

STORIES FOR READERS OF ALL AGES!

The Penny Popular

3 Grand Complete Stories.

NUMBER 203.



THE

GREAT REHEARSAL!

(An amusing scene from the magnificent long complete tale of School Life contained in this issue.)

THE REDSKIN'S LOYALTY!

A Magnificent Long, Complete
Story Dealing with the Further
Amazing Adventures of

SEXTON BLAKE,
the World-Famous
DETECTIVE.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

A Discovery—Barking Otter Arrives—
The Storm.

IN order to save Maurice Ormsdale and his sister from the evil designs of their rascally cousin, Garrick Vullamy, Sexton Blake, accompanied by Tinker and Pedro, had journeyed to Bitter Creek, a gold-mining settlement in Alaska, and arrive just in time to save a young miner from being robbed of his claim by four desperadoes.

"I am very glad that we were able to be of service to you," said Blake. "It was doubly fortunate that we should have been guided here to-night, for we have been anxious to find you. I believe I am addressing Maurice Ormsdale?"

"That is my name, sir," the youth answered, after a brief hesitation.

"I thought so. I was sure that I could not be mistaken. I knew you by your resemblance to your sister."

"My sister! You—you know Linda, then?"

"Yes. Fate brought us strangely together, thousands of miles from here. It is on her behalf, and on yours, that we have come from England to this wild country. I have an interesting story to tell you, Ormsdale, and one that will shock you."

And the detective, continuing, sketched in as few words as possible all that was necessary to make the situation clear. He told him Garrick Vullamy's intention of making himself heir to their uncle's estate by ridding himself of Maurice and his sister, and of the thrilling circumstances under which he had met Linda Ormsdale in England; of her return to British Columbia, and the disappearance of the two villains from the Grange; of the reasons that had urged himself and Tinker to follow the girl, and of what he had learned on the previous night from the conversation between Black Dan and his companions.

And when the narrative was finished Maurice Ormsdale seemed to be tongue-tied, at a loss for words. There was a curious, puzzled expression on his face, and he kept his eyes averted from Sexton Blake and the lad.

"Do you understand what I have told you?" asked Blake.

"Yes, I think so," the youth replied, in a faltering voice.

"I don't wonder that you are startled. Such infernal wickedness is almost beyond belief. And now, my dear fellow, we must put our heads together, and decide what to do. It was a vast relief to me to find you here, for I knew that a trap was to be set for you on your way back from Stewart, and I heard that you had fallen into it. Moreover, I was afraid that you might have been drowned when you



"Courage, my brave girl!" exclaimed Sexton Blake. "We'll soon have you out!" As he spoke the detective, Tinker, and Barking Otter took hold of the pliant cable and hauled Linda Ormsdale out of the jaws of death.

were carried through the rapids. You must have had a narrow escape?"

"A—a very narrow one."

"And then, I suppose, you went on to Stewart to have your claim registered. You must have travelled rapidly both ways. But I am forgetting to inquire about that plucky sister of yours. She should have reached the mining-camp before now, for she had the start of us by several days. Have you heard nothing of her? If so, we must lose no time in—"

The detective paused, interrupted by a gasping sound that had burst from the lips of Maurice Ormsdale, from whose cheeks every vestige of colour had ebbed while Blake was referring to the trap that had been set for him. There was a look of horror in his eyes, and as he was trying to speak, before he could answer the question that had been put to him, the storm that had been gathering burst with amazing abruptness.

The surging, humming noise that had been drawing near swelled to a howling, shrieking gale that bowed the trees as if they had been reeds, and stripped the leaves from them, and tugged at their roots. Thunder crashed like artillery, and forked lightning played over the black heavens, and down came a torrent of rain, falling in big drops.

"My word, what a tempest!" exclaimed Tinker.

"To shelter!" bade Blake. "Be quick!"

As he spoke the thickets to one side were thrust apart, and there was seen to emerge from them, by the continuous blaze of lightning, the tall, slim figure of a young Redskin, who appeared to be utterly exhausted. His eyeballs were protruding from his head, his tongue was hanging out, and he was breathing hard. His buckskin garments were in tatters, and a patch of clotted blood on his shoulder indicated the presence of a wound there. He staggered forward, uttering husky words that were incoherent; and then, his strength failing him, he threw up his arms, and dropped

limply at the feet of Maurice Ormsdale, who peered at him closely.

"Otter!" he cried. "Where have you been? Where is——"

"Look out, both of you!" suddenly shouted Tinker. "Danger! Run for it, guv'nor!"

The warning was a trifle too late. A great tree, standing at the edge of the clearing, had been uprooted by the gale. It was swinging down, and bearing towards Sexton Blake, who, as he tried to dart out of the way, was overtaken by the mass of falling boughs, and dashed to earth with a force that deprived him of consciousness.

"Where am I, Tinker? What has happened?"

"You have had a little accident, that's all."

"An accident? But I don't remember——"

"Never mind about that now, guv'nor. Keep quiet, and drink this."

"What is it?"

"It is whisky, and it will do you good. Come, finish it up. You have only swallowed a few drops."

Having recovered his senses, and opened his eyes, the detective had found himself lying on a bed of pine-boughs in a little cabin, and had seen Tinker bending over him with a black bottle in one hand, a tin cup in the other. Through the doorway, which was partly blocked by the fallen tree, the grey light of dawn was stealing. The storm was over, and there was a glimpse of blue sky between drifting clouds.

"You've got to drink this," urged the lad. "Open your mouth, or I'll prize it open!"

Blake obeyed, and made a wry face as the contents of the cup were poured down his throat.

"Ugh!" he gasped. "It tastes like liquid fire!"

"It is the best I could get," Tinker told him. "They hadn't any brandy. You had better have some more."

"No; I have had quite enough of that stuff."

"It has brought some colour to your face. How do you feel?"

"As if I had just got awake, and wanted to go to sleep again."

There was a short interval of silence. Pedro, who was crouched by the bed, whimpered joyously, and thrust out a warm tongue, and licked his master's hand. With an effort the detective sat up, and the vacant expression faded from his countenance.

"I remember all now," he said. "Those ruffians we drove off, and the bursting storm, and the appearance of the young Indian, whom we believed to be dead. Then the tree fell, and I was buried under it."

"Yes, that's right," replied Tinker. "We got you out as quickly as we could, and I was afraid at first that you had been killed. But you were only stunned, though it took you a long time to recover. I helped Maurice Ormsdale to carry you into the cabin, and——"

"Where is he? And where is the Redskin?"

"I don't know, guv'nor. They have mysteriously disappeared."

"Disappeared! Didn't they tell you where they were going?"

"No, they bunked off when I wasn't here. The Indian must have travelled a long distance, for he fell over from exhaustion, as you remember. He was soon on his feet, however, and while I was trying to pull you round he and Maurice Ormsdale had a palaver. I didn't hear what they were talking about, but it must have been something serious, for the Redskin appeared to be excited. Then young Ormsdale suggested that I had better go down to the settlement and fetch some whisky for you, which I did; and when I came back, five minutes ago, there was nobody here but you. Queer, isn't it? I can't imagine why they have——"

Pausing abruptly, as he perceived something that he had not observed before, the lad seized a slip of paper that had been pinned to the doorway, and read aloud the few words that had been scrawled on it with a pencil. They ran as follows:

"To Mr. Blake. I hope you have not been hurt. Will you and your brave boy please guard my claim, which is a valuable one, until I return. Barking Otter has brought me some news, and I must go with him at once.—Gratefully yours,
MAURICE ORMSDALE."

Sexton Blake's face became grave as he listened to the message, and then a gleam of comprehension flashed to his eyes. He rose from the bed, and walked, rather unsteadily, to the door, where he stood breathing in the cool morning air.

"You had better lie down again," said Tinker.

"No, I am all right," the detective answered. "I feel a bit shaky, that is all. There is work for us to do. I believe I understand the import of this message. Yes, the meaning is fairly obvious. When the Redskin fell into the hands of those scoundrels the night before last, his life was spared, and he was held as a prisoner. Some time later, probably last

evening, Linda Ormsdale was also captured as she was on the way from Stewart to the mining settlement; and subsequently, having found an opportunity, Barking Otter made his escape, and hastened here to tell the news to Maurice Ormsdale. And now the two have set off in the hope of rescuing the girl from her captors."

"No doubt you are right, guv'nor."

"I am sure I am, my boy. I wish young Ormsdale had waited to ask my advice. It is a reckless venture that he and the Indian have undertaken. But perhaps they have gone first to the settlement to procure assistance."

"No, they didn't. If they had I should have met them as I was returning."

"Ah, that's true! They have evidently started off alone for the outlaw's camp, and as there are four men there, including Garrick Vullamy and his servant, the attempt is not likely to succeed. Moreover, we may assume that the camp is deserted by now. Black Dan and his companions would not have remained there after Barking Otter's escape. By heavens, it is terrible to think that Linda Ormsdale is in the power of those ruffians, at the mercy of Garrick Vullamy!"

"What had we better do?" asked the lad. "Shall we hurry to the settlement and get help?"

"No, we will collect a party of miners later," replied Blake, "and have Barking Otter as a guide. We will first overtake young Ormsdale and the Redskin, and induce them to come back with us. They cannot have got very far, if they left only a few minutes ago."

"But we don't know which way they have gone. How can we follow them?"

"With Pedro's aid. That handkerchief lying on the floor is the one that Maurice Ormsdale was wearing around his neck, and it will give the scent to the dog."

"And what about the claim? It may be jumped while we are absent."

The detective didn't answer for a moment. He paced to and fro, keenly scrutinising the plot of ground that had been staked out.

"I have some knowledge of gold-bearing soil," he said, shaking his head, "and it is my opinion that there is very little gold here, and that what there is does not extend far below the surface. I may be wrong, of course. But whether or not the claim is valuable, it is not likely that those four scoundrels will make another attempt to seize it. It has just occurred to me that they must be Black Dan's comrades, of whom we heard him speak the other night. They came to the mining-camp for a drinking-bout, and by now they are probably on the way back to join their leader, which makes the situation more complicated and dangerous. Now to be off, my boy!" he added. "We must overtake Maurice Ormsdale and the Redskin as speedily as possible, and consult with them as to the best means of rescuing that poor girl. For it cannot be doubted that she is a prisoner."

Though he had been stunned and bruised by the falling tree, Sexton Blake was so worried in regard to Linda Ormsdale that he was insensible to the effects of his accident. He and Tinker hastily searched the cabin, and put into their pockets some biscuits and dried meat that they found there; and then the crimson handkerchief was shown to Pedro, who sniffed at it, and promptly picked up the scent.

With an eager whine he started forward, nose to the ground; and Blake and the lad, with their rifles on their shoulders, followed the sagacious animal as he trotted along the crest of the hill, in a direction that was to the left of the little settlement.

It was a beautiful morning, and the air was fresh and sweet after the storm. The golden glow of the sun was flushing on the horizon, and birds were twittering in the trees, and from a distance floated the tapping of picks, telling that the miners were already at work digging for gold.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

On the Scent—Pedro's Quarry—A Mystery.

"I DIDN'T think we were going to have a chase like this, guv'nor."

"Neither did I, my boy. I am afraid it's too much for you."

"I am pretty tired, but I'm not knocked out yet. I can keep it up as long as you can."

"Then we will push on—at least, until nightfall. Maurice Ormsdale and the Redskin are still ahead of us, and I trust that they have not yet overtaken the girl's captors."

"If they have they've probably been caught themselves."

"That is what I am afraid of. But we will hope for the best."

The speakers were Sexton Blake and Tinker. For hour after hour since morning, guided by the bloodhound, they had been following the scent of Barking Otter and his companion; but partly because Pedro had on occasions been at

fault, and partly because the detective was not in fit condition for rapid travelling—he was stiff from his bruises—they had been led so far without coming up with those whom they sought. An hour or so after the start they had been on the point of turning back to the settlement to procure assistance; but they had decided, after discussing the matter, that it would be best to rely on their own efforts so that no time should be lost.

Having covered many miles in all, and long ago eaten the scanty supply of food they had brought with them, they were both hungry and fatigued. The red ball of the sun had dropped behind a mountain peak and they knew that twilight would soon fall, and that then would come the darkness of night. Slowly, with lagging steps, they were ascending a high slope that had at one time been denuded of vegetation by a forest fire, and was now clothed with tough grass and scrub, amid which were boulders and the blackened stumps of trees. The dog, himself footsore, was moving three or four yards in advance, unrestrained by a leash, at intervals sniffing at the scent he was following.

It was a scene of weird, forbidding desolation, typifying the savage spirit of the wilderness. To right and left were hills piled in fantastic shapes, some wooded, and some scarred and gaunt. The air was turning chill and the glow of the hidden sun was fading. There was no sign of life, no cry of beast or chirp of bird.

"I wonder why Black Dan has come so far into this wild region?" said Tinker.

"No doubt for the sake of safety," replied the detective. "So that he will be able to carry out his wicked plans with less fear of discovery. Moreover, it is possible that the outlaws have a stronghold of some kind yonder."

"If they have, and if they don't get to it before dark, I suppose they will camp for the night."

"The chances are that they will, my boy; but we can't be sure of it. I am afraid we will have to stop presently, for I can scarcely drag one leg after the other. And it is the same with you."

"That's right, gov'nor; but I don't want to abandon the pursuit."

"We are not going to, Tinker. I have no intention of turning back, since we have come so many miles."

The situation was both puzzling and discouraging. Assuming that Linda Ormsdale was in the power of Garrick Vullamy and his evil allies—and it could not be doubted that she was—what did they propose to do with her? Were Barking Otter and the girl's brother still giving chase to the party, or had they overtaken them and come to grief? And what of the four members of the gang who had been at the settlement on Bitter Creek? Were they still there, or had they joined Black Dan and his companions before their departure from the camp that morning?

These questions were in Sexton Blake's mind, and, being unanswerable, they troubled him as he and the lad toiled up the rising slope, picking their way with difficulty and with increasing fatigue. On they plodded, drawing nearer to the top; and as they were intensely weary, and a mist now and then swam before their eyes, they did not observe that Pedro was showing signs of excitement, suggesting that the scent was getting hotter.

It was a surprise to them, therefore, when the hound suddenly uttered a gruff bay, and shot ahead at full speed. And as they marked his course, watching him bounding forward, a bronzed figure rose to view a short distance in front of him and dashed fleetly away.

"Look, there is Barking Otter!" exclaimed Tinker. "He must have been resting in the bushes!"

"Yes, it is the Redskin!" declared Blake. "But why is he alone? Where is Maurice Ormsdale? Don't be afraid, Otter," he added, raising his voice. "We are your friends, and the dog won't hurt you!"

"Come back, Pedro!" shouted the lad. "Come back!"

But Pedro was too excited to obey the command, and the young Indian, who either had not understood the words that had been called to him, or was in fear of the big animal, continued his flight without stopping. A few more yards brought him to the crest of the hill, and then, as he turned to face his pursuer, the baying hound sprang upon him; and when they had struggled for an instant, against the skyline, they swayed and fell, and rolled out of sight.

Meanwhile, Tinker and the detective had been hastening on as fast as they could, forgetting their fatigue; and on gaining the ridge, side by side, they paused in amazement, scarcely able to believe the evidence of their eyes. For Pedro and the Redskin had disappeared, vanished as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed them up. There was not the faintest sound to indicate where they were. There was no trace of either of them on the long, scrub-clothed slope that descended in front for some distance, and then seemed to drop abruptly into the depths of a wooded

valley. That they could have rolled so far as that, in the space of a few seconds, was quite impossible. It was equally impossible that they could be concealed in the sparse cover that stretched ahead.

"Where are they?" gasped the lad.
"I haven't the faintest idea," replied Blake, as he rubbed his eyes.

"It is a miracle, gov'nor!"
"It is a most extraordinary thing, my boy. I cannot imagine what has become of them, unless—"

"Hark!" interrupted Tinker. "What was that?"

They swung round, having heard a vague sound behind them, and at once made an alarming discovery. A number of yards below them, down the slope which they had just ascended, were to be seen six or seven rough-looking men, who had presumably emerged from a belt of boulders and tall thickets that were close to one side. They were approaching in a straggling line, and among them could be recognised Garrick Vullamy and his servant, and the leader of the outlaws.

"Come on, boys!" cried Black Dan. "We've got them in a trap! They can't escape!"

For several seconds Blake and the lad stood there, struck with consternation by the sight of their advancing foes, and still half dazed by the mysterious disappearance of Barking Otter and the bloodhound; and then, as a rifle cracked and a bullet whistled by them, they awoke to a sense of their peril.

"Run for it!" urged the detective. "Be quick!"

"There is no shelter anywhere near!" exclaimed Tinker. "They'll have us!"

With fierce shouts ringing in their ears they took to flight, speeding down the farther slope of the hill. But they did not get far. Almost immediately, when they had made half a dozen strides, and were plunging through a patch of vegetation that was flanked by clumps of rock, both dropped into a yawning chasm that they had no time to see. In vain they threw out their arms. Scrubby bushes scraped by them, evading their frantic grasp, and they found themselves in darkness, sliding down a steep and lateral shaft that was walled with smooth earth and stones.

"I am falling, gov'nor!" cried the startled lad.
"Try to catch hold of something!" urged Blake. "Dig your heels in!"

They were unable to check their descent, however. There was nothing for their feet to lodge on; nothing for their clutching hands to grip. They rushed swiftly on, faster and faster, and when they had shot downward at terrifying speed for a considerable distance, realising with ghastly sensations that they must have tumbled into the concealed mouth of a cavern, they came to a gradual stop, and scrambled dizzily to their feet within a yard or so of each other. And as they looked back, seeing not a glimmer of daylight, a mournful whimper floated to their ears.

"Pedro is here!" panted Tinker.
"Yes, he and the Redskin!" declared the detective, as a muffled voice was heard not far off.

"Where are they, gov'nor—in which direction?"
"I can't tell. We must find our way to them, my boy. They are probably hurt. Come, give me your hand."

The lad obeyed, and when they had groped blindly in the impenetrable gloom for several yards, trying to locate the sounds that they could still hear, Sexton Blake stepped into space, and dragged Tinker after him. A few seconds later there was a heavy splash from far below, then a quavering bay of grief from above, and then followed silence.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Underground River—Saved—The Search.

AN icy flood having closed over Blake and the lad at the bottom of the chasm into which they had dropped, they went far under, and rose breathlessly to the surface, when they began to fight for their lives. Each had involuntarily gripped the other as they fell, and now, as they struck out with arms and legs, they found themselves close together, drifting with a current that was running with some force, since they could feel the suction of it. And as they swung on, keeping within touch, comprehension dawned on their befogged brains, which had reeled under the two catastrophes.

It was a situation to test the stoutest courage. They had fallen, as Pedro and the Indian had done, into the cavernous tunnel that penetrated the heart of the hill; and then, while groping in search of the dog, they had dropped farther into the stream. They were now going they knew not where, and it was not likely that they would ever see the faithful hound again, or gaze upon the light of day. They were in the bowels of the earth. One of the pitfalls of this wild, trackless wilderness of the North-west had snatched them from their

enemies, saved them from one peril only to threaten them with a worse one.

"Poor Pedro!" muttered Tinker. "We are leaving him behind."

"I fear he was hurt," the detective said huskily.

"I am sure he was, else he would have jumped after us. We must be in an awful long way underground."

"There is no doubt that we are."

"And on a subterranean river, gov'nor. I wonder if it has an outlet in the open air?"

"It may have, and it may not. We are in great danger, my boy, and we must be prepared for the worst. The water is so cold that we will not be able to swim very long."

"I won't despair yet. We will hold out as long as we can."

"Yes, while there is life there is hope. Let us remember that."

It was easy to speak cheerfully, less easy to feel so. The prospect was appalling, and it would have been rash to believe that there was any chance of escape. The double disaster had happened swiftly, and the invisible tide had hurried its victims away from the spot where they had fallen. Through the inky blackness on the hushed, oppressive silence there came no sound from Barking Otter or from the dog. There was nothing to be heard at first, but presently there rose a faint, gurgling murmur that was not unlike the hissing of serpents, and this increased, swelling gradually to a louder pitch, as Sexton Blake and the lad were carried along by the current.

What their sensations were, as they swung on into the unknown, can be more readily imagined than described. They swam side by side, in close contact, occasionally making futile attempts to touch bottom with their feet. They were in the grip of a nameless horror that at times almost forced them to scream for help. The darkness wrapped them like a pall, and the damp air fanned their cheeks like the breath from a tomb, and the icy water seemed to bite into their bones. Where were they going? What would the end be? The underground river might have an outlet, but unless they came to it soon they must perish, for strength was beginning to fail them.

"I am getting chilled," said Tinker. "I can't swim much longer."

"Nor can I," Blake replied. "But I am stronger than you. Rest your hand on my shoulder, and I will support you."

"I won't do that until I have to. I am not done for yet."

"There is still hope. Be brave, my boy."

"I am, gov'nor—at least, I am trying to be."

They were pathetic words, and they brought a choking lump to the detective's throat. He had no terror of death, but it was agony to him to feel, as he did, that Tinker's young life was drawing to a close. It seemed to them that they had been in the water for a long time, though only a short interval had elapsed. For a few minutes they drifted on, struggling against the numbing lethargy that was stealing over them, and giving now and again a thought—a bitter, heart-rending thought—to the noble hound that they loved so well; and then, as the hissing noise of the current rang louder in their ears, two words burst from the lad's lips:

"Look, gov'nor!"

There was a rift in the curtain of jet darkness. Somewhere ahead there had suddenly appeared a luminous spot, pale and yellow, that flushed larger and brighter.

"Ah, a hopeful sign!" exclaimed the detective.

"We are coming to the open air!" declared Tinker.

"No, I don't think it can be that."

"Then what can it mean?"

They did not have to wait long for an answer to the question. Gliding on with increasing speed, they swept round a gradual curve of the channel, and beheld a curious scene, and one that was calculated to rouse apprehensions, though that did not occur to them at the moment. At a glance they took it all in, with greedy eyes that missed no detail. They saw the seething stretch of water, no more than ten yards in width, that sparkled under a low-hanging roof studded with stalactites, and melted into murky gloom beyond; the damp walls of granite to right and left, one pierced by a natural shaft that mounted upwards, and the other crouching at the back of a strip of rocky flooring; the whitened trunk of a tree, which, bristling with the spiky ends of lopped-off boughs and protected by a rude hand-rail, spanned the subterranean stream from bank to bank, so low that it was within several inches of the hissing tide. Such was the scene revealed by the ruddy glow from a small fire of wood, and from a lantern, that were visible to the left, on the surface of the rocky ledge.

"Here is a chance for us!" panted the lad, who was so exhausted that he was on the point of sinking.

"Be ready for it!" bade Sexton Blake, in an eager

whisper. "Watch sharp! And don't make any noise, for there may be somebody yonder."

The next instant they were carried against the trunk of the tree, and at once, before the current could suck them under it, each grasped one of the protruding spikes. There were others within reach, and by this means they worked over to the low bank on the left, and then, after a short, hard struggle, they drew themselves from the water, and fell sprawling on the stone floor of the cavern.

"Thank Heaven!" gasped the detective.

Having recovered breath and strength, they rose to their feet, grateful for their narrow escape, and as they crept forward with wary tread, already suspicious of danger, a bearded, brutal-looking man, who had been sleeping by the side of the fire, sat up, and opened his eyes. With an oath, he sprang erect, and as quickly, before he could whip his revolver from his belt, he was in the grasp of Sexton Blake, who seized him by the throat and stifled his voice.

"Down him!" urged Tinker.

No assistance was required from the lad. The fight was over almost as soon as it commenced, for the man, having been promptly tripped, went down heavily, with Blake on top of him, and struck his head with a force that stunned him. And as the detective stood up and peered at the sinister face by the light of the flames, the truth flashed to his mind.

"I know this fellow!" he declared. "He is one of the four scoundrels who tried to jump that claim last night."

"Then we must be in the stronghold of Black Dan and his gang!" exclaimed Tinker.

"That's right! We are!"

"And Linda Ormsdale ought to be about here somewhere, gov'nor."

"I have no doubt that she is, my boy. And probably Maurice Ormsdale also, since he was not with the Redskin."

That the underground region was the lair of the outlaws was indeed obvious, in view of what was to be seen here, and of Blake's discovery. The next step was to bind the unconscious prisoner, so that he might be harmless should he come to his senses, and when that had been done Sexton Blake picked up the lantern, and sent the yellow glow playing in a wider radius around him than was reached by the light of the fire, which had burnt low. On the rocky ledge, which covered no large area, were some blankets, provisions, and a couple of small casks, and beyond them, at the base of the slimy wall that was a few yards back from the stream, was an arched opening, low and narrow, that was roughly of the shape of a doorway.

"That looks promising," murmured the detective. "Let us see what is in there!"

Stooping low, with the lantern in his hand, he crept through the natural doorway. Tinker followed at his heels, and as they stood erect and paused, perceiving at a glance that they were in a fairly large chamber, with walls of earth and stone, a voice said eagerly:

"It is Mr. Blake! He has come to rescue us!"

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

A Surprise—Which is Which?—Too Late!

BLAKE'S name was repeated, but no word fell from his lips or from the lad's, so surprised were they by the curious discovery they had just made. It was little wonder that they should stand there tongue-tied, staring in bewilderment at the two prisoners who were lying side by side on the floor of the cave, bound hand and foot.

They were two slim, handsome youths, dressed much alike. The one could be recognised by his shirt as the youth who had set off that morning with Barking Otter, presumably to find and rescue his sister. And the other was almost the very image of him, having the same features and the same brown eyes and hair.

"What does it mean?" exclaimed Tinker.

The question broke the spell that had gripped the detective, and now the solution of the mystery occurred to him. Without further delay he drew a knife and bent over the captives, and severed the ropes that bound their limbs. He then helped them to rise, and when they had thrown themselves into each other's arms and embraced, they turned gratefully to Sexton Blake, who was regarding them with a glimmer of a smile on his face.

"You have the best of me," he said. "I don't doubt that one of you is Maurice Ormsdale, and that the other is his sister, but I can't tell you apart. Which is which?"

There was no reply, but it was not necessary to ask again, for the confusion of one of the apparent youths, and the hot flush that had dyed his cheeks, revealed the truth to the detective.

"I know now," he said. "You are Miss Linda Ormsdale."

"Yes, I am," was the low, faltering answer. "I am Linda Ormsdale, and I have been playing the part of my brother.

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 203.

DELICIOUS FREE TUCK HAMPERS FOR READERS. SEE THE "BOYS' FRIEND" 1^o TO-DAY.

It was I whom you saw last night on the claim at Bitter Creek!"

"I never suspected it. I was completely deceived. And why have you been carrying on this masquerade, Miss Ormsdale?"

"I will tell you, Mr. Blake."

And the girl briefly did so, making all clear in as few words as possible. She and her brother having separated, after their dramatic meeting in the forest, Maurice Ormsdale had gone on to Stewart, and Linda had made her way to the claim, to find on arriving there that Barking Otter had disappeared. She had brought with her an outfit of male attire, purchased in Canada, on the chance of its being of service to her, and she had got into it because she had felt that it would protect her from being molested by the rough miners, and would the better enable her to hold the claim should an attempt be made to jump it.

"I was not afraid in that lonely place," she went on; "but I was worried on account of my brother and the Indian. Then, as you know, Barking Otter came last night, just after you had driven those ruffians off, and while you were lying unconscious he told me his story. He had been captured by Garrick Vullamy and his companions, and robbed of the paper my brother had given him to take care of. And the next evening he succeeded in making his escape, after Maurice had also been captured as he was on the way back from Stewart. Otter was anxious that we should try to rescue my brother at once, so I set off with him, leaving a message for you. It was a long chase, and while we were following the trail we fell into a trap, and I was caught and brought on here. I don't know what became of the Indian, but I fear he was killed."

"No, he is not dead," said Sexton Blake.

And he told briefly of the disaster that had befallen Barking Otter and the hound, and how he and the lad, having also tumbled down the shaft, had found their way to the stronghold of the outlaws.

"All may yet end well," he continued. "I have no doubt that Pedro and the Redskin are alive, and I trust that we will be able to rescue them. You must admit, Miss Ormsdale, that you have acted hastily. It would have been better if you had confided in me last night. Why did you not do so?"

"I—I was ashamed," faltered the girl, her face flushing scarlet again. "I did not want you to know who I was while I was wearing these clothes."

"It was nothing to be ashamed of," declared the detective. "Quite the contrary. It was a splendid thing for you to do, and I admire your pluck!"

"So do I, Mr. Blake," said Maurice Ormsdale, looking with affection at his sister. "Linda is as brave and plucky as any man!"

"You are right, my dear fellow," Blake answered. "She is a noble girl, and you may well be proud of her. But we are forgetting that we are in danger. Our enemies are probably aware of the fact that the hole into which Tinker and I fell leads down to the subterranean river, and, if so, they have been drawing near while we were talking. We would have no chance against such numbers, so we must be off without delay!"

"But what of the papers that Garrick Vullamy stole from the Redskin? Is that scoundrel to keep them?"

"Never mind about the papers now. We will try to recover them later; and if we fail, we will find some other means of proving your identity. The first thing is to escape from the clutches of Garrick Vullamy and his companions!"

"Let us go at once, Mr. Blake," urged Linda Ormsdale, with a gleam of fright in her eyes. "Be quick, Maurice! The thought of our wicked cousin terrifies me! If he gets us into his power again, there will be no mercy for us. We shall all be put to death!"

"But how are we going to get out of the cavern?" put in Tinker. "That is the question!"

"I will show you," the girl declared eagerly. "I know the way. On the other side of the stream there is a passage that leads to the open air!"

"Come, then!" said Sexton Blake. "There is no time to be wasted. As it is, those ruffians may by now have entered the—"

He paused abruptly, having heard a slight noise, and it had no more than flashed upon him that escape was cut off, that the outlaws must have already returned and crossed the trunk of the tree, when Black Dan came diving through the hole in the wall, closely followed by Garrick Vullamy and his servant and the rest of the evil crew.

"Good gracious, here they are!" cried Maurice Ormsdale. And, with clenched fists, with the fury of desperation, he sprang upon Garrick Vullamy, who grappled with him, and pinned him against the wall. Linda shrank back, pale with horror, and looked on while her brother and Tinker and the detective offered a futile resistance. Against such odds there

had been no chance from the first. There was a short, sharp struggle, a scuffling of feet, mingled with hoarse, snarling voices, and then, villainy having triumphed, Blake and his three companions lay helpless on the floor, with their wrists and ankles bound.

Garrick Vullamy stood over them, with grim menace and satisfaction in his eyes. Herod Mauley, who was very white, glanced at the captives, and then at his master, his own evil eyes reflecting something of the elation that was felt by the man whom he served.

"You will be sorry for this, Black Dan!" the detective said quietly. "Mark my words!"

"You can't frighten me by your croaking!" the outlaw replied, with an oath. "I am playing a safe game. You got the best of me down in Arizona, Sexton Blake, and I haven't forgotten what I owe you. It is my turn now, and I am going to take good care that you don't cross my path again! As for these young people, I haven't any grudge against them. But business is business, and as I've made a bargain with my pal Vullamy—"

"That is my affair, and it does not concern Mr. Blake!" Garrick Vullamy curtly interrupted. "Come, Dan!" he added. "I want to have a talk with you."

The band of ruffians, among whom was the man Blake had attacked and stunned, withdrew one by one through the narrow aperture. And Black Dan, going last, took the lantern with him, and then hung a blanket across the outer side of the doorway, so that the four prisoners were left in darkness.

"Linda!" her brother said huskily. "Linda!"

He called in vain, for the girl had swooned, and could not answer him. Silence fell, save for a confused murmur of voices beyond the chamber, and the sound of the subterranean river hissing and gurgling through its rocky channel. Maurice Ormsdale lay with open eyes, numb and sick with dread; but Sexton Blake and the lad, though they, too, were in the grip of black, ghastly despair, were so exhausted by the long day's march that they soon sank into a heavy, dreamless slumber. — —

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

What Blake Heard—Flung to Death—The Creeping Horror.

"TINKER!"

There was no reply at first, but when the lad's name had been twice more uttered, in a low tone, he stirred, and turned his head towards his master, who was close to one side of him.

"Did you speak, guv'nor?" he said.

"Yes; I want to talk to you," said Sexton Blake.

"Where am I? What is the matter with my legs and arms? Oh, I remember now! I remember all! We were caught by those—"

"Hush! Not so loud! Are the others awake?"

"I don't think so, guv'nor."

They were not. It was evident from the deep and regular breathing of Maurice Ormsdale and his sister, who were lying several yards away, that they were in a state of merciful oblivion.

"They are sleeping soundly, and I am glad of it," said the detective, in a whisper. "I shrink from revealing to them what they will know all too soon."

"Have you something to tell me that you don't want them to hear?" Tinker inquired.

"Yes, that's right. I awoke a few minutes ago—I have no idea how long I slept—and since then I have been listening to the conversation of Black Dan and his companions, who have now settled their plans, and are eating and drinking. I must prepare you for the worst, my boy. I know what we may expect."

"What is it, guv'nor? Don't be afraid to tell me. There is no hope for any of us, I suppose?"

"None whatever," Blake answered. "There is no mercy to be looked for. I must explain," he went on, after a pause, "that some months ago, before the finding of gold on Bitter Creek, the Canadian Mounted Police were so hot on the trail of the outlaws that they fled to this part of the country, and while roaming about discovered this cavern, and adapted it to their needs by bridging the stream with the dead tree that had lodged on the opposite bank. They also discovered, a short distance down the subterranean river, near to where it issues into the open air, a pool, to which they have given the name of the Black Cauldron. It is circular in shape, hemmed in by steep walls of rock, and it has only a narrow outlet that is choked with boulders. Anything that is carried into it remains there, floating round and round on the eddy water."

"And we are to be—" The lad left the sentence unfinished.

"No, not us. The Black Cauldron is to receive Maurice Ormsdale and his sister, or will be drowned there, or on the way to it, after they have been thrown into the stream with their limbs free. The papers that prove the young man's identity will be first put in one of his pockets, in a water-proof covering. When a few days have elapsed, Herod Mauley will go to the settlement on Bitter Creek, and will state that while on a prospecting trip he saw two bodies drifting on the pool. He will guide a party of miners to the spot, and the bodies will be recovered. Their identities will be established by means of the papers, and it will be supposed that they were accidentally drowned.

"Meanwhile Garrick Vullamy will be on his way back to England—he is too shrewd to stop in this neighbourhood—and in due course he will be put in possession of the estate that he covets—the inheritance that belongs to these young cousins whom he intends to murder. And when he is a rich man, he will reward the outlaws for their assistance."

"By heavens, how awful! What dreadful wickedness, gov'nor!"

"It fairly makes my blood boil! It is maddening to think that we are helpless!"

"And—and what about ourselves?"

"Our fate will be worse, my boy. When that poor girl and her brother have

been disposed of, our captors will cross the stream, throw the tree into the water, and depart from the cavern, not to return. We will be left here to die—to perish by slow starvation."

"Oh, that is too terrible!" gasped Tinker. "Must it be? Is there no way to escape—no way to save ourselves and Maurice Ormsdale and his sister?"

"There is no way," the detective solemnly replied—"there is no hope. My wrists are securely tied, and I have no doubt that it is the same with you and the others. And even if we were not bound, what chance of escape should we have? Not the slightest. We are doomed, my poor boy! We must make up our minds to that."

"I can hardly realise it, gov'nor. We shall have to tell Miss Ormsdale and her brother, I suppose. How much longer have they got to live?"

"A very short time, I should imagine. Probably until morning—perhaps not so long as that. There is nothing to keep the scoundrels here."

They were silent for a little time, listening to the breathing of the sleepers near by, and to the sound of low voices without the chamber. A great horror was upon them, gripping their hearts like the clutch of an icy hand. Despair as black as the darkness around them chilled their blood.

"To die of starvation in such a place as this!" the lad said huskily. "There can't be anything much worse. I will try to be brave, though. I will show you that I can be. I am glad Pedro is not here, gov'nor. And yet I should feel better if he was with us."

"Don't speak of him!" begged Sexton Blake, in a tone of anguish. "Poor, noble dog, the truest friend that ever man had! What will become of him if he escapes from the cavern? Better by far that he should share our fate, my boy, than be left to grieve for us—to wander in this desolate wilderness until he—"

"Hark!" Tinker interrupted.

The muttering voices had ceased, and there was a noise of shuffling feet. The blanket that screened the doorway was jerked aside, and through the opening, one by one, came Black Dan and his comrades, on evil work intent.

"Be quick about it, boys!" bade the outlaw.

Herod Mauley, standing by the wall, held the lantern that



As the Indian turned, the baying hound sprang upon him, and when they had struggled for an instant, against the skyline, they swayed and fell.

gave light to the others, three of whom lifted Maurice Ormsdale from the floor, while three more picked the girl up. And the brother and sister, thus rudely awakened from slumber, gazed wildly at the merciless faces of their captors, and divined what the intrusion meant—or judged, at least, that some imminent peril threatened them.

"What are they going to do with us, Mr. Blake?" asked the youth. "Do you know?"

The detective's lips moved, but what he said was inaudible—incoherent. He could not break the awful truth to these young people, nor could he offer them any comfort. On his pallid features, however, could be read what he did not utter. Linda Ormsdale, courageous though she was, yielded to a womanly impulse and screamed hysterically; while her brother, whose anguish was too deep for words, struggled fiercely and vainly.

They were carried off before the eyes of Blake and the lad, who were dumb with horror. Garrick Vullamy and his servant glanced vindictively at the two prisoners who were to be left behind, and Black Dan, having taken the lantern from Mauley, and waited until the last, paused on the threshold of the chamber.

"You won't see any more of us, Sexton Blake," he said mockingly. "You are in your grave now—you and the cub who helps you to play your cunning games. Here you will lie until your bones have rotted, and there is nothing left of you but dust. How do you like my revenge?"

"You will be sorry for it," the detective answered, "when you find a rope around your neck. That day will come."

"I guess it's a long way off yet," was the contemptuous reply, "but if it was to be to-morrow, I should deal with you just the same."

With that the outlaw turned and vanished, and as Blake and Tinker listened in expectant dread—they were in such a position that they could see nothing—they heard pitiful screams, a scuffle, and a raving, protesting voice. The screams ceased, and in quick succession there came two heavy splashes.

"By heavens!" panted the lad. "They have been thrown into the stream! They are struggling in that mad current!"

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"It will be a short struggle," said Sexton Blake. "It will soon be over."

"I hope the girl has swooned, gov'nor!"

"It is likely that she has, my boy, for she is quiet now."

The light of the lantern, which had been shining into the chamber, now disappeared, leaving visible only a dim glow from the dying embers of the fire. There was a confused sound of footsteps as Black Dan and his companions made their way over the precarious bridge, and then another splash, louder and heavier, told that the tree had been dislodged from its hold and dropped into the subterranean river. There was no longer a bridge. Even should the captives be able to get their limbs free, they could not escape from the cavern.

"Good-bye, Sexton Blake!" floated Black Dan's voice across the chasm. "Good-bye for ever!"

"Serves you right!" called Garrick Vullamy. "If you hadn't meddled with my affairs down in Suffolk that night, you would not be in this position!"

There were peals of harsh laughter, then receding steps, and then utter silence. The wicked, merciless work had been accomplished. The outlaws were treading the path that led to the open air, the drowned bodies of Maurice Ormsdale and his sister were drifting on the eddying waters of the Black Cauldron, and Tinker and the detective were entombed in the bowels of the earth, with no hope of being rescued.

"Heaven help us to endure our fate with courage!" Sexton Blake said bitterly.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

A Strange Noise—The Dawn of Hope—The Rescuer.

AFTER desperate and futile attempts to loosen the cords that bound their wrists—attempts persevered in until strength failed—Blake and the lad had slept, and awoke, and slept again. They were now awake once more, lying there helpless in pitch darkness. Though they had lost all account of time, it seemed to them that many hours must have elapsed since the departure of Black Dan and his companions. Harrowing indeed were their feelings. From picturing the fate that had overtaken Linda Ormsdale and her brother, and wondering what had become of Pedro and the Indian, they turned to contemplation of what was in store for themselves.

They were suffering now from hunger and thirst, from cramp in their limbs, and they knew that their sufferings must steadily increase, hour by hour, until existence would be a torture to them. And to add to their misery—to deepen their horror—was the knowledge that they were in a living tomb, far from the world of light and sunshine. They must wait for the King of Terrors in his worst form.

"Do you suppose we will linger for days?" Tinker asked hoarsely.

"I—I don't know," the detective replied, in a faltering voice. "I can't bear to think of it. Ah, if only you could be spared! I do not fear what is to come, but that you should—"

"Don't worry about me, gov'nor. I'm not a coward."

"But you are so young, my boy. Life holds so much promise for you."

"I shouldn't want to live without you and Pedro. Let us try to be cheerful, gov'nor. I've a sort of feeling that we may escape, after all. We have got out of scrapes just as bad as the one we are in."

"But there will be no getting out of this one. It is hopeless."

Sexton Blake spoke almost fiercely, and the slender ray of comfort to which the lad had been trying to cling died within him. More savagely, with sharper pangs, the horror gripped them, and they lay thinking, realising what it meant to perish by the lingering agonies of starvation, until drowsiness began again to steal upon their tortured senses. And then, as they were about to drop off to sleep, their attention was attracted by a vague, curious noise that was audible above the murmur of the subterranean river.

"Hark!" said Tinker. "Do you hear that?"

"Yes, I have been listening to it," the detective answered.

"What can it be?"

"I have no idea, my boy, nor can I tell where it comes from."

"Can anybody be out there?" asked the lad, as he glanced towards the doorway, which he knew to be close to his left.

"No, it is impossible," Blake replied. "How could that be when the bridge has been removed? I imagine that what we hear is a piece of driftwood scraping along the rocky bank of the stream."

"It is not that, gov'nor. The sound is clearer now, and I believe it is on the other side of us, opposite to the doorway."

"You are right, my boy!"

They continued to listen—at first with indifference, and then THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 203.

with growing curiosity—as the mysterious noise grew louder and more distinct—a muffled, throbbing noise, that now rose, now fell. It went on steadily, without ceasing; and when at length there was heard a faint, wheezing sound like a snort, there flashed on the detective an idea that went through him like an electric shock.

"Can it be Pedro?" he exclaimed.

"Oh, gov'nor, if it should be!" cried Tinker.

There was such delicious joy in the thought that for a moment it turned them dizzy—held them dumb. Despair had turned to hope, and their hearts and pulses were beating to a swift, riotous measure. But dared they hope? Was the faithful bloodhound indeed near by? What else could it mean? It was now obvious—it could not be doubted—that some animal was digging and scratching behind a thin part of the wall of the chamber. And what animal could it be if it was not Pedro? It was natural to assume, since he had shown so much intelligence on previous occasions, that he had wandered down through the lower depths of the great cavern and found his way by instinct through some passage to the vicinity of where his beloved master was a prisoner.

"If it should be!" repeated the lad. "I believe it is, gov'nor. What else can that noise mean? The good old dog knows that we are here, and he is trying to get to us."

"You are right!" declared Blake. "There is hope, my boy. But don't be too confident. There is a barrier between us and the way to freedom, and if we are to be saved we must contrive to—"

Leaving the sentence unfinished, he threw all his strength into a desperate effort. Again and again he tugged and writhed, until his muscles cracked, while the muffled sound of digging went on; and at length, as he was about to abandon the attempt, the fetters around his wrists yielded to the strain, and one of the weakened strands snapped.

"Free at last!" he panted. "My hands are free! I will soon attend to you, my boy. Have patience!"

His fingers were busy with the cords that bound his legs together, and when he had quickly unknotted them he turned to Tinker, and succeeded in less than a minute in releasing his wrists and ankles. The two having risen on their cramped limbs, trembling with excitement, Sexton Blake drew a match-box from his pocket, and struck a vesta. And as the yellow flame illuminated the darkness, and revealed on the farther side of the chamber a triangular patch of gravelly soil in the surface of the rock, the spot suddenly yawned open, and down came a shower of loose earth and pebbles.

"Look, look!" cried the lad. "There he is, gov'nor!"

It was Pedro, his eyes red-rimmed and half blinded, his massive head and big paws caked with damp soil. As he scented the presence of those he loved so well—he could see them but indistinctly—there burst from him a deep-throated bay that was as eloquent with joy and welcome as a human voice could have been; and then, having squeezed himself through the gap that he had made, he sprang alternately upon his master and Tinker, and licked their hands and faces, and pranced around them, while the hollow space rang with his yelps of frantic delight.

"Pedro, Pedro!" exclaimed the lad. "Good old dog!"

"Dear old chap!" cried Blake. "What a splendid thing you have done! I believe you have saved our lives."

In darkness—the match had meanwhile burnt out—they both embraced the noble hound, with tears in their eyes, with a choking sensation in their throats. To have him with them again was almost happiness enough, and for the moment they forgot how much his coming meant to them. Hope had lightened their black despair, though they could not be certain that there was no insurmountable difficulties ahead of them.

"Now let us be off," said the detective, when he had grown a little calmer. "We must find a way to freedom."

"I wish we could take the nearest way," replied Tinker. "Just across the stream is the passage that leads up to the open air. If we could only get over to it!"

"It would be madness to try, my boy. You know how fast the current runs. We should be swept down to the Black Cauldron."

"Yes, that's true. What are we to do, then, gov'nor?"

"We must trust to the dog, who will probably guide us to the high place from which we fell into the river. The shaft that ascends from there is steep and slippery, but I think we shall be able to climb it."

"We will have to do it," said the lad. "That's all there is about it. I wonder what has become of Barking Otter?" he added. "We may find him wandering in the cavern."

"I hope we will," Blake answered, as he struck another vesta. "It is not likely that the Redskin was much hurt by his fall, since the dog escaped injury. Come, my boy! Lead the way, Pedro!"

The hound, understanding what was expected of him,

uttered an eager whine, and wriggled through the gap in the wall. He looked back intelligently at his companions, who followed him into a shaft that was no more than two or three feet in width, and went slowly on, farther and farther from the chamber where they had waited for death. The grim spectre of starvation had loosed its hold of them, but their hearts were heavy with sorrow, and they felt a righteous thirst for vengeance as they thought of the terrible fate that had befallen Maurice Ormsdale and his sister.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

Saved—The Cry of Distress—The Black Cauldron.

"HOW long do you suppose it is since we started, gov'nor?"

"I can't tell you, but it is not as long as it has seemed to us."

"I don't believe Pedro knows where he is going."

"Instinct will guide him. I feel, my boy, that Providence sent him to save our lives."

"But we have missed that shaft, gov'nor, and I am afraid we are not going to find it," Tinker said gloomily.

"Then we will find another way out," Sexton Blake replied. "Keep up your spirits."

He tried to speak cheerfully, but there was a faltering in his voice—a note he could not hide—which made it clear that he was a prey to keen anxiety, as was the lad. And they had reason to be anxious. For a long interval, during which they must have covered three or four miles, they had been wandering in the vast honeycomb of a cavern, groping slowly after the bloodhound, and in places with difficulty, as he led them from one passage to another. They were weary and footsore, suffering from hunger and thirst; and for some time, their scanty supply of matches having been exhausted, they had been in pitch darkness.

They were lost to all sense of direction, and not once had they heard any sound to indicate that they were in the vicinity of the subterranean river, above which they had expected to be led. To reach the mouth of the lateral shaft into which they had first fallen they would have had to mount to a considerable height, and as they had not done so, it was evident that Pedro had not followed the route by which he had come. Unless instinct should yet take him to the shaft, or to some other exit, all three must ultimately perish. Such was the present situation, and it was one to justify grave apprehensions.

Still on and on the little group went, the dog in front, and Blake and the lad in single file behind him, keeping as close as they could to their faithful friend, whose frequent whimpering guided them. Now their outstretched hands touched slimy walls, and now, as the passage widened, they groped in empty space. The ordeal was a strain on their nerves. They were oppressed, chilled by the thought that they were deep in the bowels of the earth, under thousands of tons of rock and soil. Ghastly was their dread of being entombed here for all time, their fate unknown.

"We may as well give up," said Tinker. "There is no hope for us."

"Don't talk like that," Sexton Blake answered huskily. "There is hope as long as we have strength to drag ourselves along."

"I don't believe it, gov'nor. We shall never get out of this awful place."

"Have courage, my boy. Don't despair. There is a way to freedom, and we must find it."

"I am too tired to go much further."

"I will help you, Tinker. Give me your hand."

They were silent again, too wretched to speak. There was no sound but their laboured breathing, and an occasional whine from Pedro, as they trudged slowly and blindly on. For another half-hour they wandered aimlessly, while their fears increased, and the shadow of death loomed nearer; and then, as they were beginning to yield to utter despair, the hound gave a yelp of excitement, and at the same instant a glad cry burst from Blake's lips.

"Look, my boy! Ah, look there!"

"At last!" exclaimed Tinker. "We are saved, thank Heaven!"

They were wild with joy. A glimmer of pale light was visible beyond them, and it brightened, grew larger, as they hastened towards it, moving at such reckless speed that they bruised themselves on the rough walls to right and left. Having traversed the passage for thirty or forty yards, they reached a narrow, ragged cleft; and when they had squeezed through it, at the heels of Pedro, they emerged in the open air, in glorious sunshine that was streaming down from a cloudless blue sky.

Behind them grey boulders were heaped high, and in front and on both sides was a level forest of timber and scrub, with grassy glades showing here and there.

"Heaven has been merciful to us," Sexton Blake said fervently.

"It seems too good to be true," replied the lad, his voice quivering with emotion. "I thought we should never see daylight again."

For a few seconds they stood in silent rapture, with grateful hearts, drinking in the blessed air of freedom, while the dog, who was as delighted as themselves, capered around them and barked; and then, from no great distance, there floated to their ears a shrill sound that startled them.

"What was that?" asked Tinker.

"It was a cry of distress," declared Blake. "Somebody is in need of help yonder."

"I believe that is the Redskin, gov'nor."

"Most likely it is, my boy. He, too, has escaped from the cavern, and is in danger."

"And he knows that we are near. He has heard Pedro."

A second time the lusty cry thrilled them, and the next instant they were hastening in the direction from which it came, their fatigue forgotten. The dog had bounded ahead of them and vanished, and when they had dashed through the thickets for a space of a hundred yards, guided by more shrill appeals, and hearing also a roaring noise that swelled louder as they ran, they broke from cover within a dozen paces of a bronzed figure that they at once recognised as Barking Otter.

He was kneeling at the edge of a cliff, pulling with both hands on the end of a tough, slender vine that he had torn from the trunk of a near-by tree; and Pedro, squatted by his side, was howling mournfully.

In a trice Sexton Blake and the lad had darted over to the spot, and were gazing into what they knew must be the Black Cauldron. They saw the dark, foam-flecked pool swirling in a rocky basin with steep walls, the driftwood that was revolving on the eddying tide, and the narrow slits through which the stream poured in and out. And then, in the same sweeping glance, they made a discovery that filled them with amazement and joy. They perceived straight below them, on a shallow ledge of rock that jutted out at a height of four feet above the water, the figures of Linda Ormsdale and her brother.

The subterranean stream had been merciful to Garrick Vullamy's victims. Having fought with the mad current, and kept themselves afloat until they were carried into the pool, they had succeeded in climbing upon the projecting shelf, where they must have been since some time during the previous night. And now they had been discovered by Barking Otter, who had found his way out of the cavern, and had heard the brother and sister calling for help. He had torn the clinging vine from the tree, and lowered it to Maurice Ormsdale, who had noosed one end of it under Linda's shoulders. But the young Redskin had been enfeebled by what he had gone through in the past two days, and his strength was not equal to the task of raising the girl, light weight though she was. With intense relief on his face he looked at Sexton Blake, who shouted down, in a voice that rang above the sound of the raging waters:

"All right, Ormsdale! Courage, my brave girl! We'll soon have you out of that."

As he spoke he took hold of the pliant cable, Tinker doing the same, and between them, with what assistance Barking Otter could give, they hauled Linda Ormsdale out of the jaws of death, and over the edge of the cliff. As she fell forward on the grass, half in a swoon, Blake slipped the noosed vine free of her, and flung it to the youth, who deftly and quickly fastened himself in it. And a few seconds later he too had been dragged up from his precarious perch.

"Thank Heaven!" he gasped. "I will never forget what you have done for me and Linda. We have been on that rocky shelf since last night, and we had quite lost hope."

And he smiled wanly as he shook hands with Blake and the Redskin.

It was as if the dead had come back to life. The murderous designs of Black Dan and his comrades had failed, the boiling pool having spared those who had been carried into it. Brother and sister had been saved, and though they were greatly exhausted, and faint from want of food, they soon rallied to such an extent that Sexton Blake judged that they would be able to travel.

"Have you got those papers, Ormsdale?" he asked.

"Yes, I have them," the young man replied. "They were put into my pocket by Garrick Vullamy, just before Linda and I were thrown into the stream. But I can't understand why he did that."

"I will explain at another time," was Blake's answer. "A fiendish crime has been frustrated, and I hold the threads that will lead to the punishment of all concerned. The game is ours, Tinker," he went on, turning to the lad. "We will have Herod Mauley in our clutches in a day or so, and if he confesses, as I believe he will, we shall be able to trap the gang of outlaws. As for Garrick Vullamy—" He

paused abruptly, and a grim smile hovered at the corners of his lips; a gleam of satisfaction played in his eyes for an instant.

"It would be a good idea to give the arch-soundrel plenty of rope," he said slowly, resuming his train of thought. "Yes, I'll do it. I will let him get to England, and keep him under an illusion, and then drop on him when he believes that he has won the prize he has been striving for. And now to be off. We will get as far as we can before nightfall."

With that he led the way, Pedro trotting by his side. And with weary, lagging steps, Linda Ormsdale, leaning on the arm of her brother, the little party turned from the Black Cauldron, and set their faces towards the distant mining-camp on Bitter Creek.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

A Startling Surprise—Conclusion.

EARLY one afternoon, when London was sweltering under a blazing sun, Mr. Garrick Vullamy stepped from a first-class compartment of a train that had just pulled into Liverpool Street Station, and walked with a brisk, firm gait along the platform, humming under his breath an air from a popular opera.

Having passed the barrier, and made his way out of the station, he glanced at his watch, and then got into a hansom. "Panton's Hotel!" he said to the driver.

The hotel named was one of the small, old-fashioned establishments that exist in the vicinity of Covent Garden, and when Mr. Garrick Vullamy had arrived there, and had inquired for Mr. William Henshaw—he did not give his own name—he was taken to an upper floor in the lift, and ushered into a private sitting-room, where he found himself in the presence of a slim man, who had tow-coloured hair and a stubbly moustache.

"Ah, Mauley, how are you?"

"Very well, sir; and very glad to see you again. You are sharp on time. I was afraid you might not get my letter until this afternoon."

"No; it came by the first post this morning, and I travelled up to town by the 11.50 express."

Master and servant shook hands, and a brief pause ensued. It was evident, as they looked at each other, that they were thinking of the circumstances under which they had parted several weeks ago, in the wild region that was thousands of miles away from England. The room was not well-lighted, and as Herod Mauley had his back to the window his features were in shadow.

"I trust that you approve of my course, sir," he said. "I felt that it would be best, instead of coming down to the Grange, to put up here for the present in an assumed name."

"That was hardly necessary," replied Garrick Vullamy.

"It is supposed down in Suffolk that you left my service to take another place in London, and when you reappear at the Grange I will let it be understood that you did not like your new berth, and that I was glad to have you return to me. And now to speak of other matters. What have you got to tell me? Is everything in satisfactory shape?"

"Everything, sir," Herod Mauley answered. "There has been no hitch as far as my work was concerned. What I have done leaves nothing to be desired."

"So I judged. I have felt easy in mind since I received the newspaper you sent to me. A copy of the 'Vancouver Journal,' I think it was, in which was a paragraph stating that a youth and a girl had been accidentally drowned while prospecting for gold in the neighbourhood of Bitter Creek, and that it was obvious, from papers found on the young man's person, that the two were brother and sister, that they were orphans, and that their mother had been a sister of a Mr. Job Prendergast, of Suffolk, in England."

"Yes, that is the way it read. I wrote that paragraph myself, sir, and had it put in the journal."

"And the papers, Mauley? Where are they?"

"They are in my possession, sir. I have them with me."

"I am glad to hear it. And what of Black Dan and his comrades?"

"They have left the mining region, and are further down country. I had a talk with them a couple of weeks ago, before I started across the continent to sail for Quebec."

"Then all is well, Mauley?"

"All is well, sir, speaking for myself."

"Good!" exclaimed Garrick Vullamy, rubbing his hands. "Very good! I am confident that we have nothing to fear—nothing to worry about!"

"Not even Sexton Blake?" answered Herod Mauley.

"No, not even him. As he has been in the habit of going abroad, and keeping his movements quiet, his prolonged absence has not caused any alarm yet, so far as I can learn. Sooner or later he and the lad will be sought for, but they will never be found, and it is not likely that you or I will be suspected of having had a hand in their disappearance. We are quite secure, Mauley. The young people who stood in my path have been removed, and I have won a rich prize. The law will put me in undisputed possession of Danesford Hall, and an income of £20,000 a year. Ah, what a life we will lead! It was a risky game, and that infernal detective came near to beating us, but we got the better of him in the end. Dead men tell no tales, and we can be sure that—"

Garrick Vullamy paused abruptly and chuckled, and took a cigar from his pocket; and when he had set it alight, and had blown a thick cloud of smoke, he gave a violent start.

"By George!" he gasped. "It is Sexton Blake!"

"Yes, you scoundrel, it is Sexton Blake!" sternly replied the detective, who, under cover of the smoke, had deftly whipped off his false moustache and wig, and revealed a clean-shaven countenance.

With an oath, Garrick Vullamy swung round, meaning to make a dash for freedom; but at that instant, as Blake whistled, the door was thrown open, and into the room stepped Inspector Widgeon, followed by Maurice Ormsdale and his sister, and by Tinker and Pedro. And before the wretched man could lift a finger Inspector Widgeon had pounced upon him and snapped a pair of steel bracelets on his wrists.

"You are my prisoner, Mr. Vullamy," he cried, "and you know why! You are wanted by the Canadian authorities, and I warn you that anything you may say will be used in evidence against you."

It was a staggering surprise for Garrick Vullamy. For a moment he glared at the little party, shrinking from the young couple whom he had believed to have been drowned in the wilderness pool; and then, white to the lips, he collapsed, and dropped limply into a chair. The wild gleam in his eyes, his twitching limbs and distorted features, marked the terror that he could not conceal.

"Your sins have found you out," Sexton Blake said to him, "and you will have to pay the penalty. Your servant Mauley has confessed. He and the outlaws are in a Canadian gaol, and before long you will join them. And now, Widgeon," he added, "let us move over to Bow Street, where your prisoner will be formally charged."

In due course Garrick Vullamy was extradited, but during the voyage across the Atlantic, knowing what was in store for him, he found an opportunity of jumping overboard, and was drowned. As for Herod Mauley, and Black Dan and his comrades, they were tried and convicted, and sentenced to long terms of imprisonment in British Columbia.

Though the claim that Maurice Ormsdale had staked out at Bitter Creek proved to be almost worthless, neither he nor his sister were greatly disappointed, since they had inherited a country mansion in England and an income of £20,000 a year. They are now living at Danesford Hall, but Linda Ormsdale's heart has found its mate; and in the near future, before many months have passed, she will be the bride of a young Suffolk squire. And Sexton Blake, knowing this, and knowing also of Tinker's secret passion for the young lady, takes a quiet delight in speaking of the approaching marriage, and observing the scowl that darkens the lad's brow at the mention of the prospective bridegroom.

And what of Barking Otter? Free as the wind, a child of Nature, he roves with horse and gun over the wild western land, thinking often of those to whom he was so devoted, and may see again some day, if they can persuade him to pay a visit to England.

THE END.

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The juniors stuck to their rehearsals enthusiastically, and each one of them did his utmost to perfect his "turn." The St. Jim's Empire seemed to be assured of success!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

No Admittance for Fags.

"Gussy, old man—" "Weally, Wally—" "Hold on a minute, Gussy," said Wally, otherwise D'Arcy minor, of the Third Form at St. Jim's. "Hold on!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth, had to hold on, as Wally turned it. His cheerful minor was standing in the doorway of Study No. 6, in the Fourth-Form passage, and he had a hand upon either doorpost, barring egress from the study.

Arihur Augustus halted.

"Weally, Wally, I am in a fwrightful huwwy!" "Bad form to be in a hurry," said Wally. "I want to speak to you; it's important."

"I'm goin' to a meetin'—"

"You can go to the meeting afterwards. I suppose it's only one of your giddy Fourth-Form meetings," said Wally. "You see, I've promised to stand a feed to some fellows in the Third, and I find that the cash has run out."

"You are an extravaganant young wascal, Wally. How-eh, aftah the meetin'—"

"Blow the meeting!"

"Are you coming, Gussy?" It was the voice of Jack Blake from the staircase. "You'll be late for the meeting, you ass! Herries and Dig have gone in."

"I'm comin', Blake!"

"Hold on, Gussy!" said Wally persuasively. "Your giddy old meeting will do any time, but Jameson and Curly are waiting for me. Suppose—"

"Pway let me pass, Wally!"

"Rats! Suppose you hand me—"

"I have just changed my clothes, Wally, and my cash is in the othah pockets. Aftah the meetin'—"

"I don't mind waiting while you look for it, Gussy. I could make seven-and-six do, if you can't spring half-a-quid," said Wally cheerfully. "Now, I don't want to rumple your beautiful clothes, but you're not going out of this study till you've settled up. I can't put off important affairs on account of your duffy Form meetings."

"Weally, Wally—"

"Shell out, old son!" said Wally. "I— Ow, ow, ow!"

A hand that seemed to grip like a vice seized Wally by the back of the collar, and he was lifted off his feet and swung back into the passage. He whirled round, and found himself looking at the cheerful, smiling face of Tom Merry of the Shell.

"Ow!" gasped Wally. "Leggo! Look here—"

"No time to talk," said Tom Merry cheerfully. "Important meeting. Gussy, are you going to be late?"

"I am quite weady, Tom Mewwy. I will speak to you aftahwards, Wally."

"Look here!" roared Wally. "Ow!"

Tom Merry gently lifted the fag off his feet, jerked him into the study, and plumped him down breathless into the armchair there. Wally gasped for breath, and glared at the hero of the Shell. Tom Merry shook a warning finger at him.

"Don't you interrupt fellows going to important meetings," he said. "Come on, Gussy! Buck up, or the New House chaps will be there first."

And Tom Merry linked his arm in Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's, and rushed him away down the passage at a speed that took his breath away.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Buck up!"

"Weally— Oh!"

D'Arcy was rushed downstairs to the open doorway of the Hobby Club-room. Tom Merry rushed him into the room, and bumped him against the table, and released him.

"There you are!" he gasped.

"You uttah ass!"

"Eh?"

"You have wumpled my jacket, you sillay ass, and thwown me into quite a fluttah!" exclaimed the swell of St. Jim's, groping for his eyeglass. "I wegard you as an uttah ass!"

"That's the kind of gratitude a fellow has to expect from Gussy," said Monty Lowther of the Shell. "We might have left him out of the meeting."

"I should have wufused to be left out of the meetin'."

"Are we all here?" said Tom Merry, looking round the room, into which juniors were dropping in ones and twos. "Now—"

"I was speakin', Tom Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with a great deal of dignity.

"Yes, I know you were, Gussy," said Tom Merry, with THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 203.

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a nod. "You generally are. I think the meeting can open now. The most important chaps are here—myself—"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"And Manners and Lowther. We're letting you Fourth-Form chaps into this thing, but of course we expect you to behave yourselves. The New House chaps haven't come yet. If they don't turn up soon, we shall have to leave them out."

Tom Merry took his place at the head of the long table in the Hobby Club-room, and picked up a stump, and rapped on the table. The rap on the table was intended to impose silence, but it did not have the desired effect. There was a buzz of voices in the room. Blake, Herries, Digby, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the chums of the Fourth, seemed to be in a somewhat warlike mood.

The meeting in the Hobby Club-room had been called by the Terrible Three—Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther of the Shell—and the Fourth-Formers had come without knowing what it was about, and quite undecided as yet whether they were going to take part in the meeting, or to act the part of hecklers. They were equally prepared for either course. Study No. 6 was generally "up against" the Terrible Three, though they joined cordially enough with Tom Merry & Co. in conflicts with the fellows of the New House at St. Jim's—the common enemy.

"Look here—" began Jack Blake.

Rap, rap!

"Order!" called out Tom Merry. "As chairman of this meeting—"

"Who made you chairman, bedad?" inquired Reilly of the Fourth.

"Yaas, wathah! Who made you chairman, Tom Mewwy?"

"I called the meeting, didn't I, fathead?"

"I wefuse to be called a fathead!"

"Order!" shouted Lowther and Manners; and Kangaroo, of the Shell, joined in with his stentorian voice, "Order!"

"I wefuse to ordah—I mean—"

"The meeting is now open," said Tom Merry. "I have called this meeting—"

"Undah the cires, I considah—"

"Order!"

"But what's the blessed meeting about?" demanded Jack Blake. "Is it a jape against the New House?"

"Certainly not!" said Tom Merry loftily. "At a time like this, little things like House rows sink into insignificance."

"Into what?" howled Blake.

"Insignificance," said Tom Merry defiantly. "We have now reached an important and momentous epoch—"

"A which?" gasped Digby.

"Epoch. We stand upon the threshold—"

"Rot!" said Herries. "What on earth are you talking about? We're right in the room. Young Wally there is standing on the threshold."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ass!" said the chairman witheringly. "I was speaking in a figurative sense."

"Can't see much sense in saying we're on the threshold, when anybody with half an eye can see that we're not," said Herries obstinately.

"We stand upon the threshold of a new period—"

"Where did he get those words from?" gasped Blake. "I believe he's made that speech up, and learned it off from memory."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Don't interrupt!" said Tom Merry, turning rather red. "We have now reached an important and momentous epoch—"

"We've had that before."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Epoch," continued Tom Merry, unheeding, "and we stand upon the threshold—"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Look here, I can't wait while you talk this tosh," said Wally, coming into the room. "If you can make it seven-and-six, Gussy—"

"Kick that fag out!" shouted the chairman.

"Pway wetiah, Wally, deah boy!"

"Turn that fag out!"

"Fags not admitted!" bawled Monty Lowther.

"Clear out, you young rascal!"

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Wally snorted.

"I'll clear out when I— Oh! Oop!"

"Chuck him out!"

Kangaroo and Blake seized Wally by the shoulders. Fourth and Shell might have their private disputes, but they were agreed upon one point, that the Third Form had to be kept strictly in its place.

"Outside, you young bounder!"

"Ow, ow, ow! Yow!"

Wally went whirling through the doorway. At the same moment three juniors came along the passage. They were Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn of the Fourth Form—New House fellows. Wally met them without intending it, and with a terrific crash.

"Yoo-op!" roared Figgins.

"Oo-ow!"

"Oh!"

Fatty Wynn sat down, and Figgins went spinning across the passage. Kerr dodged just in time. Wally fell across Fatty Wynn, and there was a grunt of anguish from the Falstaff of the New House.

"Ow! Gr-r-r-roo! Draggimoff!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Jack Blake jerked Wally off the prostrate Fourth-Former and rolled the fag along the passage. Figgins & Co., looking very flushed and excited, came into the Hobby Club-room. Figgins pushed his cuffs back in an extremely suggestive way.

"Now, then, who threw that fag at me?"

"Order!"

"Accident, old chap!" grinned Kangaroo. "Quite unintentional. Look the door, somebody, or that young bounder will be coming back."

Digby locked the door. The next moment Wally was hammering on the outside of the thick oaken panels.

"Open this door, you duffers!"

"Buzz off!"

"No admittance for fags!"

"Wim away, Wally, deah boy!"

And D'Arcy minor, finding that there was indeed no admittance, bestowed a final terrific kick upon the door, and walked away in great wrath.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Great Wheeze.

"GENTLEMEN—"

"Hear, hear!"

"Gentlemen," said Tom Merry, rapping on the table—"or, rather, I won't call you gentlemen, I know you so well—"

"Bravo!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, I object to that remark. If you mean to imply that the gentlemen present are not gentlemen—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I see no cause whatever for wibald laughtah," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, jamming his eyeglass into his eye, and surveying the assembly. "I regard Tom Mewwy's remark as tactless in the extreme. I call upon him to withdraw it."

"Hear, hear!"

"Order!"

"Sit down!"

"I wefuse to sit down!"

Rap, rap, rap, rap!

"Gentlemen," roared Tom Merry, "I've got a big idea! I've got a dodge for raising funds for the football season, so that the Junior Football Club can start its bizney for the season with plenty of capital in hand."

"Now you're talking!" said Blake.

"Hear, hear!"

"I don't suppose there's any sense in it," went on Blake, "but we'll hear it. Go on!"

"Shut up, then! You chaps know, I suppose; that there are places in London and Manchester and other towns called music-halls?"

"I believe I've heard somebody speak of 'em," said Figgins sarcastically.

"They have shows and things—songs and dances and all sorts of

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turns," said Tom Merry, "and they rake in piles of money. They say that the music-halls are knocking the theatres into a cocked hat, and I dare say they are, for of course nobody would go to see a rotten modern play when he could see a good turn at a music-hall cheaper."

"Hear, hear!"

"Well, this is where the wheeze comes in. We've got a stage society in the junior Forms, and we've given performances—some of 'em good. But when we play Shakespeare nobody will come in unless he has a place in the cast, and you can't run a successful and paying play on these lines—all actors and no audience. When we give a concert, fellows who can't sing insist upon singing, and nobody wants to listen. I've come to the conclusion that if we want to give an entertainment to raise cash, we shall have to follow the modern movement, and give a music-hall show."

"Bai Jove!"

"Of course, we shall give a very high-class and refined show," said Tom Merry hastily. "Music-halls ain't what they used to be, you know. We shall have good songs, refined dances, good music, and so on, and I really think that if we did the thing well we should rake in a lot of gate-money. At such a time as this little things like House rows fade into insignificance."

"Speech again!" murmured Blake.

"Order!"

"Therefore, I call upon all the fellows to back me up, and help me form a committee to manage the show. New House and School House ought to stand shoulder to shoulder, to make things hum, you know," said Tom Merry. "My idea is to run a really good show, and charge for admission. We'll make the prices low to the fags—temper the wind to the shorn lamb, you know—and charge good prices for good seats to the seniors. If we run the show for a week, twice nightly—"

"Twice nightly——"

"My hat!"

"Certainly!" said Tom Merry firmly. "That's how the music-halls rake in the cash, you know. You give the audience good stuff, and let 'em get out before they're fed up, and let in a fresh lot. It's a ripping idea, and I don't see why we can't work it. If it can be done in London, it can be done here. You know that what St. Jim's thinks to-day England thinks to-morrow."

"Hear, hear!"

"We might even work in some improvements on what those London johnnies do," went on Tom Merry, waxing enthusiastic. "We've got brains here, you know, and if we think things out, we shall really knock 'em!"

"Yaas, watah! I don't mind offewin' to give a selection of tenah solos——"

"That would bring the house down!" remarked Lowther.

"Quite so, Lowthah!"

"Roof and all!" added Lowther.

"Weally, you ass——"

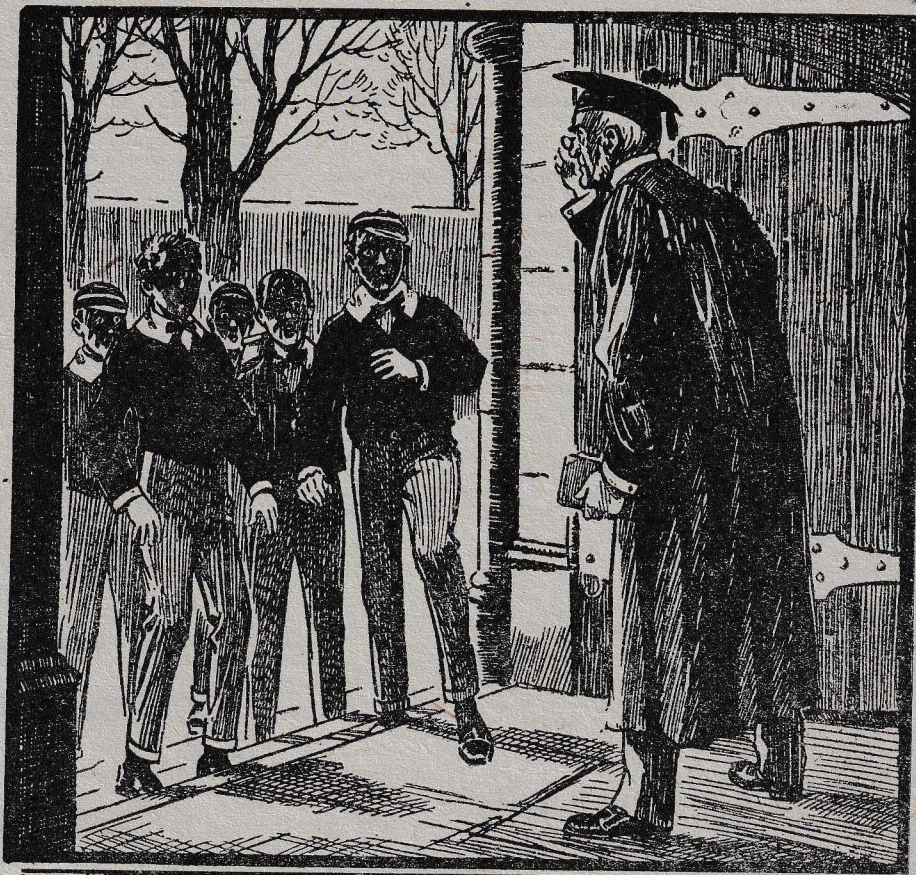
"There will have to be a committee to draw up the programme, of course," said Tom Merry. "Fellows who think they can do things, and can't, will have to be gently but firmly suppressed."

"Hear, hear!"

"If you are wefewwin' to me, Tom Mewwy, I weward it as my duty to state that I look upon you as a feahful ass!"

"Gentlemen——"

"Bravo!"



"Boys!" exclaimed the master severely, gazing at the dismayed committeemen, "how dare you go about in public in this state? Take fifty lines each, and go and clean yourselves at once!"

"A committee should be appointed," continued Tom Merry, "containing a representative of every section of public opinion."

"Speech again!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I suggest myself first, and Manners and Lowther as the originators of the idea; and Blake as a representative of Study No. 6——"

"Hear, hear!" said Blake.

"And Figgins to represent the New House."

"Good egg!" said Figgins.

"Five is a good working number for a committee of ways and means," said Tom Merry. "The meetings of the committee will be held in my study. Gentlemen desirous of giving performances in the programme are invited to draw up a sketch of what they can do, and submit it to the committee. The committee will give a fair and unbiassed opinion on the same. How's that?"

"Goal!" said Kangaroo.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hands up in favour of the Football Club Music-hall, twice nightly!"

"Hurrah!"

Every right hand in the room went up. There was no doubt that the idea of giving a show in aid of the football funds appealed to the juniors of St. Jim's. Whether the scheme could be carried out was another question, and there was likely to be warfare when the committee of selection came to details. But there was at all events plenty of enthusiasm to begin with.

"Gentlemen," said Tom Merry, "the meeting is over. The committee will be glad to consider sketches of turns for the entertainment in my study."

"Hear, hear!"

"Time we had tea, too!" remarked Digby.

"And I've got to go and feed my bulldog," said Herries. "I can bring Towser on the stage in a bulldog turn when we give the show. That's a ripping idea, isn't it?"

"Weally, Hewwies——"

"Towser can do all sorts of tricks," said Herries thoughtfully.

fully. "I can get a chap to play a tramp, and Towser can hang on to his bags."

"I object to Towzah! That beastly bulldog has no respect whatevah for a fellah's twousahs!" said D'Arcy severely.

"Oh, rats!"

"Weally, Hewwies, deah boy—"

"Hallo! What's the matter with this blessed door?" said Kerr, tugging at the door-handle. "It won't come open!"

"Let me try," said Blake. He gave the handle a tug, and uttered an ejaculation. "It's fastened on the outside!"

Through the keyhole came the sound of an unmistakable chuckle.

"This is where I score, you rotters!"

It was the voice of D'Arcy minor of the Third.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Wally on the Warpath.

THE meeting in the Hobby Club-room of the School House crowded round the door in wrath. It was past tea-time, and the juniors wanted their tea—especially Fatty Wynn. In the keen interest and excitement of the meeting they had forgotten all about Wally. But Wally, evidently, had not forgotten them, or his summary ejection from the meeting.

"The young bounder!" said Tom Merry. "He's locked the door on the outside!"

"Bai Jove!"

Figgins hammered on the door.

"Open this door, you young ass!" he bawled.

There was no reply.

"Weally, Wally, you young wascal, if you don't immediately open this door, I shall give you a feahful thwashin!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy through the keyhole.

Wally chuckled.

"Bai Jove!"

Five or six juniors hammered furiously on the door. The rest would have hammered, too, if there had been room for them to get at it. Kerr wrinkled his brows thoughtfully, and crossed towards the window. It was a good drop to the ground outside, but it was evidently the only way out of the difficulty.

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy, following Kerr. "That's the only way, deah boy. I shall wogard it as an impewative dutay to thwash that young wascal! Pway open the window!"

"My hat!" said Kerr, as he opened the window and looked out.

In the dusky quadrangle a crowd of Third Form fags could be seen waiting under the window. Wally came round from the doorway and joined them. He had the key of the Hobby Club-room door in his hand, and he waved it at the juniors at the window.

"Come on!" he said cheerfully. "Drop out! We'll catch you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Jameson. "Come on!"

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, surveying the crowds of fags through his monocle. "This is wathah wotten!"

The juniors crowded round the window inside. At the most, two or three of them could drop out at a time, and nobody was wildly anxious to drop out into the grasp of two dozen fags.

Wally was on the warpath, and under Wally's leadership the Third-Formers could be quite troublesome customers to tackle. In fact, since D'Arcy minor had come to St. Jim's it was an undoubted fact that the Third Form had quite failed to keep their proper position as fags, and had put on all sorts of airs of being quite on a footing with the Fourth, and even the Shell—which was a simply intolerable state of things, from the point of view of the Fourth and the Shell.

Tom Merry looked out of the window.

Wally & Co., grinning below the high window, were waiting. Several of the fags had pieces of chalk and charcoal in their hands, evidently intended for the personal adornment of the juniors they should capture.

"They're funky," said Wally.

"Buzz off, you kids!" said Figgins. "I shall really have to come down to you!"

"Come on, then!" said Wally invitingly.

"Ahem!"

"I say, I'm frightfully hungry!" said Fatty Wynn pathetically. "I think you chaps ought to jump out on those young bounders."

"Yaas, wathah! We're waitin' for you, Tom Mewwy."

Tom Merry and the rest of the committee exchanged THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 203.

glances. They did not relish the task. But the other fellows were determined that they should undertake it. Gore was already suggesting that if they did not drop out they should be dropped out. It was a question of active or passive

"Come on!" said Tom Merry resolutely.

He swung himself out of the window, and dropped to the ground, and rolled over. Instantly the grasp of the fags was upon him, and grimy hands were rubbing charcoal into his face.

He struggled and spluttered and roared, but he could not get away, and in a few seconds he was in a state closely resembling that of a nigger minstrel made up for the performance.

Blake and Figgins followed him, and then Manners and Lowther. They would not stay behind when their chief had led the way. As fast as they landed, they were grasped by the fags, and bumped over and charcoaled, amid yells of laughter. But by the time there were five of them on the spot the fags had their hands full, and Wally & Co. were kept very busy to hold them.

"Groo! Rescue! Groo!" spluttered Figgins.

"Ow! Help!"

"Yarooop! Come on, you slackers! Rescue! Yowp!"

Kangaroo and Digby and Herries came scrambling out of the window, with Kerr and Glyn and Gore after them.

"Cut!" yelled Wally.

There was a sudden flight of the fags. By the time the reinforcements had landed, and picked themselves up for action, the Third-Formers had vanished. Five grimy, black faces looked up from the ground, and the juniors in the window yelled with laughter.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated D'Arcy. "You look awfully funny, deah boys. Ha, ha, ha!"

"You ass!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'll smash those fags!" grumbled Manners. "Groo! I've got some of the stuff in my beastly mouth. Grooooooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Let's go and get a wash, for goodness' sake!" gasped Tom Merry. "Never mind the fags now. Groo! Buck up!"

The five committeemen hurried off to the doorway. As they ran into the School House, Mr. Railton, the House-master, met them face to face. Tom Merry & Co. halted in dismay as the House-master raised his hand.

"Boys, how dare you go about in public in this state!" exclaimed Mr. Railton.

"If—if you please, sir—"

"Take fifty lines each!" said Mr. Railton severely. "And go and clean yourselves at once! Not a word! Go at once!"

And they went!

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Getting Ready.

THE next day there was but one topic among the juniors of St. Jim's, and that was Tom Merry's music-hall.

Even cricket faded into comparative insignificance.

Fellows in the Fourth and the Shell were thinking of their intended turns which were to astonish and dazzle St. Jim's twice nightly for a week, and, incidentally, to "rope in" huge sums for the benefit of the Junior Football Club.

The committee of ways and means had plenty to do. They thought the matter over—to a great extent in the class-room—which brought them to grief sometimes. Form-masters, with no mental capacity beyond the borders of irregular verbs, did not understand the importance of the idea. When Tom Merry planned out the programme instead of working out problems set on the blackboard by Mr. Linton, that gentleman waxed wroth, and descended, Jove-like, in thunder. When Arthur Augustus, in the Fourth Form-room, commanded to contrive Cæsar, unexpectedly and absent-mindedly broke out into "Take a Pair of Sparkling Eyes." Mr. Lathom was amazed and indignant, and he gave D'Arcy two hundred lines upon the spot.

Fellows began to rehearse everywhere.

Going along the passages, masters and prefects would be startled by top notes or sonorous lines from Shakespeare proceeding from mysterious corners. Fellows would rehearse at one another in couples and threes, everybody spouting and nobody listening. The effect was sometimes quite curious. When D'Arcy was practising "Take a Pair of Sparkling Eyes" in Study No. 6, and Blake was conning over a thrilling recitation which he was getting ready as an encore, and Digby was practising interpretations and imitations of famous actors, then Study No. 6 became a fair representation of what Babel must have been like when confusion of tongues fell upon the inhabitants thereof.

“Take a Pair of Sparklin’ Eyes!” sang Arthur Augustus.

“Into the valley of death!” roared Blake.

“I’ll have my bo-hond! Speak not against my bo-hond!” bawled Digby, in the well-known voice of a great London actor. “I’ve sworn on oath that I will have my bo-hond!”

“Weally, you fellows—”

“You chaps like to see Towser go through his tricks?” asked Herries, looking into the study.

And Blake, Digby, and D’Arcy ceased rehearsing for a moment, to glare at Herries, and say things to him.

Never had there been such an outbreak of rehearsing at St. Jim’s, and it was almost as bad in the New House as the School House.

Meanwhile, Tom Merry was much exercised in his mind as to the place in which the music-hall was to begin its twice-nightly performance.

As a rule, the juniors gave amateur dramatic entertainments in the Form-room, or on rare and special occasions they had been allowed to use the lecture-hall.

But the lecture-hall, of course, could not be booked for the evenings of a whole week, and it was extremely doubtful whether the Head would give permission for a music-hall entertainment there, in any case.

The Form-room was barred, for much the same reason. Although the juniors generally had the use of it, it was not always free to them; and, besides, if the performances were at all noisy, they were liable to interruption by irate masters and prefects. The roars of applause which Tom Merry & Co. confidently anticipated would probably disturb the seniors in their studies, to say nothing of the masters. And unpleasant prefects like Knox would take a pleasure in coming down on the juniors and spoiling the show, if they had even the shadow of a pretext.

For these reasons, and others, Tom Merry decided, after much earnest cogitation, that the music-hall would have to be outside the school building.

There was a meeting of the committee to decide exactly where, and there were many suggestions, few of them of a practical nature.

Blake’s suggestion of the loft over the stables was unanimously frowned upon. Figgins thought that an alfresco show would be ripping, but the uncertain state of the weather forbade anything of that sort. It would be no joke, as Monty Lowther explained, if a heavy downpour of rain interrupted the proceedings. It would doubtless be a very comic effect, but not quite the comic effect they were after.

“What about the wood-shed?” said Manners, after long thought.

Figgins sniffed a little.

“Rather a come-down for the amateur dramatists of the school performing in a giddy wood-shed!” he said.

“And the wood and things would be in the way,” said Blake.

“We could get Taggles to move them,” said Tom Merry thoughtfully. “The wood-shed is really a big building, if the partition is taken down, and the stuff stacked there is taken out.”

“Taggy won’t do it.”

“He will if he’s paid for it. Taggy will do anything but give up drink if you pay him,” said Monty Lowther.

“Something in that,” said Figgins, with a grin. “We shall want seats, you know.”

“Planks arranged over boxes and things,” said Tom Merry. “It will be as good as the seats we get in the circuses that come to Rylcombe.”

“We really want something a bit better got up than a travelling circus,” Blake observed.

“But we can’t get it, you know, so we’d better be satisfied with what we can get,” said Tom Merry. “We must take things as we find ’em. We can hang the walls of the shed inside with chintz or something, and make it look quite home-like. The seats can be covered with something or other, and we can decorate the rafters somehow or other, and shove something of some sort on the brick floor, somehow.”

“Very lucid, I must say,” commented Blake. “What I admire about Tom Merry is his splendid grasp of detail.”

“Well, it’s no good making difficulties,” said Merry warmly. “We’ve got to give the show somewhere, and we’ve already arranged to begin on Monday, for a week’s run. It’s getting to be rather pressing about the location.”

“Quite so, but—”

“Hands up for the wood-shed, gentlemen!” said Manners. Four hands went up, and Jack Blake’s followed after a moment. He had no better suggestion to make, and he gracefully yielded to the opinion of the majority.

“Very well,” he said. “There will have to be a lot of alterations carried out, that’s all. Suppose Taggles cuts up rusty?”

“We shall have to manage him. We shall want a hall-

porter, you know, on the nights, and we can have Taggles, and give him half-a-crown an evening out of the proceeds. I expect the takings will be very large.”

“Enormous!” said Figgins.

“All expenses will be paid, and there will be a handsome profit left over for the Junior Football Club,” said Merry.

“We may as well strike the iron while it’s hot, and go and see Taggles about it now.”

“Good egg!”

And the committee of ways and means strolled down to the lodge of the school porter. Taggles was sitting in his little window, with his pipe at his mouth, and a glass of hot gin-and-water just out of sight. He looked at the juniors with a far from amiable expression, and their gentle smiles did not tend to remove his distrust.

Taggles was generally on ragging terms with the juniors, and when they were specially nice he feared some jape. Like the Trojan gentleman of old, who feared the Greeks when they came with gifts in their hands, Taggles did not trust wholly to appearances.

However, when the juniors made their proposition, the porter’s face beamed with smiles. The money side of the affair greatly appealed to Taggles, and, as he said, he was not overpaid, and the money would do well to supply him with “lemonade”!

There was no doubt that Taggles would be of great use to the juniors, and they did not mind how much money they spent in order to make a success of the St. Jim’s Empire.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER. The Programme.

THE preparations for the opening of the St. Jim’s Empire proceeded steadily. The wood-shed was looking quite unlike its old self before the end of the week. Taggles had agreed to keep his eyes on it for a further consideration in the way of tips, and he had even moved his mastiff’s kennel to the shed in order to keep away intruders.

Inside, the wood-shed was growing quite palatial. The floor was covered with hired carpet, and rows of chairs and benches had been arranged to seat an audience of at least fifty. The front seats were numbered and reserved; the back seats—cheaper—were unreserved, and there the audience would be expected to sit tight. Behind the seats was a space for standing room, which the committee agreed unanimously would be quite good enough for the fags if they came.

The stage was really a triumph. Wooden trestles had been arranged, and boards were laid across them for a flooring, and the flooring was covered with linoleum. The wings were screened in, and the curtain arranged nicely, and it was quite possible to pull it up and lower it without a hitch—which was rather a record in school theatricals.

Meanwhile, the rehearsals went on incessantly.

Arthur Augustus D’Arcy, being solemnly assured on all sides that his magnificent tenor voice was specially suited to that touching song, “Give Me Back My Seven-and-Six,” agreed to sing it, on the condition that if he had an encore he should sing something really operative. To that the committee agreed, on the principle that if the audience encored D’Arcy they would deserve all they got.

When the stage was finished, on Friday evening, the juniors surveyed it with pardonable pride. If it was trodden upon too recklessly, there was a perceptible tremor in it; but Tom Merry cautioned his company to be careful.

“Better test it by stamping on it,” Herries suggested.

“Might go through,” said Monty Lowther. “Better leave well alone!”

“But what about Figgins’ clog-dance?” said Kerr. “That will give the stage a bit of a shake, you know!”

“Well, we could cut that out.”

“Could we?” said Figgins unpleasantly.

“Last item on the programme, then,” said Lowther blandly. “If the stage goes through after the performance is over, it won’t matter so much.”

“You ass!”

“Oh, rot!” said Tom Merry. “The stage is strong enough. I think we’d better have a full dress rehearsal here to-morrow afternoon, instead of the cricket. We’ve got to make sure of getting the bizney in working order. By the way, I think I’ll put on the gramophone for one turn. Gramophones are popular now!”

“Good! Gramophone turn first,” said Blake. “Nobody wants to be first turn. Something rousing on the ’phone will start the show beautifully, and bring in the audience—like the electric orchestra in a circus. Gussy can come second!”

“The orchestra’s getting in tune now, too,” said Kerr. “I really think we can play together without making anybody shudder!”

“Time we got the bills out, too,” said Tom Merry; “and we’ve got to sell the tickets. I’ve had some offers already.

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 203.

The tickets will be delivered after tea to-day, and we can go round the place selling them."

"Yaas, wathah!"

And after tea that day the St. Jim's fellows gathered round the notice-board in the school hall to read the announcement of the opening of the St. Jim's Empire.

It was a large sheet, written out in red and black by Tom Merry, with the assistance of the committee:

NOTICE!

On Monday, the St. Jim's Empire will open its doors for a Refined and High-class Music-hall Entertainment, for the run of a week.

TWICE NIGHTLY!

Splendid Attractions! Coruscations of all the Talents!
The Principal Items of the Programme will be:

1. "War March of the Priests" (Mendelssohn)—
Gramophone Solo.
2. Song, "Give Me Back My Seven-and-Six"—
A. A. D'Arcy, Esq.
3. Clog Dance G. Figgins.
4. Humorous Recitations and Imitations ... Arthur Digby.
5. Comic Sketch, "The Sixth-Form Greek Play"—
T. Merry, M. Lowther, H. Manners.
6. Patriotic Song, "Johnny Get Your Gun" ... H. Noble.
7. Song, "The Widow Moriarty" ... G. Reilly.
8. Cornet Solo, "Alice, Where Art Thou?" ... G. Herries.
9. Song, "I Do Like a Nice Mince Pie" ... Fatty Wynn.
10. God Save the King! The Orchestra.

TWICE NIGHTLY! TWICE NIGHTLY!
TWICE NIGHTLY!

Roll up in Your Thousands! Roll up in Your Millions!
Roll up in Your Motor-Cars!

Tickets: Reserved Seats—Stalls, 2s.; Pit, 1s. Unreserved
Seats, 6d. Standing room, 1d.

Tickets may be had of the Committee, No. 1., in the Shell
Passage, and at the Doors.

TWICE NIGHTLY! TWICE NIGHTLY!
TWICE NIGHTLY!

The committee surveyed that poster with great satisfaction. It attracted a great deal of notice in St. Jim's. Fellows of all Forms stopped to read it and chuckle.

Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House, read it and smiled. Perhaps he did not think that the run of a week would come to pass; but he had no objections to make to the inauguration of the St. Jim's Empire, evidently, for he said nothing upon the subject.

Some of the fellows found fault with the programme.

Lefevre of the Fifth, who had offered his services free, with a splendid bass solo from Handel, which would have taken him twenty minutes to deliver, sniffed when he read the programme. Levison, who had volunteered a conjuring turn, snorted. Many other fellows, whose generous offers had been unavoidably declined, expressed the opinion that it was all rot.

But the committee went on their way smilingly.

When the bundle of tickets arrived from the printers, the sale commenced. If any of the tickets remained unsold, it would not be for want of manful efforts on the part of the committee.

Upon the whole, the sale of the tickets satisfied the committee. They did not go exactly with a bang, but they sold off very well. Many of the seniors bought stalls in a good-tempered, patronising sort of way, but the committee did not care in what way they bought them, so long as they did buy them. That was the main point.

If a good many of the tickets remained on the hands of the committee, the juniors consoled themselves with the reflection that there was certain to be a rush at the doors on the opening night. As for the standing room, that was sure to be filled. No other Empire ever offered a really splendid entertainment at the low price of one penny. The fags would be bound to come, if only to boo. And the committee were willing to run the risk of the fags booing if the fags paid for that privilege.

All the members of the football club were bound to come, in support of their own club, and most of the Fourth and the Shell were in the club.

"It'll go like hot cakes!" said Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah! But there ought to be some special
THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 203.

notice up about comin' in early," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy thoughtfully.

"What for?"

"In case any of the fellahs should miss the second item on the programme, you know. It would be wotten for a chap to pay his money, and miss the good part of the performance."

"Oh, that's all right!" said Fatty Wynn cheerfully. "My turn comes at the end."

"I was not thinkin' of your turn, Wynn. I was thinkin'—"

But nobody stayed to hear what the swell of St. Jim's was thinking.

On Saturday there was a rehearsal in the wood-shed, and the juniors were satisfied with it. The lighting arrangements in the Empire had been entrusted to Bernard Glyn, the inventor of the School House. Glyn was an expert in all electrical matters, and he had run a wire to the wood-shed for the supply of electric light from the School House itself.

Glyn arranged the row of lamps along the front of the stage, which were to serve as footlights, and a series of electric lamps round the shed, which gave a brilliant illumination when they were all turned on, and dazzled and fatigued the eyes of the victims after the manner of the brilliant illuminations in real music-halls.

Bernard Glyn had certainly done his work well, and the committee thanked him warmly for it. As Blake remarked, the electric footlights were better than a row of paraffin lamps, like a gang of giddy barn-stormers.

Taking everything into account, the juniors felt that the success of the St. Jim's Empire was assured.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER. Very Funny.

IMMEDIATELY after school on Monday afternoon, the music-hall committee made their final preparations. The "first house" was to begin at half-past six and last till half-past seven. The "second house" was booked from a quarter to eight to a quarter to nine. That would certainly leave the juniors scant time for their preparations. But, as Lowther remarked, if either the show or the prep had to suffer, it was better to sacrifice the less important of the two.

Everything was ready by the time the juniors returned to their houses for a hasty tea. After tea the cast repaired to the wood-shed once more, and then all was ready. At half-past six the audience were expected to come pouring in, and Tom Merry was determined that the performance should begin on time.

In the dressing-room arranged behind the stage, the juniors dressed themselves for their turns. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was quite resplendent in evening clothes. He wore a diamond stud which gleamed wonderfully. His expanse of shirt-front was simply beautiful. The orchestra took their places, the only occupants of the auditorium so far.

They tuned up.

The tuning up was not tuneful, and perhaps it was just as well that the audience were not there. Tom Merry planted the gramophone on the stage, ready for the opening number.

"Better try it over," said Manners.

"Oh, the record's all right!" said Tom Merry.

"But it won't do any harm to try it," said Lowther.

"You never know."

"Oh, all right!"

Tom Merry turned the gramophone on. "The War March of the Priests" was one of his best records. But it did not sound very well now. The music began, and there was a sudden snapping and scratching. Then it went on, then again snapping and scratching.

Tom Merry looked amazed.

"What on earth's the matter with the record?" he exclaimed.

Figgins grunted.

"It's a rotter!" he said.

"But it was one of the best——"

"Oh, stop it, for goodness' sake! It's weird."

Tom Merry stopped the gramophone, and looked at the record with a puzzled brow. Then he gave a yell of wrath.

"Some ass has been tampering with this record! It's cut across and across with a knife!"

"My hat! I bet Wally did it!"

"Bai Jove!"

"You'll have to cut the gramophone turn," said Manners.

"I could get another record."

"No time to get it. We're booked to start in five minutes now," said Fatty Wynn. "Cut the number. The audience won't mind. It wasn't much of a turn, anyway."

Tom Merry nodded. His records were kept in a case in his study, and certainly it would take considerably more than five minutes to fetch one to the wood-shed. Tom Merry pushed the gramophone away behind the scenes.

He looked through the curtain at the orchestra, who were still tuning up.

"Gramophone's gone off song," he explained. "You chaps can play something instead."

"I'll make it a banjo solo if you like," said Blake.

"A cornet solo might sound better," said Herries thoughtfully.

"Or a fantasia on the violin," remarked Kerr.

"Look here, Kerr——"

"Look here, Herries——"

"Oh, play something together!" said Tom Merry. "Play up that march from 'Carmen,' and hang it out a little somehow."

"Oh, all right!"

And the orchestra started manfully, while the cast, behind the scenes, gave the final touches to their preparations.

The audience commenced to march in slowly. Kildare and Darrell took their seats in the stalls, and Monteith and Baker and North and some more of the Sixth joined them there.

Behind the row of the great men of the Sixth other fellows crowded in. The Fifth were very well represented, and the Fourth and the Shell were there almost to a man. Behind, in the standing room, came the fags, crowds and swarms of them. Wally was not to be seen among them, but Jameson and Curly Gibson and Frayne were very prominent. There was a buzz of ceaseless voices in the standing-room department, but the fags did not boo. It looked as if they meant to give the performance a chance.

The overture ceased at last—the cornet getting in first, and the violin coming in a very good second. The banjo lingered behind the other instruments for a minute or so, amid chuckles from the audience.

Arthur Augustus, standing first upon one leg, and then upon the other, waited for the end of it. Then fresh music was handed out, and the band were ready with his accompaniment.

Then Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's beautiful tenor voice rose to the roof of the wood-shed.

"Give Me Back My Seven-and-Six!"

The audience laughed.

Laughter in front rose and rose as the song proceeded, and culminated in a terrific roar as D'Arcy concluded, and the very walls of the St. Jim's Empire seemed to shake.

Tom Merry grinned behind the scenes.

"It's going well!" he remarked.

"Ripping!" said Figgins.

Arthur Augustus came off the stage, looking a little flushed and puzzled.

"The audience seemed to take that for a comic song," he said. "I was singin' it in the most serious mannaah poss."

"Hurrah!"

"Encore!"

"Core! 'Core! 'Core!"

Stamp, stamp!

"Bai Jove! Listen to them!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Did you evah heah such an awfl'y enthusiastic encore, deah boys? I must go and take my call."

"Hold on!" said Figgins. "It's time for my clog-dance. My number's been put at three."

"Weally, Figgins——"

"Core! 'Core! 'Core!"

"Gussy must take his encore," said Tom Merry. "Go in and bow, and come off again, Gussy."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"Buck up!"

"I am going to give them an encore," said the swell of St. Jim's. "That was agweed. Besides, they deserve it, considewin' the piffle they've got to stand latah."

"They deserve it if they ask for it!" admitted Lowther.

"Well, give them the last verse again," said Tom Merry.

"Wats! I'm goin' to give them 'Mein Lieber Schwan,' f'wom 'Lohengwin.'"

"Now, look here, Gussy——"

"That was the agreement, deah boy."

"Oh, go on, then!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy returned to the stage. The audience yelled. The orchestra received the music for the encore song, which Kerr had written out in case of accidents. They tuned up, and Arthur Augustus started, letting his voice fairly go:

"Nun sei bedankt, mein Lieber Schwan,
Sie durch die weiter Fluth zuruckt——"

"My only hat! What's that?" came a query from the audience.

"He's got a fearful cough!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus sang on.

"Dahin, woher mich trug dein Kahn——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Apparently the audience mistook the encore song for a comic song also. At all events, the laughter was louder and more continuous than it had been for "Give Me Back My Seven-and-Six." The song was lost in the uproar; but the swell of St. Jim's ploughed on relentlessly to the end.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hurrah!"

"Encore!"

D'Arcy came off rather breathlessly.

"I think that went vevy well, Tom Mewwy," he remarked.

"Yes—wonderful comic effects!" said Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah——"

The audience were still yelling.

"I suppose I had bettah take anothah encore, deah boys——"

"I suppose you hadn't!" said Tom Merry. "You're not going to fill up all the programme for the first house, you ass!"

"It is bettah to give the audience what they want. As a fellah of tact and judgment——"

"Rats! Slide on, Figgy!"

Figgins went on the stage.

Some of the audience gave Figgins a cheer. New House fellows meant to back up Figgins, anyway. If he had danced like an elephant the New House juniors would have cheered him enthusiastically all the same.

Clat-clat-clatter!

Figgins' clog-dance commenced.

Then suddenly, without the slightest warning, the lights in the wood-shed went out, and the St. Jim's Empire was plunged into total darkness.

Figgins ceased. The orchestra ceased.

There was a roar.

"What's the matter?"

"Put on the lights!"

"My hat!"

"You silly asses——"

"Bai Jove!" gasped D'Arcy. "Somethin's gone w'ong with the electric light!"

And Tom Merry groaned.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

The Fags' Triumph!

PUT on the light!"

"Yah!"

Tom Merry groped his way from behind the scenes on to the stage.

"Gentlemen——" he shouted.

"Yah! Where's the light?"

"Gentlemen, please keep your seats! Owing to an unfortunate accident the electric light has been cut off——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What price the Third Form now?" yelled a voice from the darkness.

Tom Merry jumped.

He understood.

So did Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. From behind the scenes the voice of the swell of St. Jim's could be heard:

"Bai Jove! It's young Wally! He's cut the wire, you know!"

The audience yelled with laughter.

"Order! Silence!" shouted Tom Merry desperately.

"Lights will be put on in a minute or two. We were prepared for an emergency."

A strong smell of paraffin backed up Tom Merry's statement. The music-hall company lighted paraffin lamps, and they were placed along the stage, and some were carried out and stuck up on the walls of the wood-shed. The scent of paraffin was not gratifying, and the light was certainly not so good as it had been before. The time, too, was passing, and it was growing evident that, even if the first house came to a successful conclusion, there could be no second house that night. "Twice nightly" would have to remain over for the next evening.

The audience seemed to be very pleased, however, with the performance so far. Voices were heard expressing opinions as to what the next accident would be like. When the lights were going again, Tom Merry scanned the crowd of Third-Formers at the back of the shed, but he could not see Wally. The hero of the Third was probably on the war-path still, and Tom Merry wondered what his next move would be. But there was no time to hunt for him now and call him to account.

There was a buzz of talk and laughter all the time Figgins was doing his clog-dance. But the dance went off very well, and the next item was taken kindly, and the hopes of the Empire builders rose.

"It's all right!" said Monty Lowther.

"Going with a bang, after all!" said Manners. "Good!"

Tom Merry nodded cheerfully.

"Yes; and I think our caricature of a Sixth Form play will knock them."

"I don't know how the Sixth will take it."

"Oh, they have a sense of humour, you know!" said Tom Merry. "The Sixth Form play on Speech Day is one of the funniest things going, and our sketch is ripping."

"Yaas, wathah! But the Sixth take their Greek play quite seriously, you know. Upon second thoughts, Tom Mewwy, wouldn't it be better to leave out the sketch?" suggested Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I shouldn't mind goin' on and doin' another tenah solo, instead."

"Ass!" said the Terrible Three together.

"Weally, you know—"

"Shut up! Get ready, chorus!"

"Right-ho!"

"Now, then!"

And the sketch artists appeared on the stage. Tom Merry was quite right in his opinion that a Greek play given by a senior Form was funny enough. The sketch artists had made it still funnier for their purpose. They had dressed in exaggerated Greek costumes, and they had made up comic lines in English with Greek inflections, the effect of which was undoubtedly funny. But it was a question whether the great men of the Sixth would fully appreciate that kind of fun; and that was a question which the juniors had not, perhaps, fully considered.

But it was undoubtedly funny. The juniors in the audience roared at the mere sight of the Terrible Three got up at exaggerated editions of Elektra, Orestes, and Ægystheus. If Sophocles himself had been present, he could hardly have helped laughing.

The seniors in the audience looked rather grim. Even Kildare looked serious. But the Shell and the Fourth roared. The play commenced something like this:

Chorus: "The young Orestes returns to the halls of his fathers! Woe—woe! Grooh!"

Elektra: "Yow! Wow—wow!"

Orestes: "Ha! Likewise, ho!"

Ægystheus: "This is no placeum for meo. I must bunko! Yah!"

Chorus: "Woe—woe. Whoa!"

Orestes: "Who is this damsel who weeps and wails, like unto the catto on the tilum?"

Elektra: "Yow! Wow—wow!"

Exactly how that Greek play would have turned out cannot be said. For at this point there was a perceptible trembling of the stage. Tom Merry, who was about to render another Orestean "Ha!" stopped short, and said "Oh, crumbs!" instead.

The stage was shaking.

"You fwrightful asses!" came a voice from behind the scenes. "You haven't fastened the stage up safely, aftah all!"

"It was all right."

"It isn't all wight now."

"Somebody's meddling with the trestles underneath!" roared Figgins.

"Great Scott!"

"Bai Jove! I'll wagah it's young Wally!"

"Look out!"

"Bai Jove!"

The stage fairly rocked.

The audience rose in their places, shrieking with laughter. There was a yell of alarm from behind the scenes, and the whole company rushed into view of the stage in great excitement.

"Look out!"

"Cut!"

"It's going to pieces!"

The audience roared.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Crash!

One end of the stage sank down to the floor, and half a dozen of the company rolled over and slid down hopelessly to the lower end.

The others bounded off over the footlights, and landed among the orchestra with disastrous effects.

The bandmen were bowled over first shot, so to speak, and Lowther landed on Blake's banjo; and that banjo was certainly not likely to be a banjo to be played on again. Blake gave a yell.

"You ass! Look what you've done!"

"Yah!" roared Herries. "Get off my cornet!"

Kerr sprang away with his violin, fortunately in time, Blake threw his arms round Monty Lowther's neck, and began to pummel him. Blake was thinking about his banjo and forgetting everything else in his wrath.

"Order!"

"Stop it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Crash!

The players rolled off the stage among the audience. Two or three fellows rushed to save the lamps. The stage had entirely collapsed with a terrific grinding and crashing. The audience were all upon their feet now, almost in hysterics.

"Ha, ha, ha!" came a yell from the standing room at the back. "It has gone with a bang! Ha, ha, ha! What price the Third Form now?"

"You young villains!" yelled Tom Merry.

The music-hall company with one accord rushed upon the fags. In a moment there was a wild and whirling conflict raging in the St. Jim's Empire.

Seats were overturned, chairs went crashing right and left, yells and roars and shrieks and the trampling of feet filled the Empire with din.

"Yah!"

"Sock it to them!"

"Kick the fags out!"

"Clear out, all of you!" roared Kildare. "Look after those lamps! You'll have the place on fire if you're not careful! Clear the place!"

Kildare and the prefects who were present strode among them, shouting and ordering and boxing ears right and left in their efforts to restore order.

Most of the lamps had been blown out for safety, and a dim twilight reigned in the St. Jim's Empire.

In the dimness, fags and players rolled over in furious conflict, and the prefects had a difficult task in separating them and turning them out of the wood-shed.

But they were got out at last.

The Empire was cleared, and Kildare slammed the door and locked it. He shook Taggles out of a fit of chuckling.

"Taggles!"

"Yessir! Ho, ho, ho!" gasped Taggles. "Yessir!"

"Mind that nobody goes into the shed again! The juniors are not to be admitted there. Do you understand?"

"Yessir. Ho, ho, ho!"

"Clear all that rubbish out to-morrow," said Kildare, "and keep the door locked."

"Yessir. Ho, ho, ho!"

Kildare strode away.

In the quadrangle dim fighting was still proceeding. But it was over at last, and the damaged heroes of the Empire limped away towards the School House. The fags crowded off with yells of laughter. Most of them had been very roughly handled, but they did not mind. They had triumphed, and that was enough for Wally & Co. They crowded back to their Form-room, still yelling.

The next day the prefects came down heavily on the St. Jim's Empire, and the whole affair had to be dropped. Tom Merry & Co. were rather disconsolate at first, but they consoled themselves with the thought that the undertaking was really a too big a one for juniors to manage. Be that as it may, the fact remains that the Junior Football Club did not benefit to any appreciable extent by the takings of the St. Jim's Empire!

THE END.

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THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Deferred Dinner—A Fearful Upset—Ayara States How Honest He Is—His Accusation—How Pete Settled Matters.

I DUNNO weder El Tebir is de German for a furnace," growled Pete, mopping his brow, "but if dis town ain't de hottest place in Arabia, I don't care to go to a warmer one. I'm certain you could fry pancakes on de cobblestones."

"I reckon I wouldn't care to eat them afterwards," observed Sam. "They look too dirty and dusty for the purpose. How do you like the heat, Jack?"

"I don't like it at all, and I don't see how any human being could," answered Jack. "When a full-blooded nigger commences growling at the heat, you can be certain that it is warm. The whole place appears to be deserted; and I don't wonder at it, for a few more degrees of heat would render life unbearable."

The three comrades had good cause to complain. Rory could not do so, but his demeanour proved clearly that he did not like the heat, and had any dogs been about he would certainly have had a fight, by way of giving vent to his displeasure.

It was noon, and the sun blazed down on the narrow street with such fury that it seemed determined to make it red-hot. A haze rose from the ill-paved road; nor was there a breath of wind to dispel it, or to cool the heated air. One or two Arabs were sprawling about at street corners, breathing heavily, and longing for the night. No one appeared to be working, but they could scarcely be blamed for that.

"I can hear my brain sizzling!" growled Pete.

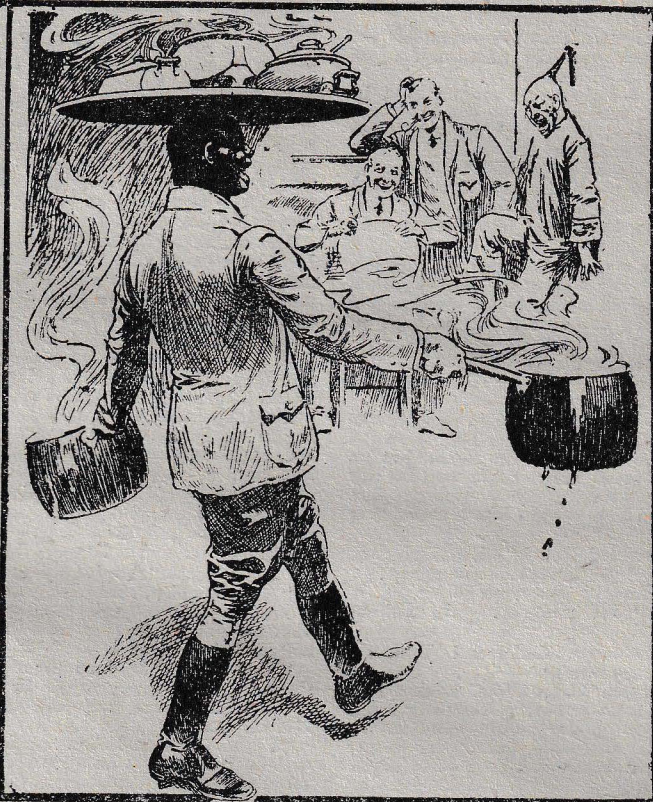
"I reckon that is the water in it," said Sam. "It can't be your brain, because you haven't got one."

"You be quiet, Sammy. You ain't got de right to infuriate a nigger dat's being roasted. You might drive him mad, and den he would be 'most sure to start biting you. I wonder, if I was to bite Sammy hard, weder de pain I caused him would be any sort ob consolation to me?"

"Now, just behave yourself like a respectable nigger!" exclaimed Sam. "It's far too hot to joke!"

"You'm quite right 'bout de heat, Sammy. It's far too hot to do anything, but I dunno dat you would find it much ob a joke eider. I was just tinkin which would be de most unpainful part ob de man. Which do you tink, Jack?"

"Ha, ha, ha! I believe he has made up his mind to bite



Pete presented a funny spectacle. In either hand he held a huge saucepan, and on his head was placed a large tray, on which were some vegetable-dishes and an enormous dish of rice. "De dinner am serbed!" he exclaimed.

you, Sam!" cried Jack. "If so, it is no good arguing. You will never convince Pete that you could not be bitten. But, look here, suppose we put up at this hotel? It looks quite respectable, and comparatively cool."

They entered the place, but found it far from cool. A Chinaman, dressed in satin, and with a pigtail hanging down his back, which made a greasy mark on the yellow satin, approached them. He looked at Rory and licked his lips. Probably he thought what a nice stew he would make. He bowed low, half shut his slanting eyes, and hoped they were "vely well."

Jack said they were, and learnt that the Chinese's name was Wang. Pete appeared to be very much interested in his extraordinary attire.

"Look here, Wangy," he said, "we want something to eat, and a lot to drink!"

"Wine — whisky — brandy — lum — tea —"

"Steady, dere! We want 'bout free quarts ob water for de start."

"No water. Vely dangerous stuff to drink."

"Golly! Do you mean to say dere ain't any water in de house?"

"Can't give you water!"

"But we are thirsty!"

"Then you must drink lum."

"Must I?" growled Pete. "Should hab to drink 'bout two-free bottles ob it to quench my thirst; and as I ain't going to do dat—why, I will make a little search, and see if water is as scarce in dis establishment as Wang wants to make out."

"You come back, you villain of a nigger! Don't you enter my kitchen! Come back, I say!"

"M'yes! Dat's what you say, old hoss, but it ain't what I'm going to do. Get out ob de way! Hi, golly! De man is clawing at me! Here, I'll soon fix you up!"

Pete pulled a picture off its nail; then, getting hold of Wang, he shoved the head of the nail through the plait.

The nail was a brass-headed one, and as it slanted upwards there was not the slightest chance of Wang getting free without outside help. Jack and Sam wanted something to drink too badly to think of releasing him, and Pete went into the kitchen, and, having quenched his thirst, brought up a huge jug and some glasses, while Wang yelled at him as he passed.

"You stop where you are for de present, old hoss," said THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 203.

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Pete. "Nunno! I ain't letting you loose. You'm too much like a pussycat to please me."

"You vely bad beast of a man!" he yelled. "You must have a bottle of wine with the water!"

"Well, we ain't going to promise to drink it; but, look here, you are bound to make a good profit out of our food, and if you tink you'm going to make us drunk wid your filthy rum, or, worse, wine, you'm mistaken. What hab you got in de way ob food?"

"Everything!" declared Wang, brightening up a little, as Pete released him from his uncomfortable position. "Should like a little money on account."

"Well, dere are a couple ob sobereigns, and mind you bring us up someting good to eat. We don't want cats, or rats, or rotten eggs."

"English food. Vely good. All things. Mutton, beef, pork, lamb, game, rabbits—"

"Nunno! Don't you dare to serve up any rabbits. Dey are a lot too like cats. How soon will dinner be ready?"

"Two minutes. Vely quick. Less than two minutes."

"Fire ahead, den, and don't you lose time, unless you want to get hung up by dat pigtail again."

Wang eyed Pete in rather a threatening manner, but he left the room without remark, and closed the door.

"Look here, Pete," exclaimed Jack, "Wang may have spoken the truth about the dinner; all the same, I believe the rascal was lying abominably, and I wouldn't like you to be disappointed! In the first place, I don't believe for a moment that he has all those things; and the second, I am perfectly certain that if he has, the dinner won't be ready in anything like two minutes."

Jack was perfectly right as regards the time. A quarter of an hour passed by without any sign of the dinner. Pete rang the bell, and, having waited patiently for another five minutes, rang again. Nothing came of it, so he kept on ringing for about ten minutes.

"Golly! Ain't dis exasperating!" growled Pete. "De man won't take de slightest notice ob de bell. Dere's a gong outside. I will see if he will take notice ob dat!"

Pete seized the gong-stick, and commenced to bang at the gong in a manner that must have been heard all over the house. It must also have been heard in the street, but no one appeared to take the slightest notice of it, and he was about to descend into the kitchen, when Wang's face appeared round the door, and Pete caught him a crack over the head with the gong-stick.

"Look here, old hoss," growled Pete, "when I ring de bell, I expect you to answer it! Why isn't dinner ready?"

"It will be ready in ten minutes," answered Wang.

"Golly!" groaned Pete. "Ten minutes! We will see 'bout dis little lot."

"Here, you come back, you vely wicked man! You vely bad, lying man! You sha'n't go into my—"

"Must nail de man up again," said Pete, seizing him round the body, and fixing him up as before, except that this time he fastened him to one of the picture-nails in the dining-room. "Now, you just stop dere, and if dat dinner ain't up before you imagine, den you will be able to blame a nigger."

Pete disappeared into the kitchen, and Wang yelled at the top of his voice all the time he was absent, which was for about five minutes; but Wang yelled louder still when Pete reappeared, while the comrades roared with laughter.

Pete represented rather a funny spectacle. In either hand he held a huge saucepan, from which steam and a savoury odour was issuing. On his head was balanced a large tray,

on which were some vegetable-dishes and an enormous dish of rice.

"De dinner am serbed!" cried Pete, as he placed the two saucepans on the white cloth; and he was about to place the tray beside them, when Fate decided it otherwise.

The most unearthly yells burst forth, followed by loud cracks of a whip, and the next moment a lithe-looking Arab, followed by a big and extremely burly officer, with rather a purple face, and in the undress uniform of a major, rushed into the room.

The major was lashing at the fugitive with a dog-whip, and the blows he was dealing must have hurt.

The Arab dived between Pete's legs, and as Pete shot forwards, the tray and its contents shot backwards. The major sat on the floor by reason of the impact, and he received about a peck of scalding rice on his head, while a dish of greens was smashed into his face; then he got another dish of potatoes in his lap, and he looked like a vegetarian—at any rate, externally.

He was on his feet in an instant, and his fall did not appear to have improved his temper. He went round the table after the Arab, and the Arab went round that table before the infuriated major; then the Arab got a bad slash across the face, and, seizing the table, he up-ended it on the top of his castigator.

Once more the gallant officer went down, but the result was more disastrous this time, for he received the contents of the two saucepans on the top of his head, and they were just on boiling point.

This ought to have satisfied the vengeance even of an Arab. It did no such thing. He charged at the table, which was standing on end, and sent it flat on the top of the scalded major; then that Arab leapt on the underneath part of the table, and performed a species of war-dance on it.

"Protect me from that wicked man!" panted the Arab, jumping off the table and gazing at Pete, who was howling with laughter, for he had not yet realised that his dinner would be deferred for a good many of Wang's minutes.

The major hurled the table from off his chest; then, springing to his feet, he once more went for the Arab. But Pete caught the infuriated man in his arms, and gave him a bear-like hug.

"Look here, old hoss," exclaimed Pete, wrenching the whip from his hand, and taking possession of the revolver that he carried, "you hab done 'bout enough damage for one afternoon!"

"Black beast!" howled the angry man. "Release me!"

"Nunno! Dere's no telling what a man like you might do if he was released," said Pete. "You ain't de best-tempered old hoss dat I hab eber met. Don't you tink dat you had better simmer down a bit?"

"Fury! Will you let me get at him!" howled the major, struggling desperately to get free.

But such a thing was quite impossible. Pete was holding him far too tightly.

"I wish you would stop your laughter, Jack and Sammy!" exclaimed Pete. "Can't you see dat you are vexing de man? What's your name, you Arab?"

"Ayara, and I am the most honest man and the most truthful one that ever lived. That is Major Murfitt, and he is the biggest thief and liar on this round earth! Only don't let him go!"

"You tink he ain't sort ob safe?"

"He's worse than dangerous. You will do me a great favour if you will kindly break his neck, or else hold him


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while I break it! Stay! I can brain the lying wretch with one of these saucepans!"

"You leabe dose saucepans alone, else I shall let de major loose on you! Do stop your yowling, old hoss! I ain't going to let you loose. Now, Ayara, what's all de trouble about?"

Ayara drew himself up, and looked as dignified as he knew how, then he pointed with his open hand towards the major, and shook that hand in scorn.

"I am a self-respecting man," began Ayara, "and one who knows not how to speak falsely. It was thus with all my ancestors, back to the mighty king who ruled this country. Major Murfitt, being the biggest thief and liar that ever breathed—hold him back!—naturally came to the most honest man he knew when he wanted to buy a camel. He knew that I am the cleverest and most honest guide in this country, and that in my travels frequently come across excellent beasts, which I give away, or almost give away. He came to me. 'Ayara,' he cried, and tears were in his eyes, 'I know that thou art above suspicion, and that thy honesty has been proved a thousand times. I would trust my life in thy brave hands—'"

"I never heard such abominable lying in all my life!" fumed Murfitt. "As though I would deign to talk to the thieving scoundrel like that!"

"Well, you shut up, old hoss!" said Pete. "I want to get at de troof ob de matter, 'cos I'm an interested party. Go on, Ayara!"

"Could you do me the favour of getting me a camel?" inquired the major of me. 'Sahib,' I answered, 'a camel is an unsatisfactory animal to sell, because they are so expensive, and it is quite impossible to get any profit on them. I happen to have one—Patience is her name—and she is a dear, sweet creature. I would rather part with my life than part with her; besides, I gave fifty pounds for her.'"

"What do you think he said to that? Oh, it was cruel! He said he would give me twenty pounds for her, and, for the love I bore the brutal beast before he hit me, I agreed to take twenty-five pounds and lose the other fifty—"

"I tink you mean twenty-five," observed Pete. "No; I gave seventy-five pounds for her."

"You said just now dat you gabe fifty." "And the twenty-five which I paid in advance. Well, knowing that the major was in need of money, as he always is, and never pays people twice, for once, either, for that matter, when he can possibly avoid it, I gave him the camel—"

"You mendacious vagabond! I handed you twenty pounds!"

"Which was practically giving the brute away," said Ayara. "Now, I tell you what I will do, Major Murfitt. I will buy that camel back for twenty-five pounds, which will be placing five pounds in your pocket. I will bring you the money now. Will you sell me the camel for twenty-five pounds?"

"Yes, I will, you dog!"

"It is a bargain, and when I make a bargain I never go from it. Will you wait here for ten minutes while I get the money?"

"Yes!" growled Murfitt.

"Come, gentlemen, and you shall learn whether I have not dealt fairly with the major. But this must be understood, sahib. When I hand you the twenty-five pounds, which will be within a quarter of an hour from this time, you let the matter drop, and that you do not strike me again."

"Very well. All the same, you ought to be hanged!"

"I thank you, sahib! You make a clear five pounds over the deal. This way, gentlemen! You shall see my home and Patience, the most beautiful beast that I have ever set eyes on."

Ayara led them through a narrow street, and all the way he extolled the virtues of Patience, who was kept in a large yard at the back of a miserable hovel, which was Ayara's home.

"Wait, gentlemen, while I get my dear wife to bring the money down. She always takes care of the money, because it is safer in her possession. I am so easy-going that I give it away. Leah is her name, and she is very beautiful, though not so beautiful as she is good and honest. I will not detain you a minute."

"I hope his minutes ain't anything like Wang's!" growled Pete. "Seems to me we sha'n't get dinner till to-morrow de way we are going on. I rader like de look ob dat camel. I seem to hab a yearning for a camel, and dis one 'pears mighty cheap. She would carry us free easily. What do you tink, boys!"

"Oh, go on!" laughed Jack. "If you have made up your mind to purchase Patience, we can consider she's yours."

"Gentlemen," exclaimed Ayara, hurrying back, "my dear

wife has run out to buy some rice, but she will be back in two minutes. Now, I know that you are men of honour, and I would not insult you by making you a present of Patience. It would break Leah's heart to part with her, she is so fond of the dear creature, and— Ah, here she comes!"

Leah was both young and handsome. She walked up to Patience, and stroked her muzzle, then she smiled pleasantly at the strangers.

"Leah, my dear, I have bad news for you. The major has treated me like a dog, and I have promised to let him have his money back. I have repurchased Patience."

"But that is good news. How could you be so silly as to sell her for twenty pounds when you gave seventy-five golden sovereigns for her?"

"Well—well, the major is a dangerous man, beloved! I do not care to enter his presence."

"Oh, I am not afraid of him!"

"No; he would not harm you. Have you the twenty pounds he paid for the gift?"

"Yes; it is here," answered Leah, producing a bag of gold.

"Take it to the major. He is at the hotel. Hand him that money, together with these five sovereigns, a present to him, and bring back my receipt; then I will sell Patience to these gentlemen for her true value, which is a hundred pounds. Be back as soon as you can, beloved, and don't hand him the money unless he gives back my receipt."

"Look here, old hoss!" growled Pete. "I dunno, in de first place, weder we want a camel, and—"

"Not an ordinary camel, sahib; but you want a camel like Patience. No one could help wanting her, and as I am practically giving her away for a hundred pounds—why, you will never get such an opportunity."

"Seems to me dat de price ob camels fluctuates worse dan gold shares!" grumbled Pete. "Dat camel was sold to de major for twenty pounds, den she was bought back for twenty-five pounds, and now you want to sell her to us for a hundred pounds."

"It is almost a gift; she is worth ten times that amount. A more beautifully-trained beast you never saw. Kneel, Patience! Groooh!"

Patience obeyed, and her action seemed to please Pete. Ayara was quick to notice it. He wanted her to please Pete. There could not be a doubt that Patience was most obedient, and really very sensible.

Presently Leah returned, smiling as usual, and handed her husband the receipt, which he passed on to Pete.

"The sahib can tear it up. I have no further use for it. Now, Leah, make out another receipt for a hundred pounds and—"

"Certainly! It shall be done, though I deeply regret to part with Patience. Still, although we are honest, we are very poor. You can see that by our miserable home."

"Stop a minute, my dear!" cried Pete. "Just you make dat receipt out for fifty pounds, 'cos I ain't paying a penny more."

"It is cruel!" moaned Ayara. "Make it out for seventy-five pounds."

"Den it's off. Fifty pounds is my price, and it ain't going to be altered by so much as twopence."

"Make out the receipt, Leah. I am giving it away. Still, what can starving people do?"

Now, considering that Ayara had pulled five pounds out of his pocket and handed them to his wife, as a present to the major, Pete did not quite believe that he was anything like starving. All the same, he wanted Patience, because she was so docile, and he was prepared to pay fifty pounds for her, which he did, in gold; Ayara saying that he preferred it to notes. The bargain was struck, and Ayara offered to keep Patience at his stables, as he called the yard, for a pound a week, and he took the first week in advance. He wanted to take a year's keep in advance, but Pete preferred to settle weekly.

Having arranged to try Patience on the morrow, the comrades went back to the hotel, where they found the major in a state of great fury.

"Where is that dog of an Arab?" he demanded.

"De man is attending to our camel."

"Well, why hasn't the villain handed me my twenty-five pounds?"

"Eh?"

"I say, where are my twenty-five pounds?"

"Leah brought you dose, old hoss. We saw de receipt."

"Fury!" howled the major, leaping to his feet. "The woman has never been near the place! The receipt was one of the things I was flogging him about. The thief vowed I had not paid him the twenty pounds, and refused to give me the receipt. Like a blind idiot, I paid him the money without taking a receipt; then he swore I had never paid

him, and his wife said the same, although I did so in her presence. That receipt, which you saw, has been in their possession all the time. She went to make it out, and it escaped my memory. Perdition, where is the villain?"

"I dunno; but I know we paid him fifty pounds for dat camel, and as we hab got de receipt here, we'm on de safe side."

"He's a vely bad, wicked man," declared Wang, entering the room at that moment. "I sold Patience to him for ten pounds, and he went to fetch the money. He gave me five pounds on account, and he has not yet accounted for the rest of the money. I gave him the receipt for the money, and he take the camel. I lose my camel and my five pounds. Oh, he's vely bad man!"

The major looked blue; his face was, in fact, blue, and his eyes bulged with his fury.

"Why, the villain has got the camel for five pounds!" he roared. "I paid him twenty for it, and now you utter idiots have paid him another fifty for it!"

"It's my camel!" yelled Wang.

"You lying dog, it is mine!" howled the major.

"I dunno 'bout dat," observed Pete, who was the only calm one in the company, for Jack and Sam were shouting with laughter, while Wang and Murfitt were howling with fury. "I dunno, but it seems to me dat I'm de owner ob dat camel. Golly! Why, here comes Ayara. If dat man ain't got some cheek, I don't want to meet an Arab dat has. Now, you keep quiet, Murfitt. I ain't habing him lashed any more. I must say I don't tink he has inherited quite all de honesty ob his ancestors, but p'r'aps he can explain de matter. Look here, Ayara, Wang says you bought de camel from him for ten pounds, and hab only paid five on account."

"Which is quite true. I have come to pay him the other five pounds. He could not keep the dear brute, and—"

"Seems to me she's a bery dear brute."

"No. Wang gave her to me, and for his kindness I gave him ten pounds—"

"Five pounds!" yelled Wang.

"On account," murmured Ayara, "which is the same thing. When I promise ten pounds, it is the same as if the man had it in his pocket."

Wang did not look as though he thought so. He said he would take the five pounds now.

Ayara pulled a wry face, but, feeling in his capacious pocket, he drew forth a dirty and thumb-marked note, and handed it to Wang. The latter fastened on to the note, and darted from the room. He had hardly expected to get that five pounds, and now that the note was in his possession, he was not going to run the risk of losing it.

"Now you can pay me my money," said the major, when Wang had departed.

"But I have no money," said Ayara innocently. "Wang has taken the last I had!"

"You thieving rascal!" roared Murfitt. "I'll give you a thorough thrashing if you don't—"

"Oh, do shut up, major, for goodness' sake!" said Pete. "I believe you would argue for years! Look here, I'm fed up wid your voice! How much do you want? Twenty-five pounds? Well, dere's ten. Put dose in your pocket, and say no more about it. I'm going to get on wid my dinner. Come on, boys!"

The comrades sat down at their table, and continued their meal. The major, thankful for the money Pete had given him, ordered up dinner, and in a few moments perfect silence reigned in the establishment owned by Wang.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Mystery of the Palace—How the Comrades Laid the Spectres.

"NOW, look here, Ayara!" exclaimed Pete, when he had finished eating. "You say dat you are a guide in de country, and know all about it?"

"There is no living man who knows so much, or would ever be able to learn it in his lifetime," declared the modest man.

"Bery well! We had de information giben us dat dere's a certain palace some distance from dis town, and dat it is haunted by a dreadful ghost dat eats up people."

"The Palace of Light!" exclaimed Ayara. "I know every stone of it. The spectre I have seen many times. Once it conversed with me, but as I advanced to seize it, it fled in terror. However, if you would care to visit the place, I would be only too pleased to act as your guide!"

"Bery well, old hoss, your offer is accepted. We will start in de morning. Bring Patience round, and I will ride her. You might also bring two camels round for Jack and Sammy. I will pay you ten pounds for the loan of each. Don't forget, directly after breakfast."

THE PENNY POPULAR.—No. 203.

"I suppose you wouldn't mind my accompanying you?" said Murfitt.

"Hallo, major, you want to come as well?" remarked Pete. "Bery well, den, we will put up with you, only you must bring your own camel, you know."

"I shall be only too pleased!" said Murfitt.

The following morning Ayara arrived to time with the camel, and the journey commenced.

It was not until the next morning that they came in sight of the Palace of Light.

It was a ruinous old place, apparently occupied by bats and owls only. But some queer things had been going on there, and the major had decided that it was his duty to fathom the mystery.

"I will show you the vault of light now," observed Ayara. "Follow me, gentlemen. You are quite safe in my hands. Mind how you descend the steps. Here is a torch. We shall need it."

They did, for the passages were pitch black, and gloomy dungeons were on either side. Numerous bats fluttered about, with shrill cries, some of them flapping into the light of the torch, while one of them fluttered into the major's face, and bit him severely.

"Yah, yah, yah!" roared Pete. "It must hab tought your face was a red lamp, old hoss. Well, you ain't making much fuss ober a little insect's bite, I must say. Where's dis vault, Ayara?"

"Sahib, it is through this archway. Follow me. Have no fear."

"Well, I dunno dat your protection will stop our fear. What's de matter wid de place? I don't see much light about it."

"Let me extinguish my torch," said Ayara, when all had entered; and directly he had done so they found themselves in absolute darkness, while there was a strange grating sound.

"What is that noise, Ayara?" demanded Jack, who had his suspicions that all was not as it should be.

"Sahib, I know not," groaned the guide. "I never heard such a strange sound before! Oh, I trust nothing serious is happening!"

"A sliding panel has been closed across the exit!" cried Jack, groping about.

"Then we are prisoners!" howled Ayara. "We are victims of the Palace of Light! Oh, why did I ever live to see this day?"

"Light your torch!" gasped the major.

It was quite unnecessary, for at that moment sunlight streamed from the roof of the vault. It appeared to come in all along the side, and the light looked very weird in the gloomy place.

Pete struck the door with the head of his axe, and he knew by the ring that it was of iron, while its strength was such that it would have been utterly impossible to burst it open.

For some moments there was a breathless silence, then they heard a muffled voice:

"I am Death! You are my victims! Prepare to die!"

The major groaned, and Ayara yelled at the top of his voice. He clasped his hands in terror, and looked very unlike being able to protect other people.

"Your lives shall be spared on one condition," came the hollow voice once more.

"Name it!" cried the major.

"One hundred pounds must be passed through the crevice beneath the iron door, which will then be opened."

"So dat's the little game, is it?" exclaimed Pete. "Well, we'm going to do nuffin ob de sort, are we, boys?"

"Certainly not!" answered Jack.

"You must!" cried the major. "I have not the money. I have only a couple of pounds!"

"And I only a shilling," groaned Ayara.

"All right, old hoss!" exclaimed Pete. "Den you'm got to die de same as we hab! Is dat where de voice comes from, Rory? Well, we will attend to dat matter later on. I dunno weder dis is a little trick ob Murfitt's, or weder Ayara is de guilty one, but I'm mighty certain dey won't blackmail us. Just you stand by dat iron door, Jack and Sammy. We will take mighty good care dat if we don't escape, de oder two ain't going to do anything like it!"

"You talk like a raving maniac!" groaned the major. "How could I have anything to do with it. I have come here to discover the mystery!"

"All right, old hoss, den you hab discovered it, dough I must say I don't see how de light ob de sun can get into de dungeon, seeing how low down it is. Still, we ain't got anything to do wid dat. If de major chooses to pay a hundred pounds for his release, ob course, he's got de right to do so."

"Fool! Don't I tell you that I have no money?"

"All right, den, you will hab to stay here, 'cos we ain't going to be blackmailed."

"Oh, gentlemen," groaned Ayara, "a hundred pounds are as nothing to you! Would you see us die terrible deaths rather than pay? And you must recollect that even if you die here, that fiend—it can't be human—would be able to take all your money, which is much more than a paltry hundred pounds."

"All right, Ayara," exclaimed Pete, "you can argue de matter as much as you like, but we don't part wid money under threats! If dis is a trick ob de major's, he's got de wrong men to deal wid; and if it is a trick ob yours, de same remarks apply."

"How could it be a trick of mine?" moaned Ayara, sinking to the floor and sobbing like a child, while the major looked far from happy. "Ah, if I only had the money I would pay it gladly to escape from this fearful tomb! It is haunted; that light could not come otherwise. We are dealing with a fiend, and not a human being."

"He appears to be human enough in wanting money," said Jack. "There is one thing to be said, and that is, it is very certain he will not get it from us. Now, stop that noise, for it will not do the slightest good. You will never alter our determination, if you howl yourself hoarse."

Ayara appeared to resign himself to his fate. He sat on the flagged floor, and moaned about himself and his beloved wife.

Murfit appeared only to care for himself. He used every argument he could think of to alter the comrades' decision, but it was without effect.

"Ain't it trying to listen to de old hoss' ravings, boys?" exclaimed Pete.

"Villain, you do not appear to comprehend that we are facing a certain and awful death!"

"There is no doubt about it," moaned Ayara. "For myself I do not care, but it is for my beloved wife. She will grieve for me all the days of her life."

"Not she!" exclaimed Pete. "She's young and pretty, and when you are comfortably tucked up in your final resting-place, de girl will fall in lub wid a man, and marry him. Den she will be able to forget all about you in no time."

"I don't want her to forget me."

"Nunno! And you don't want to die ob hunger and thirst in dis place. All de same, you've got to do it, so it ain't de slightest use ob kicking up dis mighty row ober nuffin."

"He must be mad! No man who was facing death, if he were sane, could talk like that. Oh, how terrible it is that my life should end this way!"

"But what about de major's life?"

"You are murdering him, too; but I do not mind about that. He is a sinful and untruthful man, and does not deserve to live. I, who am good and truthful, do. Now, I beg of you to pay the money, and then you will be able to get it back from the major, who has pledged his word to repay you."

"But you say he's so mighty untruthful dat I don't seem to feel certain he would keep his word."

"He will keep his word. I shall make him. I would tell all his superior officers, and all the people in the place, and so hold him up to ridicule that life would not be worth living. No; he will pay you somehow, even if he has to steal the money."

"Yah, yah, yah! You ain't got a much better opinion ob de man dan he has got ob you. But it doesn't matter. We ain't paying anything, so he will neber hab to pay it back. Now, look here, boys, I'm mighty certain by Rory's movements dat de voice comes from beneath dese flagstones; and, dat being de case, I'm going to hab dem up. Just you guard de door. And listen to me, Murfit and Ayara. You may be perfectly innocent about de matter, and if dat's de case, it will be to your advantage to say nuffin. If eider ob you utter a sound, or say any words ob warning, I shall gib you some mighty big clumps. Silence now, not a word! I won't eber hab a moan, Ayara."

"But, sahib, I—"

"Silence!" cried Pete, giving him a slap over the head that made him howl; then he got a second one for howling, and came to the conclusion that it would be far better to remain silent.

Pete had spoken in a voice too low to reach anyone outside the vault. Now he drew his axe, and inserted the blade between the crevices of the flagstones. The building was so old that all the cement had long since mouldered away, so that although the flagstone was very large, Pete's task was not a very difficult one. Feeling confident that their unknown foe was beneath the vault, Pete was anxious to get the flagstone up suddenly, as it would be certain that the miscreant had some other means of escape, and on the first alarm he would doubtless seek safety in flight.

Inch by inch Pete raised the large stone, and then, getting his fingers beneath it, he flung it over, while the next instant he dropped beneath the opening.

It was a risky thing to do, for he neither knew the height, nor did he know the number of his foes, who doubtless would be armed and quite ready to use their weapons.

He dropped about ten feet into another small vault, and he saw a man dart up a flight of steps and make an effort to close a door at the top of them; but Pete was too quick for him. Bounding up the steps, Pete gave chase; but he found the fugitive remarkably swift and active, while he had the advantage of knowing the place well. He went up a winding staircase which led to the top of the palace, then bolted down a secret passage; but as he had not time to close the door, Pete leapt upon him, and they pitched down a flight of stone steps in a manner that was distinctly dangerous.

"Lucky we ain't hurt ourselves, ain't it, old hoss?" exclaimed Pete. "You seem to hab damaged your face a little, but dat's ob no consideration!"

"I am caught!"

"M'yes! I notice dat!"

"I fear my thigh is broken. It seems to be hurting me greatly."

"It would do all dat if it was broken."

"It is Fate. I am caught at last. Well, I do not complain. I have got what I deserve. I wish my thigh wasn't broken, though. The foot seems all twisted. Do you think you could put the thing right?"

"Yah, yah, yah! You'm pretty cool, I must say. But look here, old hoss, I ain't a medicated man. Sammy is better at bone-setting dan I am, and if I get twisting your leg about I might hurt you. What's your name?"

"Ayab!"

"Well, Ayab, seeing dat I hab badly damaged your face and broken your thigh, I dunno where de kindness comes in!"

"You have spared my life when you might have taken it, and I want to warn you against Ayara. Here he comes with the major—a well-matched pair of scoundrels! I am a thief—I admit it—but that man Murfit is the most vindictive brute on the face of the earth!"

"You lying hound!" yelled Ayara, shaking his fist in the injured Arab's face. "The major is a brave and good man, and he will surely reward me for having helped him capture you!"

"Do not strike me! I am badly injured! My thigh is broken!"

"I am glad," said Ayara. "Ha, ha! It is twisted. Here, let me twist it straight!"

"You leabe him alone, Ayara, else I will gib you a clump ober de napper. He ain't to be hurt any more. Where are Jack and Sammy?"

"Waiting at the bottom of the staircase to cut off this miscreant in case he should have escaped. I knew this secret passage, and its other exit. They are stationed at both exits, so that his escape would have been quite impossible even had you not captured him. No doubt he will have money on him, Major Murfit. Shall I search him?"

"No; leave him alone for the present!" exclaimed Murfit. "Any money found on him will belong to the Government. You had better bring your comrades up, and we will carry this miscreant down. I will borrow Patience, and we can take him back on it!"

"I will be twisting his leg straight while you are gone," murmured Ayara, glaring at Ayab. "I will make the beast pay for the fright he has given me!"

"Look here, if you or de major hurt him while I'm getting Jack and Sammy, it will be de worse for you!"

"I shall not hurt the brute!" snarled the major. "Though I must say he deserves to be punished! However, the law will do that!"

Pete descended, but when he reached the bottom of the staircase he found neither Jack nor Sam there. He at once went to the door of the lower vault, which Ayab had endeavoured to close in his flight, and now he heard his comrades' voices.

"It's all right, boys!" exclaimed Pete. "I hab captured de ghost! How did you get locked in?"

"The door slammed," answered Jack. "We were following Murfit and Ayab from the place."

"Well, I will soon hab it open, 'cos it's only made ob wood. Stand clear while I gib a few blows wid my axe!"

It is true that the door was of wood, but it was studded with bolts, and the wood seemed to be like iron. Pete found his task far more difficult than he had anticipated. It took him nearly a quarter of an hour before he succeeded in bursting it open; then Rory sprang out, followed by Jack and Sam.

"We waited behind a little to get Rory into the lower

vault," explained Jack, "and we heard the door slam. There is a wheel in this lower vault that winds the panel backwards and forwards in the vault in which we were imprisoned, so it was an easy matter for that rascal to lock us in! Where is he?"

"Up dese stairs. Only see here, Jack, Ayara ain't been speaking de troof again!"

"He never does."

"He told me you were waiting to cut off de fugitive."

"He certainly suggested that we should do so."

"M'yes! I don't quite understand de man. Still, come dis way, and I dare say we shall find out all about it!"

Pete had ascended about half the distance when some howls for help reached him.

"Golly!" he exclaimed. "Dey must be twisting dat man's broken leg. Just hear what a row he is making. Come up, boys! Something is wrong here!"

It was—very wrong indeed. The major lay at the bottom of the steps. His hands were bound behind his back, and he was purple in the face, while his fury was such that his words were almost incoherent.

"Where's de man wid de broken leg?" inquired Pete, severing his bonds.

"Broken leg be hanged!" howled Murfitt. "His leg is no more broken than mine! Fury! The two villains are accomplices! They attacked me, and knocked me down! Perdition! They have escaped, and you have let them!"

"Yah, yah, yah! Dat's a good one! Why, you told me to get Jack and Sammy—"

"I don't care! I—"

"Well, if you don't care, I'm mighty certain I don't," observed Pete. "Yah, yah, yah! I tought dere was something rader forced about Ayara's rage wid de wounded man. Seems to me dese two hab been playing dis little game togeder, and dat Ayara has been guiding people to de place while Ayab has been relieving dem ob deir money. But let's come on de top ob de castle, and see if we can see anything ob de escaped prisoner. Yah, yah, yah! 'Scuse me laughing at you, old hoss, but you hab made a mighty mess ob affairs. Won't de authorities laugh at you if you gib dem an exact account ob what has happened! Golly! Look at dat!"

Ayara was mounted on one of the major's horses. Ayab was on the other one, and although they were within rifle-range, they appeared to be taking matters pretty coolly. They had reined in their horses, and were lighting a couple of Murfitt's cigars, then they smiled at each other and galloped away.

The cool impudence of the thing struck the comrades as so funny that they shouted with laughter. There is not a doubt that Sam could have brought both those daring riders down had he chosen, but seeing that their scheme was spoilt for all time now, he did not feel inclined to fire on unarmed men, and it never appeared to have occurred to the major to ask him to do so till they had disappeared in the distance with his two horses.

"Ah, if ever I come across those demons," he roared, "I'll hang them! I declare I will! I will take the law into my own hands! They shall swing, if ever I capture them! But the demons are not riding in the direction of El Tebir."

"Yah, yah, yah! Should say dat would be de last direction dey would be likely to take!" exclaimed Pete. "I rader 'spect dey are going to sell your horses, den, I should say, Leah will join her husband in anoder part ob de country. You'm been sold, major. Your intellect ain't a match for Ayara's nor Ayab's. I made sure dat man had hurt his leg. I dunno how he managed to twist his foot round like he did. Still, it's mighty certain dat dere's nuffin de matter wid it, else he wouldn't be able to ride like dat. Dey seem to be enjoying your cigars, too. Oh, what's de good ob making dat row? I tell you what it is, old hoss. Ayara ought to hab been Chancellor ob de Exchequer, 'cos he makes money all roads. De only objection would be dat de country would get none ob de money, 'cos I'm mighty certain dat Ayara

would stick to de lot. I wonder which palace dey are going to haunt dis time? All de same, I would like to find out how dey got de sunlight into de vault. Let's come and look, boys."

It was done in a most simple manner. At the top of the vault the palace was in complete ruins, and there was a broad crevice along the top of the vault. When the sun was high in the heavens it streamed direct on the ruins, and a large mirror, probably taken from one of the rooms of the palace, was so fixed that it refracted the sunlight through the opening. Close by was a large piece of canvas, doubtless used to cover the crevice when the light was not required for the schemers' little plot.

"Yah, yah, yah! Dat's mighty simple!" exclaimed Pete. "And de same remarks apply to you, major, for having been frightened ob de light. I must say you ain't such a brave officer as you ought to be."

"You insolent vagabond, I was not frightened!"

"Den what were you going to pay de hundred pounds for? You ought to be bery pleased dat we hab saved you dat money. However, you need not be frightened 'bout us, 'cos we ain't going to return to El Tebir. We'm going on a voyage ob discovery."

"You must come back. It would not be safe for me to make the journey alone; besides, I have no provisions."

"Well, dey say de steamer comes up as far as dis part, so dat you can return part ob de way by her; or, if you don't like dat, you will be able to return on Patience's back. Ayara has left you dat. I most wonder he did not steal her as well while he was about it, but I 'spect he knew perfectly well dat she wasn't worf de stealing."

"You must come back with me; at any rate, part of the way," declared Murfitt, who did not relish that journey alone, especially if he had to ride a camel like Patience.

"We ain't going to do anything ob de sort. You can hab your revolver before you start, and, after all, it won't take you so long to get back. I can't tink what you were about to let your prisoners escape in dat ridiculous manner. You ought to hab knocked dem down, instead ob letting dem knock you down. Still, if dat is your way ob keeping prisoners, I suppose you know best."

"You will come back with me?" inquired Murfitt, turning towards Jack and Sam.

"Certainly not," answered Jack. "I wonder that you have the audacity to expect it. After all, where does the hardship come in? The camel will not take long to do the journey, if she is in anything like a decent temper. You can give her a good rest before you start."

"I won't ride the brute!"

"Yah, yah, yah! I will admit dat she is a camel dat requires a good bit ob riding," said Pete. "Treat her kindly, dough. If you eber come across Ayara again, it's just possible dat he will buy her back on his peculiar credit cistern. Yah, yah, yah! 'Scuse me laughing at you, but I really can't help it. You are so mighty soft to trust a man like him. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he comes to me for his pay as a guide."

"The villain robbed me of the two pounds that were in my pocket, and said that you would make the money good, as it was for the wages you owed him."

"Well, old hoss, dere's something in dat," observed Pete, handing over a couple of sovereigns. "I must say dat I don't consider Ayara has earned dat money, considering de way he has guided us; all de same, I suppose you ought not to lose it, so you can hab it back. Now, den, old hoss, dere's nuffin more to be said, and de sooner you mount Patience, de quicker you will get home, if you are anything like lucky."

Murfitt saw that he would be unable to make any better arrangement, so he actually ventured to mount, and Patience, who appeared to want to get home as quickly as she could, bolted off at a wonderful pace, and that was the last the comrades saw of the major.

THE END.

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