don't seem any proper hours for meals here at all. Disgraceful, I call it!"

"I think that something might really be done to improve that—er—rope before Skimpole makes his attempt," said Mr. Selby, getting off the bed.

It had occurred to him that St. Jim's would hardly be a pleasant place for him if Skimmy should chance to break his neck in his dauntless enterprise.

The three of them set to work on the rope again. They took it all to pieces as a preliminary step. That could do no harm, at worst, for it could scarcely be made a more inefficient rope than it was before they tackled it anew.

It is doubtful, however, whether it was a much more efficient one. No longer thick to the extent of not allowing of a proper grip, it was, by the time they had finished, so thin here and there that Mr. Selby certainly would not have trusted his valuable neck to it. But then, of course, Skimmy was a much lighter weight than Mr. Selby.

"They've forgotten all about tea, the beasts!" groaned Baggy.

The sun had set now, and very soon it would be getting dusk.

"Tea is really a matter of very little consequence to me, Trimble," said Skimmy.

"'Tis to me, though," Baggy growled. "If they come up while you are making the attempt, Skimpole——"

But even as Mr. Selby spoke they came. The rope was thrust under one of the beds, and the little dumb maid brought in a tray. Silas stood at the door, but did not speak a word. His facetious mood of a few hours earlier seemed to have passed, leaving him surlier than ever.

He and his aide-de-camp departed. Skimmy swallowed a hot cup of tea, wolfed a single slice of bread-and-butter, and announced that he was now about to make his venture.

"Oh, good!" said Baggy, eyeing the food supply greedily.

Skimmy twisted the rope round his lean body, and stood upright in the grate.

His voice came hollowly to them.

"I do not anticipate any considerable difficulty in the ascent of the chimney," he said.

Next moment his feet disappeared.

It really must have been quite an easy chimney to climb, for within five minutes Skimmy had reached the top of it. A kind of ledge helped him part of the way up; and after that he found holes where bricks should have been, and, by bracing his back against one side, and using hands and feet upon the other, he made the passage.

He was rather grimy when he emerged, but not sooty. He was also rather breathless and tired, but he was in no way daunted. Indeed, his feeling was one of triumph. The task he had set out to do seemed to him almost as good as done.

But in thus deeming he erred. He was a long way off the end of it yet.

He unwound from about himself the thing that was to serve as a rope. He regarded it rather doubtfully.

There were plenty of fellows at St. Jim's whose courage was past all doubt. They feared nothing. But there was a difference between courage and foolhardiness; and perhaps it was rather the latter quality than the former that induced Skimmy to trust himself to that weird rope.

Tom Merry or Talbot or Blake would have shied at descending by the most reliable of ropes fastened by Skimmy, whose notions of a knot were anything but scout-like. Nothing better could be expected of him than a very imperfect granny-knot, so that it was quite on the cards that the rope would give at the top before it had time to break.

But Skimmy was unconscious of his own deficiencies. He was more than a little bit proud of the knot he made. It was intricate enough, in all conscience. But it held when he tugged at it, possibly because he was careful not to tug too hard.

He lowered himself carefully, if clumsily, over the gutter of the roof. Not until he had begun to dangle did he really understand the nature of the task he had set himself.

Swarming down a rope is a task well within the capacity of the average boy. But Skimmy was handicapped by complete ignorance of how even to make a start about it.

"Let me see," he murmured, dangling painfully, already beginning to feel the unaccustomed strain upon his feeble biceps. "Trimble said something about going down an inch or two at a time, keeping hold of the rope. If I shift one hand—— Ow!"

Skimmy had shifted one hand, and the natural result had been to set the rope swinging. He did not like the oscillation at all. But he saw that the edge of the roof had receded slightly, and from that he gathered resolution to shift his hands again.

"Dear me!" he muttered. "This exercise is extremely difficult and by no means free from pain. But I must persevere."

He got a few feet further down, and as he dangled his feet touched a window-ledge. He reached out and grasped the open sash with his right hand, still gripping the rope with his left.

The room into which he looked had no occupant. An idea flashed into his head.

"Perhaps it would be better to get in here," he murmured. "On the other hand, the door may be locked. In that case I should be trapped. There is always the rope, however."

But there Skimmy erred. The rope was neither constructed nor tied for all everlasting. He gave, quite unconsciously, a harder tug at it, and felt it give in his hand.

The shock of surprise nearly threw him off the window-ledge. But he snatched at the sash and saved himself from falling.

Then happened what seemed to Skimmy something like a miracle.

The rope broke off short. He saw a new end dangle above his head. But as he gasped at it in astonishment he saw it drop and disappear entirely.

The thing had broken, and almost at the same moment Skimmy's knot had given way!

"Dear me! How exceedingly extraordinary!" muttered Skimmy, clinging to the open sash.

It was lucky that his courage held fast, or his life would hardly have been worth a moment's purchase. It was lucky, also, that he did not look down.

Somehow, he managed to get the upper sash a little lower. Then he fairly fell over it into the room.

"Ow-wow!"

It was a half-stifled yell, though the fall had hurt him a good deal. He remembered, even as he opened his mouth, that Silas must not hear him.

He picked himself up, and moved at once to the door. The door was locked!

Here, at first glance, seemed a blow that shattered all his hopes. But Skimmy, fairly embarked on a career of adventure, had not come so far to be daunted easily.

He examined the lock. It was old and rusty, of the kind that are affixed to the door, and it moved quite perceptibly under his hand as he pressed upon the top of it.

"I really think that I could get this thing off," he murmured.

And he looked round for something with which to operate upon it.

An old and rusty poker lay in the grate. Skimmy got to work with that.

And it was a long, tedious, and rather painful job for so clumsy a workman. Skimmy barked his knuckles and banged his thumbs, and got into a perfect bath of perspiration. Also, he made considerable noise, though he hardly thought of that in his eagerness. But Silas, down below, heard nothing.

At last the lock gave way, clanging to the floor. By this time it had grown so dark that Skimmy could hardly see the thing as it lay there.

He pulled open the door, stepped out with fast-beating heart, and stood in a musty corridor, blinking uncertainly about him.

Then he heard heavy footsteps on the stairs, and looked wildly for a place of refuge.

There was an alcove in the wall close by. He squeezed himself into this just in time. He held his breath as Silas passed him, without a light.

Silas had his gun again. He had fished it up from the bottom of the moat. But Skimmy did not see the gun; he hardly saw Silas, indeed.

The man passed on, unaware of his nearness.

Skimmy scuttled downstairs. Silas might be on his way to the room in which Mr. Selby and Baggy were, and he was not likely to fail in noticing the fact that one of the three prisoners was absent.

But Silas was not bound on a visit to the prisoners, or he would have taken a light. They had none just then.

Skimmy dared not even try the big front door. He made for the unknown back regions, hoping for a way out in that direction.

He peeped into the kitchen, and saw the little old grey man at work there. Skimmy fled on.

"Eureka!" he murmured, as the latch of a door in the scullery gave to his hand, and he stepped outside—free!

Well, not quite free, perhaps. There was the gate to be opened, or the wall to be scaled. There was the drawbridge to be lowered, or the moat to be waded.

But at least he was on his way to freedom.

CHAPTER 11.
Forestalled

"READY, Talbot?"

It was Tom Merry who whispered those words.

Talbot sat up at once.

"I'm ready, Tom," he said.

Manners and Lowther were already out of bed. Tom went now to the bed of Kangaroo, woke him, and passed on to Clifton Dane, who was not asleep. Glyn was away. He could hardly have been left behind had he been there, when his two staunch chums were of the party. Gore was also aroused.

The projected rescue expedition would be a pretty big one, anyway. There was no keeping Blake, D'Arcy, Herries, and Digby out of it. Figgins & Co. had also insisted in being of the party. They were to join up in the quad. Then Levison, Clive, Cardew, Rovlance, and Durrance had all claimed inclusion. This left the Fourth with a representation of twelve as against the Shell's seven. But the matter was scarcely one into which Form rivalry entered. The Fourth-Formers made it very clear that Baggy's personal merits—if any, as Cardew observed—had nothing to do with their keenness for the quest.

Figgins & Co. were on the spot. Kerr had paid his proposed visit to the station, and had learned that the professor had merely visited the Moat House for a very brief time after an absence of a couple of days in town. This naturally confirmed the theory that Silas Stout might have acted on his own against the missing trio—a theory which was, as has been shown, quite correct.

The question of going to Mr. Railton again had been discussed; but no one was really keen on doing that. He might not be convinced, and he would certainly forbid the rescue expedition if he got wind of it.

"Managed to choke off Grundy, then?" said Kerr to Talbot, as they stood together waiting their turn to get over the wall. Half a dozen or more, including Tom and Figgins, were already over. But the moon was rising, and there was only one safe place to scale the wall under its light—where the big tree made a shadow to screen them.

"Didn't hear a sound of him," replied Talbot. "Must have been asleep, I fancy."

"It's queer," said Kerr thoughtfully. "Grundy doesn't often give up a notion once he's got it into his wooden old cranium!"

But it did not occur to either Talbot or Kerr that Grundy had not been asleep, that, in fact, Grundy had not been there.

The great George Alfred, resenting hotly the failure of the rest to volunteer for the projected afternoon expedition, had forgiven Wilkins and Gunn for their defection, but had refused even to consider the question of forgiving anyone else. He could lead Wilkins and Gunn. The rest were so stupid that they refused to follow his lead. They were even stupid enough to cast doubts on his capacity for leadership, which seemed to Grundy the very height of absurdity.

Gunn and Wilkins were not keen. But constant dropping will wear away a stone, and Grundy was at them throughout prep on the subject.

They gave way at last, as they had often given way before, to the obstinacy of their study-mate.

"Mind you, though, Grundy, I don't a bit believe we shall be able to get in," said Wilkins.

"From all I can make out the place is like a giddy fortress," added Gunn.

"And if we can't get in we can't rescue those chaps!" observed Wilkins sapiently.

Grundy snorted disdainfully.

"You can leave all that to me," he said, with a lofty wave of his big right hand.

"I suppose we can leave the dog to you, too?" asked Gunn meekly.

"You may suppose that, if you like, and you'll not be far wrong, either. Do you imagine that I'm afraid of a dog, William Gunn?"

"No; I don't believe you're afraid of anything. Sometimes I think you haven't sense enough to be!" answered Gunn.

Gunn was not lacking in pluck, but he was of rather a bookish, thoughtful turn of mind, and had to brace his courage against danger. Grundy went to danger as to a feast. There was fighting blood in his veins. He did not always enjoy the difficulties into which his extreme readiness to take risks led him; but perhaps in that he did not differ from other heroes.

Grundy snorted again, in high contempt for what he took for Gunn's lack of spirit. But possibly Gunn and Wilkins, who were ready to go, though they did not half fancy the quest, were really showing as much pluck as Grundy, to whom the risk meant nothing.

The three slipped out of the dormitory fully half an hour before Tom Merry & Co. They went down in their pyjamas to Study No. 3, where they had left clothes in readiness. It was not the easiest of things for the heavy-footed Grundy to get out of the dormitory unheard and unnoticed; but in the buzz of talk which was still going on he contrived to do it. Gunn and Wilkins had no difficulty in stealing silently after him.

They were well on the road before the rival and much bigger band of adventurers started.

CHAPTER 12.
A Bolt for Freedom.

MEANWHILE, at the Moat House, Skimmy was boldly making his bid for the freedom of himself and his companions in misfortune.

He sniffed as he stood in the smaller courtyard outside the scullery door. There was a stable somewhere close at hand, he was sure. He could smell it.

And the smell of the stable brought back to his mind Peter, the piebald pony, whose acquaintance he had made when the professor, in a luckless hour for Skimmy, Baggy, and the professor's boyhood chum, Mr. Henry Selby, had driven over to St. Jim's.

In Skimmy's eyes Peter was a steed of rare pace and high spirit. He could hardly have been very fast, or Skimmy would not have been able to overhaul him when he ran away; but Skimmy was not the mostly likely person to perceive this, in spite of his eminent reasoning powers. Skimmy imagined himself to have shown speed worthy of a crack sprinter on that occasion.

"This is fortunate indeed!" murmured Skimmy. "If I can once get the pony over the drawbridge and mount him, pursuit by that most eccentric and dangerous individual with the gun will be almost out of the question. It is true that he may fire at me; but, after all, I shall be running no risk that our gallant defenders overseas do not run, and in this very uncertain light it is most unlikely that he will hit me."

It occurred to him at this juncture that it would be wise to make sure of being able to get open the gate and raise the drawbridge before conducting Peter thither. That very spirited animal might not stand patiently.

Skimmy did not know Peter really well. One of Peter's shining virtues was a readiness to stand patiently anywhere, and he carried it out so far that it sometimes ceased to be a virtue, for he would not always go when it was required of him. But Peter was elderly and queer in temper, and, like most

elderly individuals who are queer-tempered, he did unexpected things at times.

As Skimmy stole out of the smaller courtyard at the back into the more spacious one upon which the gate opened he heard a low, threatening growl. Grip was on the alert, it seemed.

For a moment Skimmy hesitated. He dreaded dogs at any time. Towser had never been a friend of his. But he overcame his dread. He could reach the gate, while giving Grip a fairly wide berth, and he did so.

It may have been luck, or it may have been genius, but Skimmy found out the secret of the gate within five minutes. Pressure on a certain spot opened and closed it without the necessity of touching it. He had guessed as much, and he found the spot.

The drawbridge was up, and the secret of the drawbridge did not reveal itself so easily. In fact, it did not reveal itself at all.

For fully half an hour Skimmy fumbled with it in the darkness to no purpose. His hands were sore and bruised, and his sense of touch was deadened—a heavy handicap to fight against. But he stuck to his task. In the lexicon of Herbert Skimpole there was no such word as "fail," or if it were there he had no use for it.

And at last the drawbridge dropped. Why it dropped Skimmy did not know, though he could guess that he had touched the spring which released it without knowing that he was doing so.

It did not go down suddenly or noisily, but it went down, and the light of triumph dawned upon the face of Skimmy even as the moon rose above the horizon.

For a minute or two he stood contemplating the path to freedom. He was tempted to take it at once.

It would have been wiser to do so. He had only to reach St. Jim's, and the captivity of those he had left behind was bound to end within an hour or two. Silas could hardly hold out against the forces that would be brought against him when once the truth was known.

But Skimmy's heart melted as he thought of Mr. Selby and Trimble. To fly and tell of their plight would be a tame deed, too, compared with a triple escape engineered by his courage and resource.

Vanity and a soft heart betrayed him into fresh risk.

He made up his mind to steal back into the house after saddling Peter—if any saddle might be found for that noble steed—release Baggy and the master, and let them share his flight.

He was ready to give up Peter to Mr. Selby. In fact, the thought of mounting that fiery, untamed steed was not to his taste.

Baggy could clutch one stirrup, he the other. Mr. Selby could spur Peter to a gallop, and they would clatter over the drawbridge and down the moonlit road before Silas had any chance to use his gun.

It was foolish, but at least it was plucky. For stealing back into danger for the sake of two people whom he positively disliked was a deed that many a fellow at St. Jim's reckoned far bolder than Skimmy might have shied at.

He got Peter bridled and saddled before he re-entered the house.

This was a lighter task than he had anticipated. He found an old saddle which seemed to fit, and a bridle which went on somehow, though it hardly fitted, and Peter gave no trouble at all. He stood like a lamb.

Then Skimmy stole back through the scullery, past the open kitchen door, and upstairs. He neither saw nor heard anything of Silas, who was at that moment busy in the upper room where was the crane.

At the door of the place of captivity Skimmy halted. When that door was shut it was locked—on the inside, that is. But it would probably be easy enough to open it from the outside.

It proved so. A mere turn of the knob was enough. Skimmy was strongly tempted to stop to investigate this matter. It was the kind of thing which interested him.

But he had no chance to do that. As he stepped inside, Mr. Selby jumped to his feet in astonishment. His face could not be seen, but the tone of his voice did not suggest pleasure or gratitude.

The faint light of the rising moon coming through the grimy window glimmered on Skimmy's glasses, and both Baggy and the master recognised him at once.

"Skimpole! Bless my soul! I had thought that you were clear of this place two hours ago!" snapped Mr. Selby.

"No, sir. I have so arranged matters that we can all escape together—with some risk, it may be, but without any insuperable difficulty."

"Oh, good, Skimmy!" exclaimed Baggy.

But Mr. Selby was less enthusiastic.

"This is foolish, Skimpole—very foolish indeed!" he grated. "You have been losing valuable time. Bless my soul, do you not see that——"

"Pardon me, sir, but more time will be lost if we do not act at once. Follow me, if you please!" said Skimmy dramatically.

And he led the way.

Baggy followed, trembling at the knees, but eager to get away. Mr. Selby hesitated, then also went, grumbling in an undertone.

Still there was no sign of Silas.

They reached the smaller courtyard, and Skimmy led forth Peter in pride.

"You will mount, if you please, sir," he said, in an eager whisper.

"Mount? Do not be absurd, Skimpole!" rasped Mr. Selby.

"Here, I will, Skimmy!" volunteered Baggy. "Mr. Selby don't want to, you know, and you're such a duffer; you can't ride. Lemme get on him!"

"No, Trimble, no! I——"

"I absolutely refuse, Skimpole, to endanger my neck thus, to say nothing of the ridiculous figure I should cut."

"Get to the gate at once, then, sir. If you will not ride, I will, and possibly you can clutch at the stirrup and so——"

"But what about me?" bleated Baggy. "You ain't going to collar that pony, Skimmy, you selfish beast! Oh, dear, I shall be left behind, and that beast will kill me!"

"The pony is strong. He will bear two," said Skimmy. "Why, where is Mr. Selby?"

The master, far more anxious for his own safety than for them, was already making his way to the gate.

"There he goes!" howled Baggy, forgetting all caution in his fear.

Skimmy scrambled somehow into the saddle.

"Ow-yow! Don't be a cad, Skimmy! You can't leave me, you rotter!"

"Get up behind me, Trimble! Be quick, or the horse may run away!"

Fear lent agility to Baggy. He pulled himself up somehow, and hugged Skimmy with his fat arms.

It was enough to break Peter's back. Though it failed to do that, it affected Peter's temper. He bolted.

Skimmy tugged hard at the bridle, and headed him for the gate.

Mr. Selby was already there, but the gate was shut. Mr. Selby fairly shouted in dismay as he realised this.

Inside the house Silas heard that shout, looked out of the window, jumped into the lift, and sent it hurrying down. He seized his gun in the hall, and burst out of the front door like a tornado.

The gate was open now. Skimmy had not dared to dismount, but he had told the panic-stricken Mr. Selby what to do. Peter, pawing the ground, snorting, and lashing out with his heels, was a rare handful for Skimmy, and Baggy was in such a frenzy of alarm that he was yelling at the top of his voice.

"Ow-yow! Hurry up, Mr. Selby!" he hooted. "Oh, hurry up, you silly old fool! He's coming. He's got his gun. Yoooop!"

Out of the gate sped Peter, but with his feet on the drawbridge he reared.

"Stop, or I'll shoot you!" roared Silas.

Mr. Selby pulled up. The plunging pony in front, the supposed madman in the rear, made a combination too dreadful for his nerves. He stood just inside the gate, shaking with fright.

Silas rushed up. He did something—Mr. Selby could not see what—and at once the drawbridge began to rise, going up from the outer edge in a manner that proved very embarrassing to the fiery, untamed steed's double burden.

"Yaroooch!" howled Baggy, as he floundered back over the pony's tail.

Skimmy clung desperately to the animal's neck. He had lost his seat in the saddle. He was slipping sideways, but he still clung, and not a sound came from his lips.

The drawbridge continued to rise. Peter slewed round somehow, and got all four hoofs on terra-firma. Skimmy, still dumb with agitation, slipped off.

"My hat!" gasped George Alfred Grundy.

And at that moment a cloud passed over the moon, and everything was veiled in darkness.

CHAPTER 13.
All Grundy's Fault!

GRUNDY and his fellow-adventurers had come up just in time to see something.

But what it was they had seen they did not know.

They had heard something, too. But in that wail of anguish they had failed to recognise the voice of Baggy.

"My hat!" gasped Grundy.

"It's a ghost!" burbled Gunn, badly shaken.

"Looked like a horse!" said Wilkins, also in some fear, but less ready to believe in the supernatural than Gunn.

"Oh, come on!" hooted Grundy.

He, too, was alarmed, but not quite daunted.

Wilkins clutched him by the arm.

"You silly idiot!" he panted. "You'll only go flop into the moat!"

"What was it? I saw something; it did look like a horse. And there was something on it, too; but it wasn't like a man. I don't believe it had a head!" said Gunn, his voice quavering.

Then the cloud rolled from before the moon, and they saw.

But they saw no horse, no rider, headless or headed. They saw only the closed gate and the muddy stretch of moat.

(Continued on page 16.)

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THE ST. JIM'S GALLERY.

No. 19.—George Gerald Crooke.

THE rotters must have their turns, you know!

Last week we had Kerr—one of the best. Next week I shall deal with Kangaroo—another of the best. Between them let Crooke be sandwiched, though if the notion of a sandwich is to be carried out fully, one might suggest that, while the bread is as wholesome as bread can be, the meat is distinctly tainted.

For there is really nothing good to be said about Crooke.

The best one can say for him is that he has been half inclined to shy at some of the schemes suggested by his pal Racke. But when one gets down to the root of his objection it is always funk. He feels nervous, that is all. There is no merit in cowardice, even when it keeps a fellow from doing the things he shouldn't.

Crooke appears in the stories from the coming of Tom Merry to St. Jim's—he was not at Clavering with the Terrible Three—but up those earlier stories the part he played was usually quite a minor one. Gore and Levison were his chief intimates then. Both are numbered among his enemies now, for the good in them has triumphed over the evil; and though Gore may still be a trifle rough and surly, and Levison may still have something of his old cynical hardness about certain things, they are decent fellows now, respected by their Forms and liked by other decent fellows. Crooke was one of Gore's "Smart Set"—gay dogs of the dingy sort, who thought it manly to be vicious, and were suppressed for the time being by Tom Merry & Co. Crooke is still a "gay dog," which is only another name for dingy blackguard; but Racke and Scrope and Clampe are his associates in that sort of thing in these later days, with Mellish and Chowle and Trimble as hangers-on.

Crooke is essentially as vicious as Racke, but he has less hardihood. It would not be worth while to make a list of the occasions on which he has shown the white feather; they are so many that it might be regarded as a suitable crest for his coat-of-arms—if any. Like Racke, he has well-to-do people to supply him with more money than is good for him; but his people do not draw their income from war profits, so that he considers himself entitled to look down upon Racke on that score.

The first story I can recall in which Crooke played at all a leading part was called "The Waster's Reward." Crooke, Mellish, and Levison had waylaid and robbed Manners. They were held up and relieved of the stolen grub by Figgins & Co. Crooke fell out with the other two, and went off alone. He met and quarrelled with a stranger youth, and for once he was willing to fight, believing that he could lick the stranger. They fought in a barn; they both fought foul, and Crooke won. He left his opponent lying apparently senseless in the loft of the barn, and, on going, removed the ladder out of sheer malice. The barn was set on fire by a cigarette the vanquished combatant had dropped. He escaped; but Crooke believed that he had perished in the flames. Had that been so something little short of the guilt of murder would have rested upon Crooke. He would not tell anyone; but someone knew—a fellow who used his knowledge to extort blackmail. To many demands Crooke got up a bogus subscription for the dependents of soldiers reported killed. But that failed him. Then, in disguise, he tackled Wally D'Arcy on the road from the village, and robbed him of ten pounds belonging to Arthur Augustus. It all came out at length, and Tom Merry & Co. discovered that the blackmailer was actually the fellow supposed to have been burned, in disguise, by Crooke at the fire. He had undoubtedly been through a very bad time; and it was merciful to overlook his scheming. But it was mistaken mercy. Later, no doubt, those concerned saw that.

Crooke was an enemy of Talbot's from the first. He did not like reformed cracksmen, he said. As Crooke was a completely unreformed swindler and highway robber, the sneer hardly came well from his lips. But Crooke was not above asking a favour of Talbot once on a time; and Talbot, the most good-natured of fellows, detesting shady ways as much as any fellow at St. Jim's, but with more charity for the black sheep than most—for he never forgets his own past—consented.

It was a place in the cricket eleven that Crooke wanted—Talbot's place. Crooke's uncle, Colonel Lyndon, was coming on a visit, and Crooke desired to show off before him. Talbot's consent was conditional on Tom Merry's agreeing—it was not for him to settle such a matter out of hand. Tom would not agree, and Talbot withdrew his conditional promise, as he was fully entitled to do. Then Crooke, in a fury, threatened that he would get Talbot kicked out of the school. Colonel Lyndon was a governor of St. Jim's, and was hardly likely to look with favour on a junior who had once been a burglar. Crooke went out of Talbot's study with a nose streaming red and a blackened eye after that taunt.

Talbot did not want to meet Colonel Lyndon. He had his own reasons for that. He knew that the colonel was his uncle, the brother of his dead mother. She had married a man who had gone completely to the bad, and her family had disowned her. Talbot expected nothing from his uncle, and wanted nothing from him. Until he heard that Colonel Lyndon was coming he had been quite unaware that Crooke and he were cousins. The discovery naturally gave him no pleasure.

Crooke told the colonel about the schoolboy cracksman. The colonel saw Talbot on the cricket-field, and felt sure that he had seen him before. There was a meeting of the school governors—eight or nine of them, including Lord Eastwood, the father of Gussy and Wally; Sir William Lacy, chairman of the board; and Colonel Lyndon himself. The whole matter was gone into. Talbot refused to say anything that would explain the colonel's recognition of him. As a matter of fact, the stern old soldier never had seen him before; it was Talbot's resemblance to his dead mother that had misled him. The boy's obstinacy naturally told against him, and the governing board decided that he must leave St. Jim's.

The good old Head and Mr. Railton—the latter just back wounded from the Front—backed up Talbot finely; but their support was of no avail. The Head went to the length of resigning his post when matters were pushed to extremity against the fellow in whom his faith, shaken before, was now firm. The Shell and Fourth were bitterly indignant with Crooke for the part he had played in bringing about the trouble. They ragged him. They made up their minds that if Talbot had to go he should go, too.

But, after all, neither went. Talbot, heavily troubled by the Head's position, sought an interview with the colonel—not to plead for mercy for himself, but to try to straighten things out for Dr. Holmes, the kindest friend he had ever had. Then, through an accident, the truth of the relationship between him and the colonel was discovered, and the old soldier's heart was softened. He could feel pride in a nephew who had lived down his past as Talbot had; he had learned that there was nothing in Crooke that was cause for pride. Henceforth Talbot was his favourite nephew, though at that time he did not disown Crooke. All this is told in "The Housemaster's Home-coming," one of the very finest stories—perhaps the finest—Mr. Clifford ever wrote.

Crooke pretended that he welcomed the discovery of the kinship between him and Talbot. But he could not keep up that pretence long. Again and again he intrigued to get his cousin into the colonel's black books. There was the matter of John Rivers, the "Professor," Marie's father, who, through Talbot's influence, had put his past behind him and donned khaki. Corporal Brown, as Rivers called himself, had been wounded at the Front, was in the school sanny, by special favour of the Head and the military authorities.

Levison was the old Levison in those days; but at his blackest he was never as big a scoundrel as Crooke. And he went for Crooke when he learned that Crooke had discovered part of the secret and meant to use it against Talbot. Crooke found out more, and reported to Colonel Lyndon. The colonel was furious. But it turned out that Corporal Brown had saved his life, and had been recommended for the V.C. for the pluck he had shown in rescuing so. Thus Crooke's scheme fell to the ground, and, by the influence of the colonel, John Rivers got his pardon for all offences of the past.

Another attempt to put Talbot wrong with his uncle was frustrated by Levison. Crooke had got friendly with Lodgey, a man whom Talbot had known in his old days. Talbot warned Crooke that the fellow was dangerous. Crooke's reply was to sneer against Talbot as a sycophant and legacy-hunter. That made Talbot hit out, and Crooke yelled to Lodgey for aid. Lodgey came, and was promptly put on his back. Then, with Lodgey's help, Crooke planned to get Talbot into heavy trouble.

Levison had warned Talbot of Crooke's plottings. Talbot had refused to believe. He was angry with Levison when the Fourth-Former took charge of proceedings at the critical moment. But afterwards he had to admit that the black sheep had proved a true friend to him. The conversation between them—or part of it—after all was over is worth giving here.

"Rather neat of Crooke, wasn't it?" said Levison cheerfully. "It was really a pity to chip in and spoil such a really clever game! Don't you think so?"

"I'm glad you did!" replied Talbot. "I should have been turned out of the school as a hardened thief if you hadn't. Nobody could have believed what I really went to the dock for—not even my chums, I'm afraid."

"I should have believed in you, and I'm not your pal," said Levison. "Even an eavesdropping cad is more use than a real pal at times—what? All serene! I don't mind what you said. Hard words break no bones, and soft ones butter no parsnips."

"It's the second time you've done me a ripping good turn," said Talbot. "If ever my turn comes you can rely on me."

"It may come sooner than you think," said Levison, with a grin. "I'll tell you what you can do. When my minor comes, don't tell him what sort of a chap I am."

And Levison walked away whistling.

Do you see how much Mr. Clifford gets into a few simple words of dialogue there? They may not indicate a great deal as to Talbot's character, though they show at least the cool pluck which leaves him unshaken in nerve even after so big a peril. But they tell nearly all about Levison. There he stands, a black sheep still, as Talbot well knows; bitter in his words; pretending that he has not cared what Talbot said to him, while all the time he has cared greatly; unrepentant for his misdeeds, which have put real friendship between him and Talbot out of the question; yet all the time with his better nature showing in his evident loyal affection for Talbot and his concern about Frank.

Frank came, and Talbot stood his friend. And Frank, like his brother, got the chance of doing Talbot a good turn, and seized it. The story has already been alluded to in the sketch of Levison minor. Crooke came very near success that time: but in the event Frank saved Talbot. There was another time when George Gore stood by Talbot in a tight place, as Talbot had stood by him. And only a week or two ago we had the story of how, at Colonel Lyndon's wish, Talbot tried once more to be friendly with his wastrel cousin, and how the attempt failed, because there was nothing in Crooke to answer to the generosity of the other fellow.

Racke's influence on Crooke is for evil, of course; it could not be for good. But it does not make very much difference in the long run. Manners was not far wrong when he said that there was nothing at all to choose between the two. If they separated for good and all it would not mean that either would go the right way—merely that they would go wrong ways apart.

Naturally, Crooke welcomed the advent of Racke. At the outset the war profiteer's son wanted to make friends with such fellows as Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. It was that he might "get in with the nobs" that his father sent him to St. Jim's. But Gussy soon found Racke quite impossible as a friend. With Crooke, on the other hand, Racke could get on quite well. They have the same vicious tastes. Both have money to waste, though Crooke has less than Racke, and is hard up at times, when he chances to have offended the people at home. They share a study, and they suit each other in many ways. But between them there is no real comradeship. Neither would sacrifice anything for the other; neither would stand by the other at a pinch if his own safety were not involved. When either does it is because he realises that they must sink or swim together. Then he can lie to any extent to back up the other's lies.

It is seldom Crooke who suggests the rascally schemes which they put through in company. Now and then he may have an inspiration. But Racke is the more cunning and the bolder of the two. He is also the harder hearted. Even Crooke's dull conscience stirred when he knew the villainous plot Racke had concocted against Doris Levison out of bitter malice towards her brother. But funk was concerned there as well as conscience; probably funk was uppermost. And if Crooke does not make many plans, he helps in carrying out many.

Crooke hates Ernest Levison, of course. The defection of Levison from the black sheep flock made a lot of difference to it. Racke may be, and is, cunning; but he has never had the cool audacity and the deep astuteness that Levison possesses. These two, with help from their hangers-on, made it very difficult for Levison to climb out of the slough when at last he made up his mind that it was not worth while to go on being a blackguard any longer. Through them he relapsed more than once into his old ways, for Racke was crafty enough to choose the right moment for tempting him—the moment when he was suffering from some taunt or snub from fellows who did not yet believe in his reformation. Once they brought him very near a complete cropper when Tom Merry and his chums found him lying in the road, obviously stupid with drink. But, for all the disgust they felt, Tom and the rest did their best to save Levison from the consequences of that folly; and it served to open his eyes to the designs of Racke and of Crooke. After that he was no longer to be lured astray, and the methods of force they tried against him only stiffened his back to persevere in the upward way. They hate him still, of course; it is unlikely that they will ever forgive him for deserting their cheerful and improving society.

But though Levison may be the fellow whom Racke hates worst of all at St. Jim's, he is not Crooke's greatest aversion. To Crooke his cousin, Reginald Talbot, is and will always be, one fancies, his worst foe. Talbot could forgive, at least; Crooke, to whom no intentional wrong has been done, can neither forget nor forgive.

The strongest feeling in him is this bitter hatred and jealousy. If he were bolder he would be very dangerous. Even as it is, there is constant danger for Talbot in his enmity, for a funk may strike hard at times, and no consideration of honour or decent feeling will ever hold back Crooke.

THE PRISONERS OF THE MOAT HOUSE!

(Continued from page 14.)

"My hat! Oh, crumbs!" gasped Grundy.

"It must have been a—a vision!" exclaimed Wilkins.

"Let's get away," said Gunn. "This place ain't——"

"Oh, rats! S'pose the silly old place is haunted, is that any reason why we should chuck it?" demanded Grundy hotly.

His courage was beginning to come back in full force.

"We can't do anything. There's the moat; and how are we going to get across?" pleaded Wilkins. "I knew all along that this was a rotten, silly bizney; but you would come, Grundy."

"I'm going to have a look round, anyway," said George Alfred, with immense determination.

He was so resolute that Gunn and Wilkins preferred to accompany him in his tour of inspection. There seemed some protection for them while they were with him, at least.

They were not at all disappointed when he announced dolefully that he saw no way of crossing the moat. But Grundy was. He hated giving up anything.

As they came round to the front again a shadowy figure loomed up in the moonlight, and the voice of Tom Merry spoke.

"Who goes there?"

"Why, if it isn't that silly ass Grundy!" said Kerr. "What did I tell you, Talbot?"

Out of the misty moonlight came something like a score of figures now, and Grundy and his followers were surrounded.

"We've seen a ghost!" quavered Gunn, still shaky.

"What?"

"Oh, rats!"

"We've seen something, anyway," said Grundy. "There was a horse, and I believe there was someone on it. Then the drawbridge went up, and it got dark, and when the moon came out again there was nothing—nothing at all!"

"You've been dreamin', dear boy," said Cardew.

"Rot!" snapped Grundy. "I don't dream. We all saw it."

"Saw what?" asked Kangaroo.

"Haven't I told you, you ass?"

"Tell us again. It's the sort of narrative that will bear repetition," said Lowther. "We may get a different version the second time—something more like sense!"

The three all tried to tell the tale at once. But Grundy shouted the other two down.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Levison, before he had quite finished. "Don't you see, you chaps? It was an attempt at escape on the old professor's pony."

"My hat! I believe you're right Levison!" exclaimed Tom.

"An' these three noble heroes, instead of helpin', saw ghosts an' bunked, by gad!" said Cardew.

"We didn't bunk!" howled Grundy.

"You'd jolly well have been scared, I know that," mumbled Gunn.

"But I believe you're right," Grundy admitted. "The thing on the horse's back was Baggy—or Skimmy, p'r'aps. It hadn't a head, though; that's queer!"

"Not much loss, whether it was Baggy or Skimmy," said Gore.

"You silly chumps, you've mucked the whole thing up!" snapped Figgy. "There isn't a dog's chance for us tonight, after this! Oh, you frabjous idiots!"

"It's all Grundy's fault," said Manners bitterly. "He's always butting in and spoiling things for other people!"

"Wasn't our fault, anyway," protested Wilkins. "We never wanted to come."

"But we came," said Gunn. "And we do seem to have mucked things up a bit. But I can't see putting it all on to Grundy."

"Bump the silly fathead! Bump them all three!" snorted Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! Weally, Gwunday——"

"Yarooh! Stoppit!" howled Grundy, as a dozen strong hands seized him.

Bang!

"That's to warn you—over your heads!" shouted Silas, showing his bushy face above the wall. "I shall fire right into the thick of you if I have to fire again, so mind that!"

They scuttled. The garrison was on the alert, and no one felt at all confident that Silas' threat was mere words.

But the bumping of the three was only postponed till they were out of range.

They were well and truly bumped, and the feelings of the bumpers were immensely relieved by that act of rough justice. Grundy & Co. certainly had muddled things, though they were not guilty of spoiling the attempted escape.

But bumping them did not help the prisoners of the Moat House. For their aid something else must be devised.

THE END.

(Don't miss next Wednesday's Great Story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's—"RAID AND RESCUE!"—by Martin Clifford.)

The Editor's Chat.

For Next Wednesday:

"RAID AND RESCUE."

By Martin Clifford.

This week's story is chiefly concerned with the inside of the Moat House, and what happened to the unfortunate prisoners of the half-mad Silas Stout. Next week's, which brings to an end the series of three, is told more from the outside, so to speak.

It is obvious that, after the reconnoitring expedition of Tom Merry & Co., and the big rescue expedition, which was spoiled by Grundy's getting in ahead of it, there must be a real determined attempt at rescue. Moreover, it can easily be guessed that the Grammar School fellows, after their experiences at the Moat House, are not likely to lose their interest in the place and its grim custodian. So that there is every prospect of a regular mix-up. And there is a mix-up, as you will see next week!

YOUR EDITOR.

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