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Stories.**

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TOM MERRY'S MASQUERADE!

(A Great Scene in our School Tale—one of the Three Complete Stories in this Issue.)

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HIS COUSIN'S CRIME!

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

SEXTON BLAKE,

the World-Famous

DETECTIVE.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

A Private Talk—Blake's Theory—
The Watchword.

SEXTON BLAKE had taken Malloway Hall, a country house in the Midlands, for a few weeks; there he had asked a few of his intimate friends to spend a pleasant holiday with him, shooting and fishing. Malloway Hall was the property of Valentine Malloway, who was at this time on the continent for the sake of his health. While away, the squire had left the Hall in the charge of his nephew and heir, Drake Pentland, who, himself, formed one of the party.

The other guests were Roger Blackburn and his wife, Maurice Ormsdale and his sister Linda, Mr. and Mrs. Bedford-Parke, Alphonse Duval, and Gaston du Nord, while Mr. Kempton Hurst, Lady Augusta Towers, Sir Malcolm Herbert, and Professor Platinum completed the list.

Just as the party were settling down to a thoroughly enjoyable time, a tragic occurrence had taken place. The head gamekeeper, Lurcomb, had been brutally murdered. Dick Kildare, a young man who lived in the neighbourhood, and spent most of his time on the estate, had been arrested for the deed. The police had arrested him chiefly because his shotgun had been found near to the spot where the crime had been committed, and also because he had quarrelled in the past with Lurcomb about the keeper's daughter Bessie. Kildare and Bessie were lovers, but Lurcomb had refused to allow his daughter to go about with the young man; thus the quarrel. Lurcomb, in the dispute, had knocked Kildare down, and the motive of the crime was thought to be revenge.

Bessie Lurcomb had made a great effort to save her lover from prison, but all in vain.

An under-keeper having brought the news of the murder to Malloway Hall at an early hour, and communicated it to the butler, it was made known to the members of the shooting-party when they came downstairs; and when all were seated at breakfast between eight and nine o'clock, and Drake Pentland and Tinker were telling what they knew of the affair, the door opened, and Sexton Blake entered the room. Being deluged with questions as soon as he sat down in his place, he gratified the curiosity of his guests by informing them of the arrest of Dick Kildare, and describing Bessie Lurcomb's noble attempt to save her lover from prison.

"That was plucky of her," murmured Drake Pentland, as he broke an egg with his knife.

"It was heroic!" declared the detective.

"And foolish as well. The girl has my sympathy, but I have none for young Kildare. The case against him is overwhelming. Don't you think so, Blake?"

"It is certainly very strong."

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Standing within a couple of yards, clearly revealed by the moonlight that shone on him from the foliage overhead, was Drake Pentland with a revolver in one hand.

"It will hang him, no doubt. I must write to my uncle, who is now at Madrid."

The squire's nephew shook his head sadly as he spoke, and Alphonse and Gaston sighed.

"I am so sorry for that poor girl," said Lady Augusta Towers, who had a tender heart. "I should like to try to comfort her."

"I wish you would," Blake told her. "I took her home, and you will find her there."

"In view of what has occurred," put in Sir Malcolm Herbert, "I think it would be advisable for this party to break up."

"Alas, we are no longer to pop at ze pheasants?" exclaimed Alphonse.

"What grief to go away!" deplored Gaston.

"No, no, I don't want you to break up," said Sexton Blake. "I should regret that, and there is no necessity for it. I am sure that we are all greatly shocked by the tragedy, and that none of us are inclined for sport. But the circumstances, sad though they are, do not warrant me in spoiling your pleasure. I desire that you should remain here and seek what enjoyment you can get in a quiet way. And in the course of a few days, after poor Lurcomb has been buried, we will go on with the shooting."

This decision, which was a sensible one, was accepted by all. There was a shadow on the party, however, and conversation was subdued; there was a lack of laughter and jest during the course of the meal. When it was over, the guests dispersed, the bright sunshine tempting some for a walk, while Lady Augusta Towers and Marjorie Blackburn set off for the gamekeeper's cottage to visit Bessie Lurcomb. Gradually they melted away, until only Blake and the lad were left in the dining-room.

"You have something to tell me, guv'nor," said Tinker. "I am sure you have."

"You are right," the detective answered gravely. And with that he rose from the table, and led the way to a small smoking-room at the rear of the library. "We must have a

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talk in private," he continued, when he had locked the door. "There is secret work for us to do. There is a mystery to be solved."

"What do you mean?" asked the lad. "Is it possible that you don't believe in Dick Kildare's guilt?"

"I believe him to be innocent."

"And have you any idea who it was that shot the keeper?"

"I have strong reasons, my boy, for suspecting that Drake Pentland has some guilty knowledge of the crime."

"My word, gov'nor! What has led you to that conclusion?"

"I will tell you," replied Blake. "It was a trivial thing, in the first place, that roused my suspicions. Having carelessly picked up the gun in Lurcomb's cottage—nobody observed me, I think—I thrust my handkerchief into the barrel, looked at the powder-grime that had adhered to it, and judged from the appearance and smell of the deposit that the weapon had not been discharged for at least twenty-four hours. As you are aware, I have learned by experience that fresh powder-grime and stale are two different things."

"Later on I examined the gun again at the police-station, and the result strengthened my previous opinion. Satisfied on that point, confronted by evidence which suggested that young Kildare could not have shot the keeper, I asked myself what this mystery meant. And naturally, under the circumstances, there came to my mind a sequence of facts that seemed to be significant. I remembered that at the railway-station Drake Pentland had offered to Lurcomb's daughter attentions which she had repulsed, and that he had spoken of Dick Kildare with ill-concealed malice; that he had left our shooting-party yesterday on the plea of having important letters to write, that I subsequently observed him going in the direction of the Hall, and that when we arrived there he stated that he had been writing all the afternoon, which was a lie. And then—"

The detective broke off, and paced to and fro with a hard glitter in his eyes.

"I now had reason to suspect the squire's nephew of indirect complicity in the crime," he went on. "I knew that he could not have murdered the keeper himself, since in that event he could not have got back to the house in time to join us when we went out to investigate. Who, then, had fired the fatal shot?"

"I can't imagine," said the lad. "You have got me puzzled. What do you make of it?"

"I evolved a theory," replied Blake. "I reconstructed the affair link by link, one question after another, correlative to one another, occurred to me. Did Drake Pentland, knowing that old Ben Leach and his son, two disreputable characters, went poaching nightly in the woods, conceive a cunning plan which took him yesterday afternoon, after he left us, to Dick Kildare's cottage? Did he search for the gun in the young man's absence, find it hidden under the couch, and carry it off? Did he last night—after pretending that he had gone to bed—slip out of the house, set a watch for Leach and his son, shadow them to the East Wood, and drop the stolen gun there? Did he then hasten to Lurcomb's cottage, rouse him from sleep, inform him in a disguised voice that there were poachers in the wood, and hurry back to the Hall? And did Joe Lurcomb, while scouring the wood, stumble on Ben and Jasper Leach, and lose his life by a shot fired by one of them?"

"That is the neatest thing you have ever worked out, gov'nor! I shouldn't wonder if that was exactly what happened, from first to last. It is a most diabolical plot to put a rope around Dick Kildare's neck, if you are right. But so far it is all presumption."

"No, my boy, not quite all. Early this morning I slipped over here from the police-station—I went back afterwards—and examined the thick growth of ivy that clings to the wall beneath Drake Pentland's bedchamber. And I discovered leaves that were bruised, and roots that had fresh abrasions on them."

"By Jove, that settles it! The squire's nephew climbed up and down that ivy last night. It was he who sent the keeper to his death. He meant that Lurcomb should be shot by one of the poachers, and that Dick Kildare's gun should be found in the wood. He is indirectly guilty of the murder."

"I believe it, Tinker. We may safely assume that such is the case, I think, in view of the mute testimony given by the ivy."

"But is the motive strong enough?" inquired the lad.

"I judge so," Sexton Blake answered. "Knowing that Kildare and the keeper's daughter were lovers, Drake Pentland wished to be rid of the young man so that he could have a clear field for himself with the girl. On the other hand, there may be a deeper motive. He may have had another and stronger reason for desiring to get rid of his rival. A veil of mystery seems to shroud Dick Kildare. I have been told that he has little or no knowledge of the

early life of his father, who came as a stranger to Holly-hock Cottage, bought the place, and died there without having made any friends in the neighbourhood. A queer suspicion has once or twice entered my head. I have imagined that perhaps—"

He paused abruptly.

"Imagined what, gov'nor?"

"Never mind. It is an absurd idea."

"I wish you would tell me, but if you won't you won't. By the way, why did you let young Kildare be arrested when you could have established his innocence?"

"For two reasons, my boy. In the first place, though I am satisfied that the gun found in the wood had not been discharged within twenty-four hours, I could not easily have proved that fact. In the second place, had I stated what I believed, and tried to clear the young fellow, that would have put Drake Pentland on his guard. Therefore, I let Dick Kildare go to prison."

"That is jolly hard on him," said Tinker. "And on Miss Lurcomb, too."

"I know that," replied Blake; "but it will be for the best in the end."

"How are we to get evidence against the real murderer and the squire's nephew? I am afraid it won't be easy."

"On the contrary, it is going to be a difficult task, and it is by no means certain that we shall succeed. But we will persevere, and work in the dark, with the utmost caution."

"Shall we begin with Ben Leach and his son?" asked the lad.

"No; we won't pay any attention to them for the present," declared Sexton Blake. "I will look after my guests, as usual, while you will keep a furtive watch on Drake Pentland. He may make some false move, or in the event of his having arranged this fiendish scheme with the two poachers—and it is quite possible that he has done so—he may meet them somewhere for the purpose of paying them money. At all events, we will do our best to clear young Kildare. We have talked enough, my boy," he added. "We had better not remain here any longer, lest our disappearance should rouse Pentland's suspicions."

And as the detective spoke he stepped to the door.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

A Mysterious Visit—The Brass Box—Trapped.

TEN days had elapsed since the murder in the East Wood, and the sensation caused by the tragedy had to some extent subsided, though it was still the leading topic of interest and conversation in that part of the country. The man who had warned the gamekeeper on the fatal night, and sent him to his death, had not been discovered; but the police, while admitting that this was an element of mystery, did not attach any great importance to it. The coroner's jury had rendered a verdict of wilful murder against Dick Kildare—the gun found in the wood had been proved to have been his property—and the unhappy young man was lying in Midchester Gaol awaiting his trial on the capital charge. Joe Lurcomb was in his grave, and his pretty daughter, who had been seriously ill and was now recovering, was living in the desolate home with the Jimpsons. Jimpson, now being the head gamekeeper, had moved there from his own cottage.

A full report of the murder had been sent to Squire Malloway by his nephew, and he had replied stating that his health would not permit him to leave Madrid at present, but that he would return home as soon as his physician would allow him to do so. Meanwhile, pheasant-shooting had been resumed at the Hall, and Sexton Blake's guests had been enjoying themselves, and making big bags, in spite of the tragic affair that had clouded the commencement of their visit. Alphonse and Gaston were still rivals, assiduously paying court to Lady Augusta Towers; and Professor Platinum, as a result of his daily tramps, had littered his bed-chamber with a collection of beetles, pebbles, and plants, not to speak of lizards and caterpillars. As for Drake Pentland, he had not yet betrayed any evidence of guilt, in spite of the furtive surveillance that had been kept upon him.

It was after nine o'clock, and dinner was just over at Malloway Hall; a meal which had been less entertaining than usual, owing to the absence of the detective, who had gone for the second or third time to Midchester to see the accused man, and had not returned. He had been trying to get information in regard to Dick Kildare's father, but what little he had learned had no more than whetted his curiosity.

When the party left the dinner-table they scattered, some going to the drawing-room, some to the smoking-room, and some to the well-stocked library.

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Tinker, who felt himself in need of fresh air, decided to take a stroll in the grounds.

Stepping out of the conservatory door, Tinker walked along the side terrace for a dozen yards or so, in the deep shadow of the wall, and when he had reached the angle, he stopped suddenly. Not far off, on the lawn in front of the house, was visible the figure of a man who, clad in dark tweeds, was pacing slowly to and fro, and smoking a cigar.

"Ah, there is Drake Pentland!" murmured Tinker, as he crouched low. "I was just going to see what had become of him. He usually settles himself in the smoking-room about this time, and drinks brandy-and-soda. But he hasn't gone there to-night, and he didn't dress for dinner, which rather looks as if he had some game on. I'll watch him."

As it was a mild, calm night, with a silvery moon swimming in a sky flecked with cloudlets, it might have been naturally assumed that Mr. Drake Pentland had concluded that his cigar would taste better in the open air than in the house. Such was not the case, however. A vague impulse had prompted him to sit down to dinner in his tweeds. It had brought him out afterwards, and it was getting a stronger grip of him as he strolled to and fro.

"I'll do it," he said to himself, at length. "There won't be any risk—not at this hour. It will relieve my mind if I can settle the question in one way or another. So here goes."

He dropped the stump of his cigar, and walked leisurely across the lawn; and about half a minute later, having meanwhile slipped into the hall for his cap, Tinker was warily following the squire's nephew.

"I shouldn't wonder if something was going to turn up at last," he reflected.

The lad soon had reason to feel that he was right, for Drake Pentland's actions were of a nature to rouse suspicion. Having kept to the gravelled drive for a hundred yards or so, he bore to the left of it, and held to a straight course over his uncle's property—one that led him mostly through cover, where he now and again paused to listen, and to peer around him, suggesting that he did not wish to be seen by any of the keepers.

On and on he went, for a considerable distance, until he came to a narrow, fast-flowing stream that traversed a part of the Malloway Hall estate; and when he had skirted this for a time, and had diverged from it and threaded a dense plantation for fifty or sixty yards, he came out from cover close to a hedge, through a gap in which he squeezed. He was now in a small garden where grew cabbages and onions, and in front of him was the rear of the little cottage where Dick Kildare had lived a lonely existence.

Hollyhoek Cottage, as it was called, looked on to a secluded lane, and there was no other habitation near to it. As it was most unlikely that any person would pass along the lane at this hour of the night, and as the squire's nephew was well aware of the fact, he boldly advanced to the back of the cottage, prised open the kitchen window, and vanished through it. This was observed by Tinker, who had noiselessly stalked his quarry, and was now utterly bewildered by what he had just seen.

Having hesitated for a moment, he stole round to the front garden; and by the time he had posted himself behind a clump of bushes, in such a position that he could look through one of the windows, a candle had been lighted in the sitting-room of the cottage. The flame revealed the interior of the cosy little apartment, and shone on the figure of Drake Pentland, who was standing by an old-fashioned piece of furniture that was partly a chest of drawers, and partly a desk with a sloping lid. It had been locked and sealed after being searched by the police, who had found nothing of importance.

Without delay the squire's nephew set to work. A poker from the fireplace served him for a weapon, with which he forced the lid of the desk. He ransacked pigeon-holes, and tore open big drawers and little ones; and then, evidently not having found what he was looking for, he disappeared into the adjoining kitchen, and quickly returned with a small axe that had been used for chopping wood.

He vigorously attacked the piece of furniture, heedless of the noise he was making; and when he had dealt a score of heavy blows, and reduced the desk to a ruin, he suddenly dropped the axe, thrust his hand into the splintered debris, and drew out a small, flat casket of carved brass. His eyes flashed with triumph as he gazed at it.

"I thought so," he said aloud, though in a voice that was inaudible to the lad. "I was sure that old Kildare had left papers of some kind, and I was right. Here they are, in this box, which has been lying in a secret drawer that escaped the attention of the police. If it hadn't fallen into my hands, it would have been found later by somebody else, and then there would have been the deuce to pay! I'll read the papers at my leisure, and then get rid of them. But what about this mess I have made? That will be all right. I have nothing

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to fear. It will be supposed that some tramp broke in, or some dishonest rascal from the village. And now to be off. I shall sleep with an easy mind to-night!"

He glanced at the litter, and thrust the brass casket into a side pocket of his jacket; and then, stepping to the mantel, he blew out the candle. And a few seconds later Tinker had crept from hiding, and was cautiously making his way around to the back of the cottage.

"My word, I'm in luck, and no mistake!" he said to himself. "I'm on the track of a deep mystery. I can't imagine what it means, or what is in that brass box; but I am jolly glad I didn't miss this chance! The fellow has found something of importance, and I must get it from him if I can. I wonder if he will take it home with him? He may hide it somewhere between here and the Hall, so I had better not lose sight of him!"

Meanwhile, having left Hollyhoek Cottage as he had entered it, Drake Pentland had slipped through the gap in the hedge, and was retracing his course across the plantation. He was invisible in the darkness, but his footsteps were audible to the lad, who, keeping at a safe distance behind, threaded the woods until the sound of running water swelled close in front of him.

"Confound that noise!" he muttered.

Being no longer able to hear the soft footsteps, and fearing lest he should lose his quarry, he quickened his pace, and darted on for a few yards; and then, as he emerged from the trees on to a strip of open ground that bordered the stream, a gasp of alarm was forced to his lips.

Standing within a couple of yards, clearly revealed by the moonlight that shone on him from the foliage overhead, was Drake Pentland, with a revolver in one hand. Shortly before his keen eyes had caught the snapping of a twig, and at once, suspecting that somebody was following him, he had turned at bay in a desperate mood. But he was badly frightened, and this afforded Tinker an opportunity which he was prompt to take advantage of.

"Don't you dare to shoot me!" he exclaimed, as he made a quick leap, and snatched the weapon from the startled man. "Ah, now I've got you! I want that brass box, Mr. Pentland! Give it to me!"

There was a brief silence, and it was broken by a savage oath from Drake Pentland, who, by a sudden spring, came to close quarters with the lad, and struck the revolver from his grasp. The next instant the two were at grips, and when they had swayed to and fro for a moment on the slippery grass, they tripped and fell. At this point the stream formed a deep and eddy pool, and the combatants were close to it, almost on the verge of the overhanging bank, as they fought for mastery. Both were of slender build, and fairly equal in strength.

"You've caught a tartar this time!" panted Tinker. "You had better give in, and let me have that box!"

"I'll kill you first!" snarled the enraged man. "You'll be sorry for this!"

"If you harm me the gov'nor will—"

"I'll settle you and your gov'nor, confound you!"

They wasted no more breath in threats. Doggedly, fiercely they fought on, each striving to get an advantage over the other. The lad felt that his life was at stake, and with good reason, for Drake Pentland was in such a passion of wrath and terror that he was capable of any crime. The brass casket had fallen out of the pocket of his jacket, and presently, as his foot gave it a kick, it went spinning into the pool that was near by, and vanished beneath the dark water. The loss of it increased the man's fury, and the situation began to look black for Tinker, whose strength was failing.

"Help—help!" he cried hoarsely.

"Hold your tongue!" gasped Drake Pentland.

For a few seconds longer he continued the struggle, and then, wrenching himself from the hold of his young assailant by a strenuous effort, he leapt to his feet and snatched the revolver, which was within his reach. And as the exhausted lad jumped up, and tried pluckily to renew the attack, the butt of the weapon swung at him, and crashed down on his skull. He reeled backward, and pitched to the ground, and lay there motionless, with closed eyes.

All was quiet. There was no sound but the low murmur of the stream as it slid among the rocks that were below the pool. The silvery glow of the moon, penetrating the interlaced foliage, shone on the two figures, the one prostrate, the other standing as still as if carved from stone.

"It was a hard blow!" Drake Pentland muttered. "Have I killed him?"

He listened, quaking like a leaf, breathing heavily. The colour slowly ebbed back to his pallid cheeks, which grew white again as he bent over his victim, and placed a trembling hand on his chest.

"He is dead!" he whispered huskily. "I can't feel his heart beating! But it was his own fault! He shadowed me to-night, no doubt at the bidding of Sexton Blake, and saw

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me break open the desk. That infernal detective has had me under suspicion, cunning as I have been. What is to be done?"

The man was unnerved by the swift shattering of the fabric of security he had believed he had built up. The dread of Sexton Blake was in his heart, and it so wrought on him that imagination played him tricks. He crouched there like a hunted creature, turning his eyes this way and that; he fancied that he could see faces peering at him from the undergrowth, that he could hear voices calling "Murderer!" But common-sense got the better of his alarm, and when he had half-emptied a small flask of brandy, which he took from his pocket, his evil nature rallied to the emergency. The fiery spirit, moreover, had given him an idea.

"I'll do it," he told himself. "Nothing could be better. It will cover all traces, and Sexton Blake will look in vain for his boy. But the brass box! Shall I dive in for that first? No, it is safe where it is. I can get it at any time."

There was a faint rustling not far off, but Drake Pentland did not hear it. It had been his intention to drag the lad away, but he changed his mind as he remembered the powers of scent with which the detective's bloodhound was endowed. With some difficulty he raised Tinker in his arms—he was under the impression that he was carrying a corpse—and at a slow and lagging pace, with unsteady tread, he moved off towards Hollyhock Cottage.

The gloom of the wood swallowed him from sight, and the swaying bushes closed behind him. His footsteps died to silence, and a moment later two persons, a man and a youth, were standing in the open space by the pool. They had been hidden near by for some time, and had witnessed all that had occurred. They looked at the eddying surface of the water, and then at each other.

"Shall I strip, father?" asked the youth, in a whisper. "Nay, Jasper; we'll see to that afterwards," the man replied. "Come, let us first follow the squire's nephew. I'm curious to know what he means to do."

With noiseless tread they stole after Drake Pentland, and soon they, too, had vanished in the sombre thickets that skirted the plantation.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Where is Tinker?—On the Scent—The Fire—Face to Face.

BETWEEN nine and ten o'clock that night a smart trap, driven by a young groom, rattled up to Malloway Hall, and stopped; and Sexton Blake and Pedro—the dog had accompanied his master to Midchester—got out of the vehicle, and were admitted to the house by the butler. None of the guests had gone to bed yet. They were assembled in the library, chatting, and playing cards, and smoking, when the detective appeared among them, to receive a general welcome.

"How is that wretched young man bearing up?" inquired Mrs. Bedford-Parke. "Does he still protest his innocence?"

"I would rather not talk about him, if you don't mind," Blake replied. "It is a painful subject to me. Where is Tinker?" he added.

"I saw him come into the house, take his cap from the rack, and go out again," put in Marjorie Blackburn.

Nobody had laid eyes on him since, it appeared. Blake glanced at the company, and asked another question:

"Where is Mr. Pentland?"

"He hasn't been here since dinner," replied Maurice Ormsdale. "After we left the table I saw him on the lawn, smoking a cigar."

"With or without an overcoat, Ormsdale?"

"He wore none," was the answer. "He was in tweeds and a cap."

"In tweeds? Did he not dress for dinner, as usual?"

"No, he told me he was feeling too lazy."

"I say, Blake, we are having a dry time of it," interjected Kempton Hurst. "If you can recall the famous remark made by the governor of North Carolina to the governor of South Carolina, suppose you—"

"If you will ring for the butler," said Sexton Blake, with a forced smile, "he will bring you what refreshments you want."

With that he strolled off, with his dog at his heels. He had already begun to feel worried by what he had learned, and his anxiety increased when, after going upstairs, he looked into the lad's bed-chamber, and the one occupied by Drake Pentland, and found both to be empty. He passed on to his own room, where he set a pipe alight, and stood by the window.

"It is the first time Pentland has absented himself after dinner," he reflected. "It is pretty safe to assume that he has made some suspicious move at last, and that Tinker has shadowed him. The lad knows his business, and he is not likely to get into trouble. But he has been caught napping

before, and it may happen again. I don't feel easy. I must go after him."

Having returned to Tinker's room, and taken a handkerchief from a linen-basket, Blake went downstairs and peeped furtively into the library, observing that neither Drake Pentland nor the lad were with the others. He then quietly withdrew from the house, by the front door, and showed the handkerchief to Pedro, who sniffed at it, nosed the lawn, and started forward with an eager whine which meant that he had picked up the scent.

"Follow it, old chap," bade the detective, "and don't make any noise. I must be careful," he said to himself. "I don't want Pentland to know that I suspect him. But I don't suppose I shall meet either him or Tinker. They will probably return by another route, and I will find them at the Hall when I get back."

Clouds were spreading over the sky, and it was only at intervals that the moon peeped forth. With lowered muzzle Pedro went steadily on, across fields and wood, through covert and spinney. He came at length to the brawling stream, which he skirted for some distance; and then, after bearing to one side, and diving into a plantation, he began to whimper loudly. And now, to his surprise and alarm, Blake saw a red glare shining ahead of him, and heard a roaring noise swelling above the sound of the water that was splashing down its rocky channel.

"It is a fire!" he exclaimed. "Something is burning! And it is in the direction in which the lad went! I hope nothing has happened to him!"

He did not know exactly where he was, or he would have guessed what was on fire. Pedro bounded on with increased speed, and the detective, floundering blindly after him, tore through the plantation, and emerged breathlessly in the open, when at a glance he saw a startling scene. A hedge near by separated him from the back garden of Hollyhock Cottage, which was blazing furiously, and illuminating the night with a lurid glare. The roof had fallen in, and the windows were melting. The whole structure was a mass of flames, which were leaping high in the air, and shooting forked tongues into a mushroom-shaped cloud of smoke that was spangled with myriads of sparks.

"It is Dick Kildare's home!" gasped Blake. "There is some mystery about this! Something sinister, perhaps! Tinker came this way, shadowing Drake Pentland. Where is he now?"

The bloodhound had leapt the hedge into the garden, and stopped half-way to the cottage, unable to go any further because of the intense heat. It was evident that the lad's scent had led him to this point. He was whining, and looking back at his master; and as Sexton Blake perceived where the dog was, and realised the significance of what he saw, his apprehensions deepened, and he felt as if an icy hand had gripped his heart.

"Tinker—Tinker!" he shouted.

He listened for a moment, and then a gruff voice—a voice that was certainly not the lad's—came from a direction which the detective located by ear. Calling to Pedro to follow him, he darted to one side, ran along the edge of a field that bordered the garden, and scrambled through a hedge into the lane that led past Hollyhock Cottage. And here he found young Jimpson, the under-keeper. There was nobody else in sight. As the hour was late, and there were no other houses in the vicinity, the conflagration had not attracted attention, and was not likely to.

"Curious thing, sir, isn't it?" said the young man. "I wonder how this started. Most likely some tramp has been sleeping here, and he set the place on fire with his pipe, and got frightened and ran away!"

"Perhaps so," assented Sexton Blake, uttering the words with difficulty. "I hope that was the cause of it. But—but I have my suspicions. I am afraid—"

"Well, sir, it won't be any great loss," interrupted Jimpson, noting with surprise the detective's agitation. "I don't suppose Dick Kildare had anything of much value. I'm on duty," he continued, "and that's how I happen to be here. I saw the light from the woods yonder."

"Been on your rounds, have you? Have you seen anything of Mr. Pentland, or of my boy Tinker?"

"No, sir, I haven't. Are you looking for them?"

"I am looking for the boy. He disappeared after dinner, under circumstances that made me uneasy. I put Pedro on his scent, and followed it across the estate as far as—"

Blake could not finish the sentence. He was in keen distress, trying to fling off the ghastly fear that was increasing instead of diminishing. And as he knew that the lad had come as far as the cottage, that he had been in the back garden not long ago, he had ample ground for his fears.

"What does it mean?" he asked himself. "Some mysterious motive brought Drake Pentland here, and he was shadowed by Tinker. Where is the boy now?"

He strode through the gate into the front garden, with the

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hound by his side, and went as near as he dared to the burning dwelling; and as he was standing there in the lurid glow, peering into the raging, roaring furnace of fire, his eye was caught by something bright that lay on the path within a yard of him. He picked up a pearl-handled penknife, and stared at it in horror, knowing to whom it belonged.

"Tinker lost this!" he gasped. "It must have fallen from his pocket while he was struggling, while his assailant had him down. He has been murdered! He was carried into the cottage, and the murderer set the place on fire to hide his crime! The boy is in there, among the flames! I must get him out! I must—"

"Stop—stop, sir!" shouted Jimpson. "Don't be a fool! You can't go any nearer!"

As he spoke he seized the detective and clung to him, while Pedro, who was howling dismally, fastened his teeth in the slack of his master's trousers, and pulled back as hard as he could. For a few seconds Sexton Blake resisted the efforts of the two, raving wildly; and then, having submitted to be led out of the garden, he uttered an incoherent cry, and dashed off along the lane, with the faithful hound at his heels.

Jimpson looked after man and dog, and gazed at the blazing cottage, and scratched his head in bewilderment.

"Mr. Blake must have gone daft," he muttered. "That's all I can make of it. I had better go after him. I can't do anything here."

With that he moved away, and broke into a run; but he had lost sight of the detective, and he sought for him in vain.

Sexton Blake had turned from the road into the woods, and was hurrying straight across the estate as fast as he could, like a man distracted. He did not hear Pedro's frequent whimpers, was scarcely aware that the hound was by his side. With the import of what he had learned seething in his brain, maddened by the awful suspicion that was in his heart, the detective strode on and on, holding by blind instinct to the right course. Now running and now walking, he threaded covert and plantation, and crossed the park, and came at length to Malloway Hall. His footsteps had been heard on the gravel, and the door was opened by the old butler, who was yawning.

"Has everybody gone to bed?" Blake inquired.

"All but Master Tinker, sir," answered Slipper, looking curiously at the detective.

"He has not come in, then?"

"Not yet, sir. He is very late."

"And Mr. Penland?"

"He returned some time ago, sir," was the reply.

"Thank you, Slipper. Take the dog to the kitchen, and give him something to eat. He has had no supper."

"And neither have you, sir. Won't you—"

"No, I want nothing."

Pedro trotted off at the heels of the butler, and Blake, who was now outwardly composed, went quickly up the stairs. In spite of what he had been told he looked into the lad's bed-chamber, finding it empty; and then, passing a dozen yards farther along the corridor, rapped on the door of Drake Pentland's room.

"Come in!" bade a drawling voice.

The door was not locked, nor had the squire's nephew gone to bed. He was in dressing-gown and slippers, with a cigar in his mouth and a novel in his hand, sitting in a big chair by a table on which was a lighted lamp.

"Where is Tinker?" the detective asked hoarsely. "What have you done with him?"

"What have I done with him?" echoed Drake Pentland, with an expression of surprise. "How should I know where he is? I have not seen him."

"Don't lie to me! For some reason you went off to-night after dinner. You were followed by the lad, and I followed his scent by the aid of my dog, who led me to young Kildare's cottage. I found it in flames, and I—I believe that you have—"

"The cottage on fire! That is very strange. But I know nothing of it. I have not been near there, nor have I seen anything of Tinker. I went out for a stroll because I had a touch of headache. I was in the park all the time, and never more than a quarter of a mile from the Hall."

"I know better than that, Pentland."

"I have told you the simple truth, and I can't tell you anything else. Why have you suggested that the boy followed me? May I inquire what object he could have had in doing so?"

"Let your conscience answer that question."

"My dear Blake, this is utterly absurd. You must be mad. You cannot be in your right mind, or you would not speak so wildly."

"What have you done with Tinker?" Blake again demanded.

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"Nothing!" vowed the young man. "I swear that I have not seen him since dinner."

There was a brief silence, while the two looked straight at each other. Drake Pentland did not flinch, nor did his countenance show any trace of guilt or confusion. He calmly met the gaze of Sexton Blake, who was breathing hard; his eyes were bloodshot, and the veins stood out on his forehead like whipcords. He knew in his heart that the squire's nephew had lied to him, and he was strongly tempted to leap upon him and seize him by the throat. He kept his self-control, however, because he realised that it would be a mistake to yield to passion; and he felt, moreover, that he had already spoken more freely than was prudent.

"I will tell you one thing, Pentland," he said, in a low, tense voice. "If you have murdered that poor boy you will hang for it!"

With that he turned and left the room, reeling like a man intoxicated, his face convulsed with rage and anguish. The door closed behind him, and when Drake Pentland had sat still for a few seconds, listening to the sound of receding footsteps, he rose from the chair and opened a cabinet. He was very pale now, and his hand shook as he poured some brandy into a tumbler and tossed it off at a draught.

"What had I better do?" he muttered. "Shall I disappear while I have the chance? No; that would be madness—it would give the game away, and put the police on my track. Why should I turn coward? I have nothing to fear, surely. No doubt they will find a charred body in the ruins, but they won't be able to identify it, or to prove anything against me. I am playing for high stakes, and I stand to win."

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Ruins—Tinker Learns Something—Danger!

THE RE was a cloudless sky the next morning, and the weather was perfect for a pheasant drive; but no shooting-party set forth from Malloway Hall, nor did anybody go for a walk. A dark and mysterious shadow lay on the old mansion.

Breakfast was over—the host had not appeared at the meal—and the guests were wandering from room to room, talking of the mystery, and conjecturing one thing and another. They knew nothing definite, were not aware that Hollyhock Cottage had been destroyed; they had merely been told by the butler that Tinker had not returned on the previous night, and that there was grave reason to fear that he had met with some accident. So they were all in low spirits, and none left the house until after luncheon, when Drake Pentland went for a stroll, and Professor Platinum, who fancied that he was an angler, got his tackle together and departed to whip the trout stream.

And what had become of Sexton Blake? You would have found him standing in the garden by the ruins of Dick Kildare's humble abode, where Jimpson and two other men employed on the estate were busily digging, while Constable Spink kept at a distance a small group of rustics, who had by some apparently occult means got wind of the proceedings.

The work had begun about nine o'clock—as soon as the ruins had cooled sufficiently—and as the morning wore on, and the sun mounted higher in the heavens, the detective stood there in grave silence, his face white and haggard, watching the workmen as they dug deeper into the mass of ashes and blackened debris which were all that remained of the little cottage. And Pedro, who was squatted by his master's side, now and again uttered a mournful howl, as if he understood what the operations meant.

It was an unusually warm day for October, but Blake was insensible to the heat of the sun, and blind to the gaping yokels. Every stroke of pick, every thrust of shovel, was a torture to him. Hope he had none; the iron of utter despair had sunk into his soul. Sooner or later, he believed, there would be brought to light the charred body of the lad he had loved so dearly. He was waiting for that dread moment, a prey to such emotions as words cannot describe.

Though Sexton Blake's fears were justified by circumstances—though he had every reason to believe what he did—and Drake Pentland had more reason to believe the same—his grief and horror were wasted. For Tinker was not in the ruins of Dick Kildare's cottage, nor was he dead.

On recovering consciousness after the blow that had felled him by the side of the stream, he had found himself in darkness and silence, bound and gagged, and in so weak and dizzy a condition, owing to his ill-treatment, that a vague comprehension of what had happened to him had no more than pierced his befuddled brain when he lapsed again into a state of insensibility that was more stupor than sleep.

This must have lasted for a considerable period, for when the lad next awoke, with his brain clear, and his physical energy to some extent restored, the day had come, and a ray

of sunlight was streaming into his place of imprisonment. Save for a dull headache, he felt little the worse for the blow that had stunned him in the plantation.

Having collected his thoughts, and recalled all the events of the previous night—events which were shrouded in mystery to him—he had taken stock of his surroundings, which were not of a cheerful description.

He was lying on the bare, dusty floor of a loft, under the sloping roof of which was a narrow, slit-like window, through which a cat could scarcely have squeezed; and he had for company in this dismal place a cracked stool with two legs, a pair of discarded boots covered with mildew, several ginger-beer bottles draped with cobwebs, and various other rubbish.

"I have no idea where I am," Tinker had said to himself, "and I am not going to bother my head over that question. It is certain, at all events, that I was brought here by Drake Pentland, and that I have been here for a whole night and part of a day. What I've got to think about is how to escape, and the sooner I do that the better. I want to get possession of that brass box before the contents have been destroyed. It is not likely that I shall be rescued in a hurry. The gov'nor is searching for me, of course, and he might search for a week. If he had had any clue—if there had been a scent for Pedro to follow from the spot where I was attacked—I should have been found long ago."

Having taken this mental retrospect of his position, and judged that freedom was by no means near unless he could achieve it himself, the lad had bent all his energies to the task of getting rid of his fetters. He had been tightly bound, however, and he had felt from the first that his efforts would probably fail.

But he had persevered at intervals, for hour after hour, now writhing and tugging, now lying still while he recovered breath and strength; and at last, when he had been on the point of abandoning the attempt for good and all, a strenuous tug had loosened the strands of rope that were tied around his wrists, and he had succeeded in drawing one hand through them.

The rest was simple. He had taken the gag from his mouth, and had soon disposed of the rope that bound his ankles together; and now, having risen on his cramped limbs, he was listening intently, and looking towards a square hole in the floor, where he could see the top of a flight of steps. He had heard no sound from below at any time, and the silence still continued, save for a murmurous noise that was like running water.

"My word, this is hard luck!" he muttered. "I am afraid my escape is cut off. I thought I was alone, but there is somebody down there. What am I to do? If this window was only larger! There is no use in trying to squeeze through it!"

What was to be done? That was the question, and it was a serious one. On hands and knees went Tinker, and slowly and warily, with the utmost caution, he crawled over the floor to the opening, and peered down. A rickety staircase descended to a poorly-furnished room, and here there was visible, in the act of yawning, a swarthy-faced youth of sturdy build, who wore a shabby suit of fustian. He yawned again, and stood there in a listless attitude, as if he did not know what to do with himself.

"He looks like a pretty tough customer," thought Tinker, "and I doubt if I could get the better of him in a scrap.



"Tinker has been murdered!" gasped Blake. "He was carried into the cottage and then the place was set on fire! I must get him out! I must—" "Stop, stop, sir!" shouted Jimpson. "Don't be a fool! You can't go any nearer!"

I'll have to risk it, though, or else wait on the chance that he will clear out. But it is not likely that he will. He is here to guard me, and I don't suppose—"

The lad's musing was cut short by a heavy tread, and the next instant a door below—he could see it from where he was crouching—was thrown open, and there stepped into the room a big, bearded man, who was roughly attired, and had a sinister cast of features.

"You haven't been out of bed long," he said sharply, as he flung his cap on a chair.

"No, I just got up," the youth replied. "I slept longer than I meant to!"

"You fool! What if the boy has escaped?"

"No fear of that, father. He's all right. I'd like to see him get his limbs free. But what luck have you had?"

"Better than I expected, Jasper. I didn't have to prowl about long. I met my fine gentleman in the park, near the Hall, and told him that I had something particular to say to him. He was insolent at first, but in the end he agreed to come here at ten o'clock to-night."

"That's all right, as far as it goes. But do you think we'll get any money out of him? Mr. Pentland may be too cunning for us."

"It will be the other way round," declared the man, with an oath. "Haven't we got the advantage of him? Confound his fine airs! It will be a pleasure to take him down a peg or two! I'll put the screw on him, and you can bet that he will be like a lamb."

"I hope he will," said the youth, with an evil grin. "You didn't tell him what you wanted with him, did you?"

"No; I kept that for to-night."

"Did you learn how things are at the Hall, father? What are they doing about the disappearance of Sexton Blake's boy?"

"I don't know, and I don't care! We are safe enough. I am hungry, Jasper. Get out the loaf and that cold bacon. We'll have a feed, and then I will give the boy something to eat. I don't want to starve him."

"He won't have many more meals, father, if Mr. Pentland agrees to hand over the money."

"No, that's true," was the answer. "We'll have to put

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the boy out of the way, and hide his body where it won't be found. I don't like to do it, but it will have to be part of the bargain, I reckon, so we must make up our minds to—"

The man lowered his voice, and what else he said was inaudible to Tinker, who crept warily from the top of the staircase, and rose to his feet.

"By heavens, what am I to do?" he asked himself.

Fresh throes of anxiety gripped him; and then, as he rallied his courage, and vowed that he would not despair, there occurred to him something that gave him a dim ray of comfort.

It was first suggested by the recollection that he had a small notebook and a pencil in his pocket, and the idea took clearer shape as he glanced at the three ginger-beer bottles that were standing near him on the floor. He picked them up one by one, and found that they were all empty, as he had supposed.

"It is not likely to save me," he reflected, "but I'll do it. That stream yonder is, of course, the one that flows through the Malloway Hall estate, and goes in to the village of Carlton Royal, where it forms a pool by the bridge. I'll write a message to the gov'nor, and cork it up in one of these bottles, and throw it into the water. And there is just a bare chance that somebody will find the bottle between there and the village, and open it, and read the message. I'll do more than that, too. It is a thousand to one that the message won't be found, and I'm not going to lie here and wait to be murdered, not if I can help it! When Ben Leach comes up I'll be ready for him. I'll stun him with one of the other bottles, and jump down and attack that young ruffian Jasper, and do my best to escape."

Having formed this desperate resolve, Tinker now felt more cheerful; and without delay—he knew that he might be interrupted at any moment—he wrote rapidly on several pages of his notebook, tore them out, and rolled them into a small compass. He opened one of the bottles, stuffed the message into it, and screwed the stopper tight. Then, measuring his aim, he tossed the bottle through the broken pane of glass; and as he was watching it float away on the current—it had dropped almost noiselessly into the stream—a sound fell on his ears from behind him, and his heart gave a throb of alarm as he swung round.

He had lost the opportunity on which he had been counting—the meagre chance of getting the better of the old poacher. He had probably made some slight noise that had roused suspicion below, for Ben Leach had crept quietly up the stairs, and was now standing on the floor of the loft, with an expression of rage and surprise on his evil face.

"You young villain!" he exclaimed. "How did you get loose? I'll take good care that you don't do it again!"

And with that he advanced towards the lad, who, though the odds were against him, determined not to submit without a fight. The other two ginger-beer bottles were within his reach, and in a trice he had snatched them up.

"Keep off, you scoundrel!" he shouted. "Don't come any nearer, or I'll kill you! I mean it!"

The threat proved futile, and the bottles were quickly hurled—one striking the man on the shoulder, while the other grazed his head. With a snarl and an oath he leapt at Tinker, who darted back, and seized the broken stool, which was torn from his grasp before he could deal a blow. The next instant he was in the clutches of the enraged poacher, and while the two were fighting, young Jasper Leach hastened up to the loft, and sprang to his father's assistance.

Tinker offered a desperate resistance, and cried loudly for help; but he had no chance from the first, and there was nobody in the neighbourhood of the cottage to hear his appeals. A blow having slightly stunned him, his struggles were soon overcome, and he was at the mercy of his captors, who tightly bound his wrists and ankles, and stuffed a dirty handkerchief into his mouth. And then they withdrew, leaving him to his dismal reflections.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

The Professor Goes Fishing—A Big Catch—A Find.

PROFESSOR PLATINUM had been fishing for several hours, and without result, though he prided himself on being a skilled angler. He had whipped the stream for more than a mile, and sunk to his knees in boggy places, and a dozen times entangled his line in bushes and trees; but not a single trout had risen to his fly, greatly to his chagrin; and he was in a vexed state of mind, disposed to give up the sport and bend his steps towards the Hall, when he came to a deep, dark pool that had a very tempting appearance. He looked at it, and hesitated, and looked again. The place invited rest as well as sport, and the professor was tired after his exertions. On both sides of the stream were thick woods, which formed a canopy of foliage overhead; and at the upper end of the pool, jutting out from the overhanging bank, was a wide-girthed tree that offered

shelter to an angler who wished to hide his presence from the wary fish.

As he gazed about him, he felt a tug that would have wrenched his rod from his grasp had he not clutched it with both hands. And as he sprang to his feet, and tried to reel in, he encountered so strenuous a resistance that he was nearly pulled into the water. He could hear a strange noise—a spluttering, explosive "kind of sound—and he naturally supposed that it was made by the fish which had taken his hook.

"What a monster!" he gasped, as he braced himself firmly.

"How it struggles! It must be the grandfather of all the trout! Five pounds at least! Perhaps ten—perhaps even twenty! What will they say at the Hall? How I shall amaze them! If I can only get it in! If only the line doesn't break! Never before have I—"

"Help, help!" came a loud voice from no great distance.

"Yes, I'll be glad to have help," Professor Platinum shouted. "I fear this is really too much for me. Lend me a hand, sir, whoever you are."

"Help, help!" the voice repeated. "Stop it!"

"Come along, sir, instead of calling to others! I need you! The struggle is terrific!"

"Let go! Do you hear me?"

"Let go? Never, sir—never! You evidently do not know me! I will land this fish, sir, or I will—"

"You infernal idiot, you haven't got a fish!" the voice roared. "You have caught me!"

"What's that—eh?" snapped the professor. "You are joking with me, sir! How dare you?"

But an uneasy suspicion had entered his mind. He wormed around the outer side of the tree, clinging to his rod; and when he had got to a strip of open ground, by the verge of the pool, he beheld a sight that struck him with consternation. There was a man in the water, submerged to the chest—a man who was kicking and splashing, and shaking his fist, and using language of a shocking nature.

"Mr. Pentland!" exclaimed the man of science. "What does this mean?"

"I'll show you what it means!" yelled the squire's nephew.

"Come out, sir—come out! You are frightening my fish!"

"Fish be hanged! You have caught me! Your hook is fast in my leg!"

"Indeed!"

"Haven't I told you so, you clumsy fool? If you don't stop pulling, I'll—"

"Keep cool, I entreat you!" urged the professor. "There is nothing to be gained by impatience. Strong language is excusable, perhaps, but it can do no good. Let me play you, my dear sir, as I would a trout. Let me reel you in. If you will turn on your back, and paddle just sufficiently to—"

"I'll play you! Drop that rod! You are the biggest ass, Platinum, that ever disgraced the name of science! Wait till I get my hands on you!"

"Once more, sir, I entreat you to be cool. Do you not perceive that I am doing my best to—"

"Ouch! Help! You are driving the hook in deeper!"

But with that, as Drake Pentland gave a frantic plunge, the hook was wrenched from his flesh, and he was free. He waded ashore, and scrambled out upon the bank, and stood scowling at the man of science, who did not appear to be in the least repentant.

"I trust that you are not much hurt, sir," he said calmly.

"It is unfortunate that I should have caught you, but it may appease your injured feelings to know that you have served as a very interesting experiment. If you will give me your exact weight, at an early opportunity, I shall be able to calculate, to an infinitesimal degree, just how much pressure can be withstood by this line I have been using."

The squire's nephew interjected a remark which would not look well in print.

"But I am surprised that I should have found you in the water at this time of day," continued the professor. "It was most ill-advised. The proper time to bathe is either early in the morning, or at the hour of sunset. If you have any regard for your health, sir, you will not hereafter—"

Professor Platinum did not finish the sentence, for at that instant Drake Pentland aimed a blow at him, and in his efforts to avoid it he slipped on the edge of the bank, and tumbled headlong into the pool. He went under, and came up dripping like Neptune, bobbed under again, and got a footing waist-deep.

"Sir, you are no gentleman!" he spluttered, shaking his fist. "You are a conceited, supercilious bounder!"

"And you are a bald-headed old vulture, who ought to be kept in a cage!" retorted the squire's nephew. "What you pretend to know about science is enough to make a cat laugh. Stay where you are!" he added fiercely. "If you come out I'll knock your head off! I mean it!"

He evidently did so; the man of science wisely remained where he was. Drake Pentland pulled on his clothes with

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provoking slowness—he had dived into the pool for a purpose which the reader can easily guess—that of recovering possession of the brass-bound box—and when he had finished dressing he strode away with a muttered oath, and disappeared in the thickets.

“At last!” Professor Platinum said aloud. “What a rude, ill-natured young man! How silly of him to lose his temper over such a trifle! I shall really complain to Mr. Blake. I will tell him how badly I have been—”

As he spoke he felt a gentle bump, and, on looking down, he saw that the current had washed a ginger-beer bottle against him.

“Ah, how fortunate!” he reflected, as he grasped his find, and began to wade ashore. “A gift of nectar from the gods, and sent most opportunely. Though I am outwardly wet and cool, I am dry within and suffering from thirst, which this will but assuage. It has doubtless drifted away from some luncheon-party, whose loss is my gain.”

Having scrambled out upon the bank, and squeezed the water from his clothes, the professor uncorked the bottle, sniffed at it, frowned with disappointment, and drew from the stone receptacle a roll of paper. There were three small sheets twisted together, and when he had unrolled them, and read what had been scrawled upon them with a pencil, he gasped with astonishment.

“Bless my soul!” he exclaimed. “This is most extraordinary!”

And with that, his eyes bulging with excitement, he set off at a rapid pace, forgetting that he was leaving his rod behind him. As fast as his little legs would carry him, he strode across the estate, by field and covert, until he was half-way across the home park. And then, as he emerged from the trees and shrubbery on to the drive, he saw Sexton Blake approaching him.

The detective was walking slowly, with bent head, a prey to the deepest melancholy. Not long before he had left the scene of the digging operations, the men having assured him after they had turned over all the debris that there was no body there. But he could not believe that. He was still convinced, in view of the circumstances, that the charred remains of Tinker were under the ruins of Hollyhock Cottage.

“Good-afternoon, professor!” he said wearily, as he glanced up. “Why, what have you been doing to yourself? You appear to have been in the water. And you are quite out of breath!”

“I have been running, sir,” panted the man of science. “I have been hastening to search for you. I have joyful news for you, my dear friend! A message, which I found floating in the stream, enclosed in an empty bottle! It is from your boy—”

“From—from Tinker? Impossible! He is dead!”

“No, sir; he is alive! He is a prisoner in the hands of villains, in need of help! Read this, and be convinced! Read it!”

And the professor thrust the roll of papers upon Sexton Blake, who seized them with trembling fingers, and read the message that they contained.

“Thank Heaven!” he cried fervently, as tears started to his eyes. “Thank Heaven! I dared not hope for this mercy!”

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

The Professor's Mirth—At the Poachers' Cottage—The Arrest.

IT was a gloomy company that sat down to dinner that night at Malloway Hall, between eight and nine o'clock, in the absence of the detective, who, it was understood, had gone to the village to consult with the police in regard to the mysterious disappearance of Tinker.

Not all of the party were in low spirits, however. The one exception was Professor Platinum, who chuckled and smiled, and so conducted himself generally that he roused the indignation of the others, and especially of Drake Pentland, who naturally imagined that the fishing episode was the cause of the professor's amusement. As for Alphonse and Gaston, they were so shocked by the unseemly behaviour of the man of science, at this time of grief, that they gave way to their feelings, and wept tears into their soup.

“That poor boy!” sobbed Alphonse.

“Alas! Where is he?” wailed Gaston.

“He was so bright, so clever, my dear Gaston!”

“How we shall miss him, my dear Alphonse!”

“Ha, ha!” gurgled Professor Platinum. “Ha, ha!”

“It is my opinion, sir,” Kempton Hurst told him severely, “that too much science has turned your brain!”

“Grinning hyena!” snapped Mrs. Bedford-Parke. “I wish he would choke himself!”

Cowed by a battery of frowning glances, the professor subsided, and tried to look mournful, with but poor success. The meal went gloomily on, with hardly any conversation; and the first to leave the table was Drake Pentland, who, rising as soon as he saw that all had finished, strolled from the room, and put on his cap in the hall, and departed from the house by a side-door.

For a few moments he stood on the terrace, with a cigar in his mouth, and a sombre, thoughtful expression on his face. Then he walked slowly away, and quickened his pace as soon as he had got into the shadow of the trees.

“There is mystery in the very air,” he reflected. “I feel infernally depressed, and I don't know why. What have they found at Hollyhock Cottage? I wish I knew; but I dare not go near the place. Sexton Blake's attitude worries me, and I am puzzled by that fellow Leach. I wonder what he wants to see me about? I can't imagine, unless he suspects that it was I who put Lurcomb on to him that night, and hopes to get money out of me. But he can suspect what he likes. I am not afraid of him. I won't be blackmailed, and I will tell him so straight!”

Still pondering moodily, oppressed by a vague, intangible fear, the squire's nephew strode on his way across the estate, over the fair, fertile domain that he expected to inherit some day; and when he had gone a little more than a mile from the Hall, and had left the borders of his uncle's land, he struck into a footpath that soon brought him to his destination, which was a low-eaved, rickety-looking cottage standing in a lonely position, and partly surrounded by a garden that was overgrown with weeds and bushes. His footsteps had been heard, and the door was opened as he reached it.

“Good-evening, Mr. Pentland!” said Ben Leach.

“Good-evening, sir!” grunted young Jasper.

A chair was offered to the visitor, and when he had seated himself the two poachers dropped into a long settle that was opposite. A lamp, burning dimly on a table in the middle of the little room, revealed the meagre furniture, and the damp paper that was peeling in strips from the wall.

There were three windows, one of them open, and the other two in practically the same condition, for half of the glass had fallen out, and had not been replaced.

It would have been easy for inquisitive people to play the spy from outside, but no such idea occurred to Ben Leach. There was no other house within a mile of him, and nobody ever came near his mean abode.

“Well, here I am,” said Drake Pentland, as he took a fragrant weed from a cigar-case and set it alight. “You told me this morning that you had something important to say to me, and I agreed to your request, though I don't know why I did so. What do you want with me? Come to the point, and be done with it!”

“We want money, sir!” brusquely answered Jasper Leach.

“And we mean to have it!” declared his father. “Two thousand pounds, and no less!”

Drake Pentland gave a slight start, and then he smiled scornfully.

“Your audacity is too amusing to be taken seriously,” he observed, in a drawing tone. “Why should I give you any money?”

“I'll tell you why, sir,” replied Ben Leach. “I'll make it as clear as I can, if you will listen to me. If you will cast your mind back a week or so, to one afternoon before Joe Lurcomb was shot, you may remember that you paid a visit to Dick Kildare's cottage while he was absent, and carried his gun off—”

“You are mad!” broke in the squire's nephew, his face flushing hotly. “I did nothing of the sort!”

“You did, sir!” said the old poacher. “You needn't try to deny it, for Jasper and I happened to see you sneak away from the cottage, and we recognised the gun. We had no idea then why you had stolen it, but all was made clear to us the next day. We know just what you did, and why you did it. Your cunning work couldn't fool us, as it did others. You had been wanting to be rid of young Kildare because he had been cutting you out with the keeper's daughter. That was the reason—or, at least, we'll call it that. So you first stole the gun, and the night of the next day you dropped it in the East Wood after you had followed us there; and then you hurried off to Lurcomb's cottage, and woke him from sleep, and told him there were poachers in the wood. And your dirty trick succeeded, as you meant it to! The keeper was killed, and Dick Kildare's gun was found near, and he was arrested for the crime—”

“You are talking a lot of nonsense!” interrupted Drake Pentland.

“It isn't nonsense!” muttered Ben Leach. “It is true, every word of it! You know well enough—and I don't mind

admitting it myself—that we did the thing. You sent Lurcomb to the wood, and he came on us suddenly with his gun, and one of us let fly at him in self-defence."

"And it was all your fault, sir!" chimed in young Jasper, with a savage scowl. "You set a trap for us and the keeper, and we all fell into it. And now you've got to pay for your little game! There is no getting out of it!"

"That's right, sir!" continued the father. "We mean to have two thousand pounds from you, on condition of our holding our tongues. We'll put the money aside for a few weeks, until the affair has blown over, and then we'll emigrate to Canada, and take up farming, and lead honest lives."

Drake Pentland laughed, and leaned back in his chair, thrusting his hands into his pockets.

"No, I will not!" was the sharp reply. "I won't give you a penny; that's flat!"

There was a brief silence. The two poachers looked at each other, and there was something in the glances they exchanged, in the nodding of their heads, that roused a keen apprehension in the squire's nephew, and led him to wonder what was coming.

"If you have finished," he said, "I'll be off!"

"We haven't finished, sir," Ben Leach answered. "We have more than one card up our sleeves. Wait a bit, please, while we tell you what happened last night. Me and Jasper were out poaching, and we saw you fighting with Sexton Blake's boy by the stream. We followed you to Kildare's cottage, and after you had set the place on fire, and gone off, leaving the boy to die in the flames, we dragged him out and brought him home. And he is here now, in the loft overhead. You thought you had killed him, but he is alive and well. He was only stunned."

A low exclamation burst from Drake Pentland's lips. He was very pale, and his features were twitching.

"And that isn't all, sir," the old poacher went on. "Early this morning we slipped back to the spot where you had the fight with the lad, and Jasper dived into the pool, and brought up the brass box that fell out of your pocket last night. I opened the box and read the papers that were inside it. And those papers, I needn't tell you, show who Dick Kildare really is, and show also why you wanted to be rid of him. Now, what have you got to say, sir?"

"Ay, what?" put in young Jasper, with a grin.

Drake Pentland had nothing to say. He was at first speechless, dumb with consternation and rage. His sense of security was gone, and he was appalled, terrified, by the revelation that had been made to him. But he was quick-witted, and it did not take him long to perceive that there was but one way in which these men dared used their advantage. If they were to expose him they would be putting ropes around their necks. He drew a deep breath, and the colour ebbed back to his face.

"If you want to come into your uncle's property one of these days," said Ben Leach, "you'll have to square with us. Are you ready to talk business, sir?"

"Yes, I am," Drake Pentland replied quietly. "You have the best of me, and I will come to terms, provided we can agree."

"We must have the two thousand pounds."

"You shall have it. I can't lay my hands on so large a sum at once, but I can get it in the course of a few days, on the strength of my expectations, from a loan office in London. And when I have paid you the money, what then?"

"You shall have the box of papers, sir."

"And what about the boy, Leach? Of course, you understand that—"

"I understand, sir. Don't worry about that. It is an ugly game, and me and Jasper don't like it, but the gold will make it worth the risk. We'll put the boy where nobody will ever see him again, and with him out of the way for good and all, and young Kildare hanged, you will have nothing to fear."

The evil bargain had been made. Cold-blooded murder had been promised for a consideration, and an innocent man was to be left to die on the gallows by those who might have saved him. There was another short silence, and then, of a sudden, the door was burst open, and into the room sprang Sexton Blake and Pedro, followed by three constables and the local superintendent of police.

"In the King's name!" cried Constable Spink, as he swung his truncheon.

It was a startling surprise, and there was no chance of escape for the three plotters. They offered a desperate resistance, but after a struggle of brief duration—in which the bloodhound took a part—Drake Pentland, and Ben Leach and his son, were hurled to the floor, and overpowered. And then, fetters having been locked on their wrists, they were hauled to their feet by the constables.

"We have been listening outside," Blake said to them, "and we have plenty of evidence to warrant your arrest, on charges which will be preferred against you later. I must tell you that we heard all of your conversation, and that your statements and admissions will be used against you."

The lips of the three prisoners moved, but they could utter no words, could frame no denials. They were ghastly white with terror, trembling in every limb. Only too well did the two poachers realise that the hangman's noose awaited them, and hardly less harrowing were the feelings of Drake Pentland, who saw that he must lose all that made life worth living.

Accompanied by Pedro, the detective had hastened up the stairs to the loft, knowing that he would find Tinker there. He cut the lad loose, and fairly hugged him in his joy; and when they went below, shortly afterwards, the superintendent was holding in his hand the brass box, the whereabouts of which had been disclosed by Ben Leach. It was passed over to Sexton Blake, who opened it, and glanced at the papers it contained.

"Yes, just as I thought," he said, half to himself. "I suspected this some days ago, curiously enough. And now let us be off," he added. "We will lock these scoundrels up for the night, and take them to Midchester by the first train in the morning. And I have no doubt that before to-morrow is over Dick Kildare will be a free man!"

A few days later the old squire returned, and was acquainted with the full facts of the crime and the contents of the brass box. The papers in the box, as Blake had suspected, proved that Dick Kildare was in reality the squire's nephew, being the son of the squire's own brother. Drake Pentland had been the only person besides Dick's father to know of this, for the late Mr. Kildare, having in the past quarrelled with the squire, had not, for sentimental reasons, told his son of the relationship. The squire was delighted to think that, after all, his future heir would bear his own name and be a Malloway.

There came a day, soon after the return of the old squire, when Blake's shooting-party broke up, and the various members of it departed to their homes, leaving the Hall with regret. All had enjoyed themselves, but a painful discovery had marred the close of the visit for Alphonse and Gaston, who, having learned by chance that Lady Augusta Towers was engaged to a young baronet, went back to France in chagrin and disgust, vowing that all women were fickle and deceitful. The others, however, took only pleasant memories with them. Mrs. Bedford-Parke had found in her husband some good qualities hitherto unsuspected, and Professor Platinum was the richer by a collection of wild, weird things he had picked up in the woods.

The tragic sequel was to come, but that did not concern the scattered guests. The trial of the three prisoners took place in November, and Drake Pentland, though he gave evidence against the two poachers, in the hope of getting off easily, was sentenced to imprisonment for ten years; while Ben Leach and his son were condemned to death, without any recommendation to mercy, and were hanged in Midchester Gaol one dreary morning when rain was falling from the leaden skies. The black flag was hoisted over the roof, and the crowd in the street slowly dispersed, feeling that the murder of Joe Lurcomb had been justly avenged.

A few weeks later Dick and Bessie were married, and at Christmas the happy old squire, who had sensibly made up his mind that he would not worry about his wicked nephew, filled Malloway Hall with a large and merry party that was honoured by the presence of Sexton Blake and Tinker. And nobody, the reader will believe, could have been made more welcome there.

THE END.

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- BY -
**MARTIN
CLIFFORD.**



Mr. Crump and his excited followers swarmed into the School House doorway, and the heavy hand of P.-o. Crump descended upon the shoulder of the gasping convict. "I arrest you!" spluttered Mr. Crump. "I arrest you in the name of the law! Surrender, you villain!" "Ha, ha, ha!" roared the prisoner. "Oh, my only aunt! Rescue, School House!" But there was no need for the School House to rescue Tom Merry. His captors had released him as suddenly as if he had become all at once red hot. They were staring at him in stupefaction!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Head's Orders.

ROT!" Jack Blake made that emphatic remark, and it was echoed by a crowd of other fellows, standing before the notice-board in the hall of the School House.

"Rot!" said Blake emphatically.

"Simply rot!"

"Wubbish!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Silly rot!" said Monty Lowther.

"Tommy rot!" chimed in Kangaroo.

The notice was in the Head's handwriting, and so the comments of the juniors were really a little disrespectful. But it was enough to exasperate them. The notice stated that, until further notice, Friardale Wood and Wayland Moor were out of bounds, and that all boys below the Shell were to remain within gates.

The notice further stated that the reason was the supposed presence in the neighbourhood of an escaped convict from Blackmoor Prison. The man was known to be a dangerous character, and until he was recaptured, or until assured news was received that he was not in the vicinity of the school, the orders as to bounds were to hold good.

"Of all the rot!" said Blake, in exasperation. "All Forms below the Shell to be kept within gates because of a giddy escaped convict!"

"Uttahh wotten, deah boys!"

"It's all very well to keep the Third in," said Blake, "but to gate the Fourth—as if we couldn't take care of ourselves!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Why, we've got to go down to the village about the costumes for the ball to-morrow night at Glyn House," said Digby.

"Yes, rather!" said Blake. "We must not miss going to the ball!"

"Hear, hear!"

A fancy-dress ball was being given by Mr. Glyn, of Glyn House, near St. Jim's, the father of Bernard Glyn of the Shell. Mr. Glyn was a millionaire, and the affair was to be on a large scale, and the hospitality would be boundless. Mr. Glyn had not intended to include junior boys from school in his list of invitations; but Bernard Glyn had put

it to him very strongly, and his sister Edith had backed him up, and the result was a shower of invitation cards upon the St. Jim's fellows.

The ball was being given on the occasion of the engagement of Edith Glyn to Arthur Wodyer, who had been a master for a time at St. Jim's, and Housemaster of the New House during the temporary absence of Mr. Ratcliff.

The St. Jim's fellows all liked "Woddy" very much, and they were glad to hear of his good luck; and Bernard Glyn had kindly consented to approve of his future brother-in-law.

Tom Merry & Co. of the School House were going, and the question of costumes occupied every mind. Figgins & Co. of the New House were going, too. As Woddy had been their Housemaster, though only for a short time, they could not possibly be left out. Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn were therefore asked; and so were Redfern, Owen, and Lawrence, the "New Firm," as they called themselves.

Cousin Ethel, too, was coming to the dance, and a friend of hers, Marjorie Hazeldene of Cliff House School. And, of course, the two young girls would want boys to take care of them, Figgins declared. And of Cousin Ethel, at least, Figgins was certain to take excellent care—probably to the extent of glaring at every other fellow who wanted to dance with her.

"It's a lot of rot!" growled Digby. "As if a convict can do us any harm. If we met him, I suppose he wouldn't eat us."

"Might pick up some tips from him for my costume for the dance," said Tom Merry. "I'm going as Convict 99, you know."

"It's beastly!" said Fatty Wynn. "I shall have to stick

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to Mrs. Taggles' shop now, and her cream-tarts ain't half so good as Mother Murphy's. I don't suppose the Head has thought of that."

"I don't suppose he has!" grinned Tom Merry.

The juniors dispersed, discussing the new orders in great duce.

As a matter of fact, many of the more adventurous fellows would not have been displeased by a chance meeting with the escaped convict. Escaped convicts, as Monty Lowther remarked, did not grow on every bush, and they would have been glad to see what he was like. But the fiat had gone forth, and the juniors of St. Jim's had no choice but to obey.

It was really very awkward for the coming dance made it necessary to pay visits to the costumier's in the village. Mr. Wiggs, who dealt in second-hand clothes and fancy costumes, did quite a thriving trade with the amateur theatrical societies of St. Jim's, and he was likely to have a run on his stock just now.

But Mr. Wiggs' little shop was out of bounds now for all Forms below the Shell.

"Never mind," said Tom Merry to the indignant chums of No. 6. "We're going down to Wiggs' after lessons this afternoon, and we'll tell him what you want. He'll bring costumes up to the school for you to try on."

"Well, that's not such a bad idea," said Blake, a little mollified. "Save a walk, too. I want a Satan costume."

"A which?" said Monty Lowther.

"I'm going as Mephistopheles," said Blake, a little defiantly. "I think the character will suit me all right. Graceful sort of figure, and—"

"My hat!"

"Look here, Lowther—"

"Give us a list of what you want, my sons," said Tom Merry pacifically. "Don't row now! We'll make Wiggy bring up his whole blessed stock, if you like. What are you going as, Gussy?"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy jammed his monocle into his eye, and surveyed the hero of the Shell with a glance that was simply withering.

"I have already acquainted you with the chawactah I am going to assume, deah boy," he said crushingly.

Tom Merry rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

"Did you?" he said. "What is it?"

"I am goin' as Wichard Coeur-de-Leong!"

"Oh, yes, of course—in armour!" said Tom Merry, with a nod. "I suppose you've thought about the possibility of a mistake as to the character you're trying to represent? You might be taken for a walking advertisement of Armour's Extract of Beef."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I regard the suggestion as wiculous. I considah—"
"Sure you won't have another costume?" asked Tom Merry. "I could select something really nice, if you wanted to go as a ragman or a spring poet—"

Arthur Augustus elevated his aristocratic nose, and walked away, declining to enter into such a frivolous discussion.

"Mind you get me a good Mephistophelian rig-out," said Blake. "I'm rather particular about that. I say, Figgy—"

"Going to add to the Sorrows of Satan?" asked Figgins genially. "Must be rather annoying to the old gentleman, when every ass goes to a fancy-dress ball libelling him!"

Blake glared.

"I suppose you're going as a clothes-prop?" he suggested. "Or you might go as a cow that doesn't take proper care of its youngsters."

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"Why, it would have very thin calves," explained Blake.

And Blake walked away, leaving Figgins to digest that Parthian shot. Figgins' calves certainly were a little slim, and he was strongly suspected of wearing double hose when he was in cycling costume. Figgins turned crimson, but he had no reply ready.

"Ahem!" said Tom Merry.

"There goes the dinner-bell!"

And the juniors trooped in to dinner.

That the coming masquerade at Glyn House was occupying a great deal of attention in the school was painfully evident that afternoon. Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth, and

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Mr. Linton, of the Shell, found their classes very absent-minded, and they came out quite liberally with lines.

"Never mind," said Tom Merry. "It's all in the day's work. Let's get a snack of tea, and go down to Rylcombe about the costumes, before Wiggs' is put out of bounds."

"Good egg!" said Manners and Lowther.

And the Terrible Three sallied forth upon their errand.

They found Mr. Wiggs most obliging. He seemed to take quite a fatherly interest in the fancy-dress scheme, and he entered into all the plans of the juniors in the most whole-hearted way. He also entered up a good many things in his little book, to be produced later. But for the present the juniors were thinking of the costumes, not of the bill.

Tom Merry was delighted with the costume he was to wear as Convict 99, and Mr. Wiggs assured him that if he went out into the High Street of Rylcombe in it he would infallibly be arrested by P.-c. Crump, the local representative of his Majesty's police-force, as the escaped convict Wilde. As Tom Merry did not wish to have that delightful experience, he did not put the matter to the test. The Terrible Three stayed quite a long time with Mr. Wiggs, selecting costumes, and talking the matter over, and Mr. Wiggs promised to call at the school that very evening with a large and assorted stock for the disposal of the Fourth-Formers who were kept within gates.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Convict 99!

MR. WIGGS kept his promise, and he arrived at St. Jim's with an assortment of costumes that would have delighted the hearts of any amateur theatrical society. Some of them, perhaps, were a little worn, but it was agreed that Mr. Wiggs had done very well, considering the short time at his disposal. He succeeded in satisfying almost all the fellows who were going to the masquerade at Glyn House, and that was a great deal for any human individual to do.

After Mr. Wiggs had taken his departure there was a tremendous trying on of costumes, and all the fellows were very busy. Some of the seniors were going to the dance, including Kildare and Monteith and Darrel and Langton of the Sixth, and Lefevre of the Fifth, and they were as busy as the juniors.

In Tom Merry's study the Terrible Three tried on their outfit with the greatest of satisfaction. Tom Merry, in the garb of Convict 99, was simply a picture of haunted guilt. The baggy, broad-shouldered clothes, the striped stockings, and the artificial cropped head of hair were quite convincing.

"It's simply ripping!" said Manners. "I say, Tommy— Ha, ha, ha!"

"What are you ha, ha-ing about if it's simply ripping?" demanded Tom Merry.

"I was thinking— Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, I suppose it's rather funny for you to do any thinking," agreed Tom Merry. "Ha, ha, ha, then!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" cackled

Lowther.

"Ass!" said Manners. "I was thinking of a jape. Why not take a run in the quad? The fellows don't know that you're rigged up as Convict 99, and they'd take you for Convict 61!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Lowther. "Give 'em a look in in the New House, and Figgins & Co. a fright!"

Tom Merry roared. The idea struck him as funny. All the school was talking about the escaped convict of Blackmoor, especially since the restriction of bounds for the juniors.

"Give me a coat, then," said Tom Merry. "I can cover this rig-up from head to foot, and put a big cap on. Ha, ha, ha!"

He was soon arrayed in a long coat which reached to his feet, and a cap which was pulled down over his ears. The Terrible Three strolled out into the dusky quadrangle, Manners and Lowther also wearing their coats, so as not to attract attention specially to Tom Merry's being muffled up. In the quadrangle it was very dusky, only a few stars gleaming in the clear, dark sky.

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WIN ONE ON MONDAY.

Tom Merry slipped off the coat and cap, and handed them to his chums. A light was gleaming from the doorway of Taggles' lodge, and the school porter could be seen in the doorway, looking out into the quad.

"Begin on Taggles!" murmured Monty Lowther joyously.

And Tom Merry nodded, and glided away into the darkness.

Taggles, as he gazed thoughtfully into the dusk of the quad, was suddenly aware of a figure that was slinking along by the school wall, and apparently seeking to keep in the shadows. Taggles' eye gleamed. He suspected at once that it was some fellow who had been out of bounds, and had climbed in over the wall, and in that case it was Taggy's duty to spot him and report him; and on such occasions duty was pleasure to Taggles. The porter quitted his doorway, and darted in the direction of the slinking figure.

It stopped, and Taggles rushed up to it. He halted as he saw the convict. Convict 99 faced him, as if about to spring upon him.

"My heye!" gasped Taggles. "My heye!"

The convict made a movement.

Taggles backed away a pace, and then turned and fled. The convict was between him and the school buildings, and Taggles dashed away towards the gate. There was a patter of feet as Convict 99 pursued him.

"Ow!" gasped Taggles. "He's arter me!"

He swerved towards his lodge, but the convict was quicker, and headed him off from the lodge.

"Stop, will yer?" came a hoarse voice from the pursuer.

"I'll out yer! Yer 'ear? Stop, I tells yer!"

Taggles would just as soon have stopped if a mad bull had been after him. There was only one way of escape for him—by the gates. He had his keys with him, and he unlocked the gates more quickly than he had ever unlocked them before, slammed them behind him, and darted out into the road.

"'Elp!" gasped Taggles, as he fled. "Oh, 'elp! The villain! Oh, 'elp!"

The convict halted at the gates, almost exploding with suppressed laughter. Taggles disappeared down the road in the dark.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Convict 99 turned back into the quadrangle. Taggles was running as if terror had lent him wings, and he was not likely to stop till he was half-way to Rylcombe.

The disguised junior skirted round the New House, and climbed into a back window, a window Tom Merry had used before on the occasion of a House raid. He reached the Fourth-Form passage in the New House from the back, and stepped cautiously along towards Figgins' study. Pratt of the Fourth was just coming out of his room as Convict 99 reached Figgins' study, and opened the door. Pratt stopped, petrified at the sight of the convict. He did not recognise Tom Merry for a moment, and he had no suspicion but that it was the convict, of whom the whole school had been talking.

"My hat!" gasped Pratt.

He darted back into his study in great alarm.

Convict 99 entered Figgins' room, and closed the door. He had not glanced towards Pratt, but he knew that Pratt had seen him. There was no one in Figgins' study. Tom Merry closed the door, and listened within. He was not surprised to hear Pratt steal past on tiptoe a few minutes later. Tom



Figgins struck a wax vesta, and the light glimmered into the study and revealed a figure standing in full view—the figure of a desperate ruffian with a cropped head, and a broad-arrow suit and striped stockings. "The convict!" gasped the juniors.

Merry chuckled softly. He knew that Pratt was going down to carry the news that the escaped convict had entered the New House.

He was right. Pratt burst into the Common-room in the New House with a wildly excited face.

"You fellows!" he gasped.

Then his voice failed him from sheer excitement and terror, and he staggered against the door, gasping for breath.

Figgins & Co. were there, with most of the New House juniors. Preparation was over, and it was getting near bedtime.

"Hallo, what's the matter with you?" asked Figgins, looking up from the chess-table, where he was playing with Kerr.

"Oh!" panted Pratt.

"Seen a giddy ghost?" asked Redfern.

"Ow!"

"What on earth's the matter?" asked Fatty Wynn.

"Somebody been raiding your grub?"

"No! I—I've seen him!"

"Seen whom, you ass?" asked Thompson of the Shell.

"The convict!"

"What?"

"Which?"

"Fathead!"

"I've seen him, I tell you!" gasped Pratt. "He's sneaked into the House to hide himself, I suppose, or to steal something. I've seen him."

"Seen the escaped convict!" said Redfern, in amazement.

"Yes, yes, yes!"

"Rats!" said Figgins. "You're dreaming!"

"I'm not!" shrieked Pratt. "You ass! The convict is hiding in your study. I tell you I saw him. He ought to be arrested!"

"Oh, come on, and have a look!" said Figgins resignedly. "I suppose it's somebody having a lark, and Pratt's had his leg pulled."

"Better get some of the masters to go," said Pratt. "He's an awfully desperate character. He may have a revolver."

"Oh, rats! They don't provide escaped convicts with revolvers at Blackmoor," said Kerr. "Come on, you fellows!"

"It's somebody having a lark!" said Fatty Wynn.

"Of course it is."

"It's the convict, I tell you!" yelled Pratt.

"Well, we'll soon have him out, if it is!" said Figgins.

A crowd of juniors hurried up the stairs to the Fourth-Form passage. Pratt's excitement had made some impression upon them; but they could not help thinking it extremely unlikely that the hunted convict of Blackmoor had taken refuge in a junior study in their House.

Figgins' study door was closed, and there was no light under it. Figgins opened it boldly enough. He did not believe that the convict was there; and he wasn't afraid of the convict, anyway.

"Take care!" called out Pratt from the rear of the crowd. "Mind he doesn't rush at you!"

"Oh, rats!"

"There's nobody here!" said Kerr. "I——"

He broke off.

For as he was speaking, there came a sound of a movement in the dark study. The juniors backed away a little. There was evidently somebody there, whether it was the fugitive from Blackmoor or not.

"Get a light!" said Kerr hurriedly.

"It's only some japer," said Figgins.

He struck a wax-vesta and held it up in the doorway, and looked into the study, and a crowd of anxious faces looked over his shoulders.

The light glimmered into the study, and it revealed a figure standing in full view—the figure of a desperate ruffian with cropped head, and a broad-arrow suit, and striped stockings!

The match dropped from Figgins' fingers.

"The convict!"

Suddenly the convict darted through the crowd of juniors and turned towards the stairs.

The next instant there was a wild rush. Figgins & Co. did not mean the scoundrel to get off scot free. They streamed pell-mell down the stairs into the hall in wild pursuit.

THE THIRD CHAPTER. In the Name of the Law.

THE convict was very fleet of foot, and succeeded in eluding his pursuers. By the time Figgins & Co. reached the quad they had completely lost sight of him.

Suddenly a helmet gleamed in the light by the gates, and Figgins gave a shout.

"Here's the bobby!"

It was P.-c. Crump.

Taggles had encountered the constable in the lane, and had brought him back to the school with the news that the escaped convict was lurking in the quadrangle there.

P.-c. Crump might or might not have been a heroic person, but he was certainly burning to distinguish himself by capturing the escaped convict, and leading him in triumph and handcuffs to the local police-station. That exploit would be enough to make Mr. Crump celebrated for life in the quiet countryside.

"E's 'ere!" said Taggles breathlessly. "I seed him! I seed him as plain as I see you, Mr. Crump!"

"Looks as if somebody else 'ave seen 'im, too," said Mr. Crump, as the excited crowd came streaming out of the New House.

"Crump! Crumpy! This way, old man!"

"Look after the gates!"

"Look out!"

"The convict's here!"

"Arrest him, Crumpy!"

"Which I've already received hinfornation that the convick is 'ere, Master Monteith!" said Mr. Crump. "I've come 'ere to do my dooty!"

"Hurrah!"

"Go for him, Crumpy!" shouted the juniors.

There was a yell.

"Here he is!"

"After him!"

In the light from the School House windows a glimpse was caught of a figure in broad-arrow garb. The crowd streamed after him at once, Mr. Crump's helmet gleaming in advance, like the white plume of the brave Navarre, leading on the Huguenots at Ivry.

"Here he is!"

"After him!"

"I calls on all you young gents, in his Majesty's name, to help me in the heexecution of my dooty!" gasped Mr. Crump.

"That's all right, Crump; we'll back you up!"

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"Yes, rather!"

"Pile on him!"

Mr. Crump, considering his plumpness of figure, put on a really good burst of speed, and the New House fellows streamed after him. The amazing thing was that the convict, though he must have known that a crowd of fellows were swarming at his heels, was making straight for the open doorway of the School House. It was surely the least safe refuge for an escaping convict, under the circumstances, but the fugitive did not appear to think so. He dashed on at top speed, and ran up the School House steps. In the broad, lighted doorway the desperate figure was clearly seen.

"We've got him now!" panted Mr. Crump.

And Mr. Crump and his excited followers swarmed into the School House doorway. The heavy hand of P.-c. Crump descended upon the shoulder of the gasping convict.

"I arrest you!" spluttered Mr. Crump. "I arrest you in the name of the law! Surrender, you willain!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

To Crump's amazement the captured convict burst into a roar of laughter.

Mr. Crump, in his surprise, released the prisoner, and staggered back a pace. The convict yelled:

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My heye! I arrest you——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He's gone mad!" said Figgins. "That's what it is! Collar him!"

A dozen pairs of hands grasped the escaped convict on all sides, and he was a prisoner; and Mr. Crump felt in his tail-pocket for the handcuffs.

Mr. Railton came out of his study, and looked on at the peculiar scene in amazement. School House fellows were gathering from far and near, and most of them were laughing. They knew of Tom Merry's little jape on the New House, and they understood how matters really were. But the New House fellows were still in deadly earnest, and Mr. Crump was fairly gloating over his prize.

"I've got 'im, sir!" he said to the School House master.

"But—but what—who——" gasped Mr. Railton.

"The escaped convict, sir!" said Mr. Crump importantly.

"From hinfornation received, sir, I came 'ere to look for 'im, and 'ere he is!"

"Good heavens!"

"I've got 'im, sir; no need for anybody to be afraid now," said Mr. Crump. "I've got 'im right enough. 'Old his 'ands, young gents, while I clap the darbies hon!"

"Here you are!" said Redfern.

"Here's his paws, Crumpy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the prisoner. "Oh, my hat! Rescue, School House!"

"Wh-wh-what!"

"Great Scott!"

"That's Tom Merry's voice!"

"Phew!"

Mr. Crump staggered back, and the handcuffs fell to the floor with a musical clink. The portly constable had never been so taken aback in his life.

"Master Merry!" he said faintly.

"Tom Merry!" yelled Figgins. "Oh, you spoofing bounder!"

"T-t-tom Merry!" stuttered Redfern.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Rescue, School House!" gurgled Tom Merry. "Ha, ha, ha!"

But there was no need for the School House to rescue him. His captors had released him as suddenly as if he had become all at once red-hot. They were staring at him in stupefaction.

"Tom Merry!" murmured Monteith. "Oh, you young rascal!"

Mr. Railton strode forward, frowning.

"Merry! Is it indeed you!"

"Ha, ha, ha! I—I mean, yes, sir!" stammered Tom Merry.

"What is the meaning of this absurd masquerade?"

"If—if you please, sir, I was trying on my new dress for the fancy ball at Glyn's, sir," said Tom Merry meekly.

"These chaps seem, somehow, to have taken me for a real convict, sir. Quite a mistake, of course!"

"Yaas, wathah! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the School House fellows, in chorus. "Silence!" exclaimed Mr. Railton. "Silence at once!"

The laughter died away, but the juniors were still chuckling.

"Merry, do you mean to tell me that you are going in that extraordinary dress to the masquerade at Glyn House?"

"Yes, sir. I'm Convict 99, sir," said Tom Merry very meekly. "These chaps seem to have taken me for Convict 61. I don't know why."

"Oh, you spoofer!" murmured Figgins.

"Taggles made the same mistake, sir," said Tom Merry

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blandly. "He left in such a hurry to fetch Mr. Crump that I had no time to explain."

"My heye!" gasped Taggles. "I've allus said, and I says it agin, that all boys orter be drowned, especially Master Merry!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Railton tried not to smile, but he did not quite succeed.

"You must have known that if you went out in this costume, Merry, that it would lead to—well, misapprehension," he said.

"Well, you—you see, sir—"

"I am afraid that you knew that very well, Merry. You must have caused some of these boys a great fright—"

"No fear, sir!" said Figgins. "We weren't frightened in the least, sir! Nothing at all like that! Only a little surprised!"

"That's it—just a bit surprised!" said Redfern.

"Yes; you looked surprised when you looked into your study, Figgy!" said Tom Merry, laughing. "More than a little surprised! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, rats!" said Figgins.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Railton smiled.

"You should certainly not have gone out of the School House in this absurd disguise, Merry!" he said. "You will take two hundred lines, and I forbid you to do anything of the sort again!"

"Yes, sir," said Tom Merry, with exemplary meekness. He thought that the jape on the New House was cheap at two hundred lines.

"I am sorry you should have been troubled for nothing, Mr. Crump," said the School House master courteously. "If Taggles had looked a little before he ran away, the mistake might not have arisen. I am very sorry!"

"Oh, never mind, sir!" said Mr. Crump, into whose hand Mr. Railton had slipped something as he accompanied him to the door. "Boys will be boys, I s'pose, sir! They're always the same!"

"They are, indeed!" said Mr. Railton, laughing.

And P.-e. Crump departed without a convict, but with half-a-crown.

The crowd in the School House broke up, the New House fellows going back to their own House, looking very sheepish. Figgins & Co. had to admit that they had been completely done this time.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Masked Ball.

THE next day went all too slowly for the juniors of St. Jim's, for it was the day of the fancy-dress ball at Glyn House. Time after time they tried on their costumes, to see that they fitted all right; and when Glyn announced that the brake was ready to take them to Glyn House, excitement rose to fever-pitch.

When the brake containing the St. Jim's juniors arrived at Glyn's father's palatial residence, carriages and cars were arriving from all quarters. The brake from St. Jim's drew in with the rest in line, and the Saints alighted and entered the broad portico. They were genially welcomed by Mr. Glyn.

A crowd had already arrived, and the St. Jim's fellows, numerous as they were, were mere drops in the ocean.

"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remarked to Tom Merry. "They are doin' this thing quite in good style, you know."

"Go hon!" said Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah, deah boy! So fah, I don't see that I could have awwanged it bettah myself!" declared the swell of St. Jim's.

Many remarks were made upon Richard Cœur-de-Lion, and still more upon Convict 99. Indeed, several persons had an impression at first that Tom Merry was the escaped convict whose flight from Blackmoor was the talk of the countryside.

Figgins suddenly left the party, and sprinted off towards a Queen of the May—a very pretty Queen of the May, whose other name was Cousin Ethel. Arthur Augustus, rather distressed because his eyeglass could not be worked in conjunction with the vizor of Cœur-de-Lion, looked round in surprise.

"What's the mattah with Figgay?" he asked.

Tom Merry nodded in the direction of the Queen of the May.

"Cousin Ethel!" he exclaimed.

Richard Cœur-de-Lion drew himself up.

"I fail to see why Figgins should be in such a huvwvy to see my cousin," he said, somewhat stiffly.

Tom Merry laughed.

"There are lots of things that you fail to see, Gussy, old man!" said Jack Blake, slapping Richard Cœur-de-Lion on the back, and then uttering a howl.

"Weally, Blake—"

"You ass!" roared Blake.

"Anythin' the mattah, deah boy?"

"Yes, fathead; I've hurt my hand!" growled Mephistopheles, sucking it. "What do you mean by dressing yourself up in tin?"

"Weally, you know—"

"Never mind—only one more of the sorrows of Satan!" grinned Monty Lowther.

"Oh, rats!"

Cousin Ethel smiled very brightly upon the juniors. Her companion, Miss Hazeldene, was well known to the juniors, who had met her when they went over to Greyfriars to play cricket. The two girls looked very bright and happy, as indeed they had reason to do, for where was there ever a young girl who did not enjoy a dance, especially when partners were in the majority?

Arthur Augustus was not quite sure whether he approved of girls so young coming to such a very big dance, but, fortunately, he kept his doubts upon the subject to himself. Only to Tom Merry did he confide his opinion that a school-room dance was all vewy well for the gals, but a weally big affair like this— To which Tom Merry cheerfully rejoined that he was an ass, and there the discussion ceased.

Everybody looked very bright and cheerful, especially the youngsters. Figgins was not usually very much to the fore at a dance, but he secured Cousin Ethel's programme before anybody else had a chance, in quite a businesslike way. Tom Merry came next, and Monty Lowther and D'Arcy were rather exasperated at being elbowed off for a time.

But there were some dances left for him, though he elevated his aristocratic eyebrows inside Cœur-de-Lion's helmet when he found that Figgins had secured the supper dance. He made a remark to Cousin Ethel on the subject, but Ethel seemed to be afflicted with a sudden, unaccountable deafness.

"Yes; the flowers are arranged beautifully," she agreed, which was not in the least a reply to what Arthur Augustus had said.

"I wasn't speakin' of the flowahs, deah gal," said D'Arcy, in surprise; "I was wemarkin' that, undah the circs—"

"And they say the orchestra is splendid," said Cousin Ethel. "Mr. Glyn has had a special band sent down from London."

"Vewy well. But I was sayin'—"

"And it isn't a Cinderella, either!" said Marjorie Hazeldene joyously.

"I wathah approve of Cindewellahs, you know," said D'Arcy. "It isn't good for you young people to be up too late. But I was sayin'—"

"It was so startling, when we were coming," said Cousin Ethel. "We saw somebody by the roadside, from the carriage, and somebody said that it was the escaped convict."

"Oh, he won't come neah heah, deah gal!" said D'Arcy. "I wemarked—"

"Poor man! How hungry he must be!" said Marjorie. "I can't help feeling very sorry for him, you know."

"Yaas; he must be havin' a wathah wuff time. But people shouldn't be cewiminals, you know," said D'Arcy. "I was sayin', Ethel—"

"Yes, Arthur, I must go to Figgins now, as I have given him the first dance."

"But—"

"Au revoir!"

And Ethel tripped away to Figgins. The bandsmen were already settling down to business, and a wonderful assortment of characters were forming for the first dance. Tom Merry, alias Convict 99, led away Marjorie Hazeldene. Figgins had taken possession of Cousin Ethel, and Mr. Wodyer could be seen with Edith Glyn. Fatty Wynn was not dancing the first dance.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, having missed Cousin Ethel owing to the unusual and unlooked-for enterprise on the part of Figgins, selected a particularly plain lady for his partner, and begged a dance with great courtesy and humility.

Arthur Augustus was a very good dancer, and he was invaluable at any dance, for his courtesy rose superior to any considerations of personal pleasure. He could always be relied upon, as Kerr remarked, to dance with the blind, the halt, and the lame. The worst possible dancer, with the most rigidly fixed determination to take no notice of the music, could not tire out the politeness of the swell of St. Jim's.

"Getting on all serene, Gussy?" murmured Convict 99 as he passed Richard Cœur-de-Lion a little later.

"Yaas, wathah, deah boy!"

"Mind you don't puncture anybody with the headpiece."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

But then they were separated, and D'Arcy's remark had to remain unfinished.

Tom Merry grinned cheerfully at Mephistopheles as he passed him. Mephistopheles' feather was hanging down, broken, but otherwise Jack Blake was getting on well.

"Beats prep, doesn't it?" grinned Tom Merry.

"What-ho!" said Blake heartily.

"Kildare's going it—he's dancing with Miss Glyn now. Blessed if I knew these Sixth-Form chaps could dance!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Darrel of the Sixth, who had heard the remark, looked round with a grin. But it was no time or place to box a junior's ears.

"Oh, ripping, wasn't it?" said Figgins, as, a dance ended, he led Cousin Ethel to a seat overlooking one of the big French windows that opened upon the terrace.

Ethel Cleveland gave a little sigh of content.

"Yes, indeed, and a very great treat for us schoolgirls," she said. "It was so kind of Edith to make us come."

"Miss Glyn is a jolly girl, and that chap Woodyer is a lucky bargee," said Figgins. "I wonder what it's like to be engaged?"

"I wonder!" said Ethel.

"Must be jolly nice, I should think!" said Figgins thoughtfully.

"Isn't the terrace lovely?" said Cousin Ethel, with a nod towards the broad open terrace, adorned with great tubs of tropical plants and flowers, with the open lawns and the shrubberies behind.

"Yes, isn't it?" said Figgins. "There's Tom Merry—isn't he like a giddy convict?"

A figure in broad-arrow garb had appeared for a moment on the terrace, and then disappeared into the shadows.

"Yes—quite convincing," said Ethel. "If there were a policeman here, Tom Merry would be in danger of being arrested."

Tom Merry came up to claim Ethel for the next dance a few minutes later.

"Cool out there on the terrace?" asked Figgins.

"I dare say," said Tom Merry. "I don't know."

"Why, I just saw you out there!" said Figgins, in astonishment.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"I haven't been out," he said. "I've just taken Miss Hazeldene to Manners."

"Not been out?"

"No," said Tom Merry.

"But I saw you on the terrace!"

"Dreaming, old chap!" said Tom Merry pleasantly. And he led Cousin Ethel away, leaving Figgins very much astonished.

"But I thought that I saw you on the terrace, too," said Cousin Ethel. "There was certainly someone dressed as a convict."

"Must be another Convict 99 here, then," said Tom Merry carelessly. "unless that chap from Blackmoor has come to the dance. Ha, ha, ha!"

And they both laughed heartily at the thought.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Cousin Ethel's Partner.

"**H**ANG them! Hang 'em! Look at them—in there—and me here! Hang them!"

A man stood upon a dusky spot on the terrace, concealed by the thick shadows of a group of shrubs, and looked across at a lighted window of the ball-room.

From the open French windows came the strains of a waltz, and couples passed and repassed the windows continually.

The man who was watching from the darkness was in the hideous convict dress, mud-splashed and torn, white-faced and desperate.

Out there, hungry, in the darkness, he watched the scene of gay animation within with rage and misery in his breast.

Every second or two he looked over his shoulder and listened, as if fearing pursuit—as, indeed, he did.

It was Wilde—Convict 61. Dancers, coming out on the terrace for a breath of cool air, passed sometimes within a few feet of the man crouching there hidden in the shadows, little dreaming of the fierce eyes bent upon them from the shrubs.

As he watched the masquerade from the terrace, a wild hope had come into the convict's mind that he might secure some costume, and so elude the watchers in disguise. He moved along the terrace cautiously, and came suddenly upon a couple of lads who were chatting there, one of them a cavalier, and the other a matador.

"Hallo! Here's Tom Merry!" exclaimed the matador.

The convict had halted, his hands clenched hard.

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Instant discovery was what he had anticipated—instant alarm, and a flight for life—and he had been tempted to rush upon the boys, and make a mad attempt to strike them down before they could call out. Bernard Glyn's exclamation petrified him. He was quick-witted, and he understood at once that among the costumes at the dance there must be one that represented a convict, and that he was taken for that character.

"I thought you were dancing, Tommy," said Monty Lowther. "Jolly warm in there, isn't it?"

"Yes, very warm," muttered Convict 61, in a stifled voice. And he hurried on.

The two Shell fellows glanced after him in surprise.

"What's up with Tommy?" said Bernard Glyn.

"Blessed if I know!"

"Well, time we got in, if we're dancing the next," yawned Glyn, with quite the air of an old man about town.

And the Shell fellows strolled in.

Convict 61, with his heart thumping like a hammer, stole along the terrace past the ball-room windows, and stopped at an unlighted window. It was the window of the library, and he had it open in a couple of minutes, and clambered in.

He groped his way out of the library, and found himself in a passage, dimly lighted. The distant strains of music guided him in the direction of the ball-room—and near that, he expected, he would find what he sought. This part of the House seemed to be deserted—the servants were probably busy elsewhere.

There was a sudden footstep, and the hunted man started and darted into the nearest room. It was unlighted, save by a few rays of starlight that came into the window, but he made out a door at the end of the room. He could hear the music now, and he could also hear the footsteps close at hand. There was nothing else for it; he had to face instant discovery, or to flee by this door—without knowing whither it led—and taking the chances!

He took his courage in both hands, as it were, and threw open the door.

A sudden blaze of light dazzled him.

Merry strains of music and glancing figures, a band in pink uniforms, flowers everywhere, soft voices and laughter.

He was in the ball-room!

Convict 61 stood in full view of every guest at the masquerade in Glyn House!

At the worst he had not expected this!

To step right into view in the ball-room itself! It was the worst thing that could have happened for him, and he was lost!

Yet was he lost!

There was no shout of alarm, the dancers did not cease their movements, there was no check to the flow of merry music.

A junior came gliding towards him—a lad in the garb of Mephistopheles—and clapped him on the shoulder with a chuckle.

"You bouncer!" he exclaimed, while the convict stood petrified. "You bouncer! You've been down to supper before half-time—eh?"

The convict muttered something.

"Don't you know that you've booked this dance with Cousin Ethel?" demanded Mephistopheles severely. "Come on! She sent me to look for you."

And Blake slipped his arm into Convict 61's and dragged him away.

The man went unresistingly. He understood.

He remembered the incident on the terrace, and he knew that there must be a convict among the characters represented in the masquerade—and that he was taken for someone named Merry.

There was a chance yet!

Cousin Ethel was seated under a big palm, and she smiled brightly at the convict as he came up with Blake.

"Here's the bouncer, Cousin Ethel!" said Blake. "Look here, it would serve him right to chuck him, and give me the dance instead."

Cousin Ethel laughed merrily.

"No, I won't be so severe as that," she said. "Are you ready, Tom?"

The convict gave her his arm, and they joined the dancers.

The convict's brain was in a whirl, as well as his feet, as they glided among the waltzers. The dance was already beginning.

He wondered where the real Tom Merry was. If he had gone out into the grounds he might have been captured by the police who were watching for Convict 61. That would account for his absence.

Five minutes ago Wilde had been a hunted fugitive; now he was dancing with a charming Queen of the May. He could dance, too—and dance well. And insensibly he glided into the spirit of the thing.

Well, it would be a last fling, anyway! If he were to

be captured, if he was going back to death-in-life in a convict prison, this would be a pleasant memory for him.

"How entertaining you are!" said Cousin Ethel at last.

The convict started.

"Am I?" he ejaculated.

"Yes. Did you catch a cold on the terrace?"

"A—a cold?"

"Yes. Your voice sounds hoarse."

"Does it?"

"Yes, indeed it does. You are dancing much better than you did your last dance with me, too," said Cousin Ethel.

The convict laughed.

"I used to dance a great deal," he said.

"Well, you are improving!" said Cousin Ethel merrily.

"But you seem remarkably thoughtful; and I wonder what you are thinking about?"

"I am thinking how queer it is to be here, dancing with you."

"Is it?" said Ethel, in surprise.

"I—I mean—that is—you see—"

"I'm afraid you are not very explicit," said Ethel. "Are you tired?"

"Oh, not at all!"

"I'm sure you have caught cold."

"Not in the least!"

"Well, say something amusing, then; and don't make me do all the talking, Tom."

Convict 61 laughed.

"I was just thinking—" The convict broke off. "Hark! What is that?"

It was a sound of a sudden commotion on the terrace.

Many of the dancers paused, and looked in that direction. But the strains of the band went on without a pause, and the dance hardly slackened.

"Something happening on the terrace," said Ethel.

"The convict perhaps."

"Possibly."

Mephistopheles passed them with Marjorie Hazeldene in the waltz.

"They've got him!" he called out.

"Got whom?"

"That convict chap."

"Really?"

"He was on the terrace. I saw a policeman jump on him as I passed the windows. Can't help feeling sorry for the poor beggar!"

And Blake was gone.

"Don't you feel sorry for the wretched man, Tom Merry?" asked Cousin Ethel, looking at her partner, as they waltzed on.

Her partner started.

"I? Oh, yes—none more so! Poor chap!"

"I hope he is not hurt," said Ethel. "They say he is a very desperate man."

"Yes—I think he is rather desperate at the present moment," assented No. 61 grimly.

The dance ended.

"How delightful!" said Cousin Ethel, as she sank into a seat by the ferns. "I never knew you could waltz so well."

Blake came gliding up.

"Jolly good, isn't it?" he exclaimed. "Next dance is the last before supper, isn't it—or the one after? I say—"

He started forward, and caught the convict as he staggered.

"What's the matter, old man?"

"I—I feel faint! Help me out of this, please!"

"Certainly!"

Jack Blake piloted the convict out of the ball-room, and the blaze of lights and the cheery voices were left behind.

Cousin Ethel was looking rather anxious. Figgins came up and joined her, with a cheery grin. His mask was a little sideways. By this time many of the masks had come off, however, and Figgins jerked his right off as he stopped beside Cousin Ethel.

"Did you hear a row yonder?" he asked.

"Yes. Was it the convict?"

"Yes. He came on the terrace, it seems, and they've got him."

"There seems to be something going on there now," said Ethel, as a noise was heard; and many of the dancers turned towards the French windows.

"Let's go and see."

They moved away towards the windows.

There certainly was something going on on the terrace, and it was something very peculiar indeed; and there were exclamations of wonder from the dancers as they crowded out into the light of the coloured lamps.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Out of the Net.

TOM MERRY had taken a turn in the grounds after a dance, to get a breath of cool air. As he stepped upon the terrace again to return to the ball-room three figures had rushed upon him, and he was seized in a second. There was a clink as a pair of handcuffs fastened upon his wrists, and his captors dragged him away. That was the first commotion that was heard, as Tom Merry struggled furiously, gasping in rage and wonder.

"You'd better come quietly!" said Inspector Skeat in his ear. "You'll only make it worse for yourself if you struggle."

"Let me go!" yelled Tom Merry.

The inspector chuckled.

"That's likely—I don't think!" he remarked. "Get him along, men. I told Mr. Glyn I would get him away as quietly as possible. We don't want a disturbance here."

"Let me go, you idiots!"

"Quick with him!"

Tom Merry was hustled off the terrace and rushed through the gardens.

Policemen and warders seemed to spring up out of every shadow.

Inspector Skeat blew his whistle as a signal to the watchers that the capture had been made, and that there was no further need for their vigilance.

Tom Merry realised now the mistake that had been made. He had heard the rumour, like nearly everybody else at the masquerade, that the escaped convict had been seen in the grounds of Glyn House.

He understood that the police had been hunting there for the escaped man from Blackmoor, and that they had taken him for No. 61.

The trick he had played at St. Jim's on the New House fellows was happening over again; only this time it was without his own wish, and was something rather more than a joke.

A rough hand had been jammed over his mouth to stop his voice in order that the alarm might not be given to the merrymakers.

It was not till he was at a distance from the house that the hand was removed, and he was able to speak again.

"You utter asses!" he gasped breathlessly.

"Enough of that!" said the inspector roughly. "You'd better keep a civil tongue in your head, my fine fellow! You'll get it stiff enough as it is."

"I'm not the convict!" yelled Tom Merry.

"Oh, don't be a fool, my man!"

"I'm Tom Merry, of St. Jim's!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The inspector burst into a roar of laughter. The utter impudence of the statement, as he regarded it, amused him.

"You ass!" shouted the exasperated junior. "Take these things off my wrists at once! Do you hear?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the inspector. "Of all the cheek—"

"You dummy!"

"Here, stow that!" said Inspector Skeat, feeling that his dignity was suffering. "Hold your jaw, my man. Take him away!"

"I tell you I'm Tom Merry, of the Shell, at St. Jim's! I'm in fancy-dress; I'm Convict 99!" yelled the junior.

"You're Convict 61, my fine fellow, and you're going back to Blackmoor!" said Mr. Skeat.

"Look here, feel this cropped hair on my head—it's false," said Tom Merry. "The whole thing will come off if you pull it!"

"Nonsense!"

One of the policemen jerked at the cropped head, and gave a gasp of stupefaction as the close-fitting skull-cap came off, revealing Tom Merry's head of curly hair underneath.

"W-w-w-what!" gasped Mr. Skeat.

"You've seen me before at St. Jim's," said Tom Merry. "You ought to know my voice. Take these things off my wrists!"

"My word!" said the inspector. "Here, bring him back to the house, and we'll ask Mr. Glyn to look at him, and see if he's one of the guests. This looks to me like a plot to defeat the aims of justice."

Tom Merry was marched back to the terrace.

"You've caught him, inspector?" exclaimed Mr. Glyn eagerly, meeting the party on the terrace. "Get him away quietly, please—no noise—"

"They've caught me, Mr. Glyn!" said Tom Merry. "Will you tell Mr. Skeat that I'm Tom Merry, of St. Jim's, and not Convict 61 of Blackmoor?"

"Dear me! Bless my soul!" exclaimed Mr. Glyn.

"Is that correct, sir?" asked the inspector anxiously.

"Yes, quite correct!" said Mr. Glyn. "I know the boy's

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voice. That is Tom Merry; I remember he came as Convict 99."

"Take the darbies off," said the inspector gruffly.

Tom Merry's wrists were released from the cold, unpleasant contact of the handcuffs.

"It was a natural mistake to make, inspector," said Mr. Glyn, taking pity upon the discomfiture of Mr. Skeat. "But the real convict, I suppose, is still at large. You had better look for him."

"My hat!" exclaimed Figgins, as he came out on the terrace. "Have they been arresting you, Tom Merry?"

"I've had a jolly narrow escape of going to Blackmoor, Figgy!" grinned Tom Merry.

There was a laugh from the crowd of dancers. But Cousin Ethel turned pale.

"Tom Merry! You here!"

"Here I am!" said Tom Merry cheerfully.

"But—but I danced the last dance with you!" Cousin Ethel exclaimed, in amazement.

Tom Merry stared.

"That you jolly well didn't!" he said. "I was coming in to claim the dance, when these bobbies jumped on me on the terrace, and yanked me off without giving me a chance to explain."

"But—but I danced with you—or—or with someone whom I took to be you!" gasped the girl. "He was pretending to be you."

"Who was?"

"The person in convict dress whom I danced with."

"What!"

"Eh!" exclaimed Inspector Skeat, his eyes gleaming. "You danced with somebody dressed as a convict, miss?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was there more than one fancy dress of this sort here, Mr. Glyn, sir?" demanded the inspector eagerly.

Mr. Glyn shook his head.

"No," he replied, "certainly not. I remember noticing Tom Merry's costume particularly, because of the fact that there was an escaped convict in the neighbourhood. There certainly was no other in the house."

"I am quite sure of that, too," said Mr. Wodyer.

"Then the person I danced with—" gasped Cousin Ethel.

"My hat!" ejaculated Tom Merry. "It must have been the convict himself!"

"Bai Jove!"

"What—what unparalleled insolence!" gasped Mr. Glyn. "I—I should never have dreamed of such a thing! Inspector, your man is in the house, and has the insolence to pass himself off as a guest at the ball."

"He was always a cool customer," said Mr. Skeat. "But we've got him now. Where did he leave you, young lady?"

"He was faint, and Blake took him away," said Ethel dazedly. "Perhaps he was pretending, to get out of the ball-room, if he was really the convict. Blake took him to the dressing-rooms, I think."

"Here's Blake!" exclaimed Figgins, as the figure of Mephistopheles appeared on the terrace further down. "I say, Blake!"

Mephistopheles halted. He had a coat hanging on his arm. His eyes turned towards the group, gleaming through the holes in his mask.

"I say, Blake!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "That chap you took out of the ball-room wasn't me—it was the giddy convict!"

"My hat!" exclaimed Mephistopheles

"Yes, rather! Where did he go?"

"I left him in the dressing-room."

"Show me the way, quick!" Inspector Skeat muttered to Mr. Wodyer. "Come on, my men!"

"This way!" said Mr. Wodyer.

Mr. Wodyer and the inspector and the constables rushed into the house. An excited group discussed the strange occurrence on the terrace. Mephistopheles went down the steps into the garden, and vanished into the darkness.

Cousin Ethel leaned upon Marjorie Hazeldene's arm. The

thought that she had been dancing with the-escaped convict made her feel quite dazed.

Figgins remained with Cousin Ethel, but most of the guests crowded after Mr. Wodyer and the police, to see whether the daring convict was still in the dressing-room.

Inspector Skeat rushed into the room, and glared round him, ready to spring upon the convict if he were there.

"Here is his dress!" exclaimed Mr. Wodyer.

On the floor lay a convict's garb, evidently discarded by the fugitive. From a bundle of coats in a corner came a muffled groan.

"Here he is!" yelled Monty Lowther.

"Here's the giddy convict!"

A figure was lying in the corner of the room. It was bound hand and foot, and gagged, coats and handkerchiefs having been used for the purpose. But the figure was not that of Convict 61 of Blackmoor Prison. It was Jack Blake, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's. He was no longer in his Satanic garb, but in his underclothing, and he was red and breathless with efforts to escape his bonds. The inspector stared at him in stupefied amazement. Digby dashed forward and jerked the gag from his mouth, and dragged at his bonds till he was free. Jack Blake sat up, panting.

"My hat! I'm glad you've come—I was nearly suffocated!" he gasped.

"Who are you?" roared the inspector.

"I? I'm Blake!"

"Where is the convict?"

"He's gone!" growled Blake.

"Tell the inspector what has happened," said Mr. Glyn quietly—though he guessed.

Blake gasped for breath.

"All right, sir. I brought the awful bounder out of the ball-room, thinking that it was Tom Merry—as he pretended he was. The moment we were in here, he turned on me—and he had me down and bound up in next to no time. Then I guessed who he was, but I hadn't a chance to yell. He took my Mephistopheles rig-out, and tied me up with these things, but—but he isn't a bad sort, either. He could have bashed me on the head and saved time by that, if he'd liked. I thought he was going to, but he didn't—he tied me up and gagged me and left me here, and went off in my duds!"

"As Mephistopheles!" yelled Inspector Skeat.

"Yes, sir!"

"Then—then the fellow who passed us on the terrace just now—"

"Did Mephistopheles pass you on the terrace?"

"Yes."

Blake chuckled breathlessly.

"Then it was the giddy convict, sir!"

Inspector Skeat rushed away furiously. He had been clean done, there was no mistake about that—but he hoped yet to find Mephistopheles in the grounds.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I've wathah an ideah, you know, that Inspector Skeat won't captuah that chap at all!"

And many of the others fully agreed with the swell of St. Jim's.

But the convict was gone now, and the police and the warders were gone after him; and the dancing was resumed, and the startling incidents of the evening were soon forgotten.

The merry masquerade came to an end all too soon; and Figgins saw Cousin Ethel and Marjorie to their carriage, and the juniors all came round to say good-bye; and then they mounted their own brake to return to St. Jim's.

The juniors of St. Jim's went to bed that night very happy and very tired.

The next morning they were eager for news. But no news came of the capture of Convict 61, and after another week had elapsed, and he had not been found, it was generally supposed that he had succeeded in quitting the country. And Tom Merry hoped—not without reason—that in another land he would turn over a new leaf, and would make the best use of the chance that had been given him by his escape on the night of the fancy-dress ball at Glyn House.

THE END.

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THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Planning the Adventurous Journey—Jonathan Makes a Bad Start—Pete's Idea of Speed—The Rhinoceros.

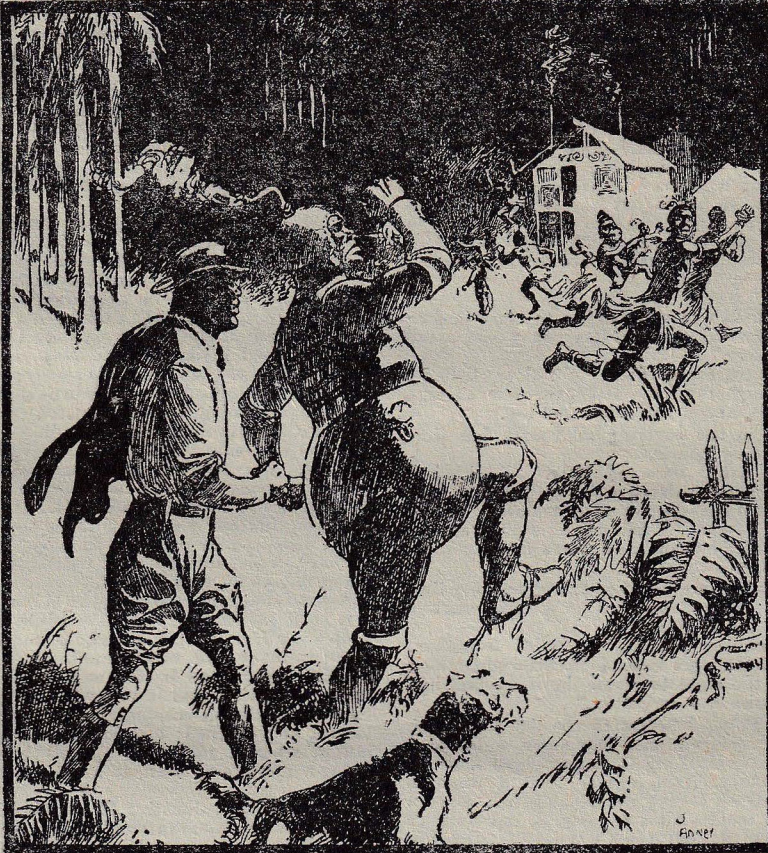
IF you turn to your maps, and look for Chagga, situated to the south of the Sahara, and towards the west of Africa, you will not find it; and for this reason. Chagga, although a black spot on the beautiful tropical country, is not yet a black spot on the map. In years to come it may be; then, again, it may get burnt down by savages, who would slaughter its inhabitants, and leave the forest to cover over the black spot once more.

At any rate, Jack, Sam, and Pete were in the smoke-room of the only hotel in Chagga. Rory was also there, walking round Pete's steam man, who was hissing away like a small locomotive waiting to get off. Jonathan, the great Yankee inventor, was also there, and while he smoked Jack's cigars he extolled the wonderful invention that he was about to show them, but he did not give them the slightest inkling as to its nature.

The only thing he did tell them was that they would require a few hundred pounds for the stores for their intended journey into the heart of Africa, and Pete, wanting to see the invention, had found the money. The stores, and all the rest of it, had been sent to Jonathan's domicile, and now all was ready for the start, except Jonathan.

That worthy found free living at the hotel, to say nothing of Jack's cigars, so comforting, that he did not seem to be at all inclined to shift his quarters for the hardships and perils of African travel. The fact is, Jonathan hated hardships, and dreaded perils, although he would never have admitted as much.

"Now, look here, my dear old hoss!" exclaimed Pete, who was never chary of speaking his mind. "It's all bery well for you to sit here lazing away your time, and seeing dat Jack is keeping you in cigars and clover. I must say dat I don't blame you for your choice; but you'm got to consider dat we'm going to start dis morning. You hab been free days making up your mind, and finding oder tings dat we require; bery well, now I'm going to gib you a



Pete emerged from the caravan with the steam man, and steered the strange form among the savages, who fled in terror.

little longer — but not much. I admit dere's no particular hurry for de start, and would like to get you to name an exact time, and we will be off to de minute. Feel like naming a time?"

"Yes. To-day is Monday, so we will start next week. There are one or two things that I want to consider."

"Should say you could consider dose after we had started. When shall you be ready, Jack and Sammy?"

"I reckon we are ready now," answered Sam.

"As a matter of fact, we have been ready for a week!" exclaimed Jack.

"Bery well. It is now eleven o'clock!" exclaimed Pete. "We will start at free minutes past eleven."

"I will do no such thing!" snarled Jonathan. "Do you think I am going to allow a nigger to dictate to me as to when I will start?"

Pete pulled out a pencil, and as he commenced to scribble something down, smashed the point.

"Lend me your knife, Jonathan,"

he said. "Open de small blade for me, please, and den just dictate any tings you tink we shall require beyond dose we hab now got."

The unsuspecting Jonathan did as directed, and Pete cut a length off his lasso, placed the knife in his pocket, and then making a noose in the centre of the piece of rope, he seized Jonathan by the ankle, and slipping the noose over his foot, drew it tight.

After that Pete walked across the room to his steam man, while Jonathan came hopping after him, protesting at every hop.

Pete made the ends of the lasso fast round the steam man, and then he started that man marching out of the place.

Jack had just settled the bill, so he and Sam followed, and, needless to say, Jonathan did the same.

The people in the street howled with laughter at the strange procession, and Jonathan howled with rage. He badly wanted to borrow a knife, but no one seemed to be inclined to spoil the fun by lending one.

"I wish you would keep quiet, Jonathan!" exclaimed Pete. "You're making more noise dan de steam man. I

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tell you I ain't going to release you. If you can't make up your mind de steam man must do it for you. I'm going to quicken his pace just directly, and den you will hab to run, 'cos if dat cord draws tight you are likely to hab a nasty fall, and he would be bound to draw you along de ground."

Jonathan appealed to Jack and Sam, but they pointed out that they could not possibly interfere with Pete's arrangements, so Jonathan, who, for obvious reasons, did not allow the cord to tighten, had to go hopping along in the funniest manner imaginable.

It was a considerable distance to his house, but he had to go like that the whole distance, and it was a remarkably lucky thing for him that the steam man behaved himself all right.

"Now den, my dear old hoss," exclaimed Pete, stopping his steam man in front of a large barn-like building, which served as Jonathan's workshop and storage place for his inventions. "I will disrelease you—so. You'm as free as de birds ob de air, and if you don't want to come wid us on our voyage ob discovery, we will go alone."

"I should not allow you to go alone, you insolent rascal!" "Well, we shouldn't ask you 'bout dat, old hoss, 'cos, don't you see, it was understood dat we were to go in de arrangement if we found de money for de stores, and what you required, and seeing dat we hab done all dat, we are going to hab our money's worf. We don't particularly want you, 'cos you'm such a snarly sort ob creature, and neber seem to be happy, so dat if you like to stop at home you can do so; den, again, if you like to come, you can do dat, and we shall use you in de ordinary way. You hab got free minutes to make up your mind, 'cos dat's de correct time dat we are going to start."

"I shall start when I like."

"In dat case you will hab to start liking to start in free minutes. Now den, open dat door, unless you would rader let me open it wid dis axe."

Jonathan had sufficient sense to unlock the door, then he revealed a curious-looking machine. It looked like a large boat on six broad wheels, and it had a covered top.

There were windows in the covering all round, but they were now closed by sliding panels.

"Must be a Noah's Ark," observed Pete. "Looks just like it, only you ain't got it painted quite as brightly as I should like to see it for de correct representation ob de ark. Still, I can easy do dat. What dat concern wants is to be painted in an artistic fashion, and dere's no man more competent to do dat dan dis child."

"Ha, ha, ha! Give him some brushes and a pot of paint, Jonathan," suggested Jack, "and you will see what a beautiful thing he will make of it!"

"He is doing no painting for me," growled Jonathan. "Of course, if you wish to start now, I have no objection; only you will not have the right to blame me if we find half the necessaries we require are forgotten."

"Golly!" exclaimed Pete. "Seems to me dat if we hab only got half what is required, and hab spent a lot ober free hundred pounds, dat travelling in dat machine must be a mighty expensive luxury. Den, again, what I want to know is, what's de sense ob taking dat Noah's Ark concern when we can travel on foot? All I can say is, dat Jack or Sammy will have to pull it, 'cos I ain't going to, and I'm perfectly certain dat you'm a mighty lot too lazy to do anything like dat, Jonathan."

"Well, of all the silly rascals I ever came across, you are the worst! Do you suppose we are going to pull that caravan?"

"Got a horse for de job, den?"

"No, stupid! It goes by itself. That contraption will go at a hundred and fifty miles an hour."

"I see!" exclaimed Pete, who knew that Jonathan was given to exaggeration. "How many hours do you tink it would take to do fifty miles? Rader looks to me as dough it would be able to travel about ten miles an hour down a steep hill, but I hab my doubts weder it would eber be able to travel on a level surface."

"That contraption is to do away with camels," declared Jonathan, waving his cigar—it was really one of Jack's—at the machine. "It will revolutionise the world. No one knows—not even myself—the speed at which that car can travel. Can you work a motor-car, Pete?"

"M'yes!"

"Well, you stand by the steering-wheel here in front, and the panel in front of the window slides back, so. You can see how to steer through that. Now, run right across the desert. Jack knows the course we want to go, and he will give you instructions. Sam can help with the engines. Now, I calculate you will get along all right!"

"But what are you going to do, old hoss?" inquired Pete.

"I shall watch how she goes."

"M'yes! And smoke Jack's cigars. I dunno dat I

wouldn't be able to do dat part ob de work best. We must lift de steam man in, 'cos he's coming wid us."

"We don't want that brutal thing!"

"Den we'm going to hab him, old hoss. De steam man has got his feelings de same as yot hab, and if I leabe him here alone he will mope, and tink he's being neglected. Just help him in, Jack and Sammy!"

"I reckon you will have to get Jonathan and Rory to do that," said Sam. "I'm having nothing to do with him!"

"Neither am I," said Jonathan.

"Don't you make so sure ob dat, old hoss," said Pete. "If dat steam man lets himself go, you dunno how much you may hab to do, wid him. However, if you are too mighty lazy to do any work, I 'spect I shall hab to do it!"

"The brutal thing will only take up room, and fill the place with fumes!" growled Jonathan, although he knew that it would be useless to argue the matter with Pete if he had made up his mind to take the steam man.

"I am going to put him out ob action for de present," said Pete, "and he only smells a little when he is not working. You can soon get used to de perfume ob paraffin!"

He got the steam man in without difficulty, and, having closed the door and flap, which was much like those used in furniture-removing vans, Pete went to the steering-wheel, and his comrades watched results with some misgivings.

Pete, however, started at a moderate pace, but he quickened it up until they were rushing across the sandy desert at a terrific speed.

"Yah, yah, yah! I must say dis is a comfortable way ob travelling!" cried Pete. "A little jolty, perhaps, but dat is de fault ob de unlevelness ob de ground!"

"You mad villain!" roared Jonathan. "Will you check the pace? We shall be over directly!"

"Look here, old hoss!" exclaimed Pete. "A machine dat won't travel at full pace widout turning ober ain't de slightest good in de world. Now, seeing dat we hab run ober a few rocks, and mounds two-free feet high, I don't see dat anything short ob a mountain is going to upset us!"

"You are going a great deal too fast."

"I ain't going nearly fast enough."

"You obstinate brute, I tell you that you are!"

"But, you see, my poor, miserable old hoss, I neber believe anything you tell me! Jack and Sammy might be soft enough to do dat, but I ain't. Here's a nice, level sort ob space, and now I'm going at top speed. Hold tight, boys, 'cos I hab de idea dere will be some jolting!"

Pete put the motor at top speed, and now their pace was something to be remembered.

A vast cloud of sand rose in their wake, while the jolting was so great that it was impossible for the comrades to keep their feet. Then the noise was such that they had to shout to make each other heard.

Pete appeared to be the only satisfied one. Speed was what he wanted, and it was what he got. The jolting and the noise he cared nothing about. Jack and Sam sat on the lockers and laughed; but Jonathan made a rush to stop the motor, when a jolt more violent than the rest sent him flying across the caravan, to knock his head badly against the side.

"Steady, dere, Jonathan!" exclaimed Pete. "You know de sides ob de caravan won't bear too much banging about. You will bruise de woodwork. If you want to charge your noddle at anything, you had better bang it against de iron machinery!"

"You stupid, senseless blockhead, will you stop?"

"Seems to me dat you are de stupid one for banging your head like dat," observed Pete. "Now, dis is just de pace I like, and when we come to de sea we will cross it, and get into some oder country. What's dat, Jack, jolting? Well, you will soon get accustomed to de jolting part ob de business. Seems to me you want to be wrapped up in cotton-wool, and I would put Jonathan in a box, 'cos he makes such a mighty row! De man is neber happy unless he's grumbling at something!"

Pete kept up the terrific speed for a very long way, and then, when Jack pointed out that the ground they were coming to was extremely rugged and somewhat dangerous, he slowed down a little.

It was well he did so, for as they turned round a bend they saw within twenty yards of them a huge rhinoceros! And the gigantic beast was right in their path!

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

An Unexpected Foe—The Damaged Caravan—Camping in the Forest—Attacked by Savages.

NOW, there was not the slightest reason why that rhinoceros should not have walked into the forest, and let the comrades pass in their caravan in peace. A lion would probably have done so, not understanding the look of the strange vehicle. But this rhinoceros appeared to be of a more inquisitive turn of mind,

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and seemed to want to know the inner meaning of that caravan.

Lowering his huge head and uttering an angry bellow, it charged at the front of the caravan, and shoved its horn and the best portion of its head through the woodwork.

"Good-morning, old hoss!" exclaimed Pete, bowing politely. "It's a nice sort ob morning for de time ob year—don't you tink so?"—and—

"Where's that long-nosed Yankee, Jonathan?" came a deep voice.

It was, of course, a little of Pete's ventriloquism, but it sounded exactly as though it had come from the rhinoceros.

"He's somewhere in de caravan, old hoss," said Pete, in his natural voice; "but he's too busy to talk to you now. Don't you tink you had better buzz off to your peaceful home? Here, I ain't standing dis!"

The rhinoceros had charged again, and now the three comrades opened fire; but few of the bullets took much effect, owing to the enormous thickness of the brute's hide, and the pain of those that did only seemed to increase its fury.

At last, however, Sam planted a ball behind its left shoulder, and this brought the huge brute down.

"Dere are two tings I want to know," said Pete, kicking away the splinters of wood. "One is weder rhinoceros is good to eat, and de oder is if we'm got enough ob it to go round. Do be quiet, Jonathan! You'm always grumbling at something! Damaged your caravan? Well, dat can easily be repaired, and it will serve as a ventilator in de meantime. Now, what's your impression 'bout dose two points, Sammy?"

"I reckon rhinoceros is rather nicer than roast beef, and, in my opinion, there's enough meat there to feed a whole army!"

"Den roast dat rhinoceros, Sammy, while I find some edible roots to go wid it. We'm got some damper, den dere are some potatoes, so we will hab a mighty big banquet. We will light a camp-fire, and Jonathan shall cook de potatoes ober de oil-stove. Start away, old hoss, and stop your grumbling!"

Jonathan was very hungry, and so he raised no objection to this arrangement, although all the time the meal was being prepared he grumbled about the damage done to his caravan.

"Now, den, boys," exclaimed Pete, "dis is what I call a nice meal, 'cos dere's plenty ob it, and if de taste is in accordance wid de smell, den we'm going to enjoy ourselves! And I would get a better start at de enjoyment if you would kindly stop your grumbling, Jonathan. You hab told us 'bout fifty times dat your caravan is damaged, and we noticed dat fact before you told us de first time. You hab to be bery thankful dat de rhinoceros ain't eating you instead ob your eating de rhinoceros, 'cos you heard him ask for you. He must hab decidedly funny taste to fancy a Yankee.

"Still, dat's his business; and now de poor old hoss will eat no more. It's rader pathetic, and I'm sorry for him, in a sense. Dat breadfruit will go all right wid him, Sammy, and so will dose mushrooms. Yes, I'm sorry for de poor old hoss. Just pass me anoder slice ob him, Sammy. He's nice and tender, almost like roast chicken, only sort ob more so. Golly! Just look at Jonathan putting him away! Funny ting you keep so thin, old hoss, seeing de enormous amount you consume. Jonathan only reminds me ob a boa-constrictor when he's yaffling up his food. Seems to gulp it down in mighty chunks. You would tink de man would want a fortnight's sleep after each meal."

"You silly, coarse brute, mind your own business!" snarled Jonathan, who did not approve of Pete's personal remarks. "I don't eat a quarter of the amount that you do."

"You'm de first Yankee dat I hab eber met who could eat a rhinoceros at one sitting. You'm worse dan Yardo."

"Who was he, Pete?" inquired Jack.

"Golly! Ain't it awful to tink dat a man who has bent at Oxford has neber heard ob Yardo! Dat comes ob flirting wid your schoolmistress instead ob— M'yes, as I was goin' to say—"

"What about the fair savage?" exclaimed Jack. "As I have told you a score of times, they don't have schoolmistresses at Oxford, but they do have beautiful, if stout, savage ladies in the forest; and when you speak of flirting, it reminds me of them. All the same, I want to know who Yardo was, for I vow I have never heard of him."

"It was de gentleman who slew an ox wid his fist, and ate him all at one meal."

"Ha, ha, ha! You mean Milo."

"Well, dere ain't so mighty much difference between a mile and a yard. I remembered his name by yard. It's one ob de defects in my cistern. Still, dat ain't got anything to do wid Jonathan's appetite. He will start eating de

animal's horn directly. Yah, yah, yah! Just look at de mouffulls he's stuffing in! I know you will do your digestive concertinas an injury directly."

"I suppose the stupid black idiot means digestive organs," snarled Jonathan, helping himself to some more; for although he did not like Pete's chaff, he was not so silly as to allow it to interfere with his appetite.

"Dere's a sort ob catchiness 'bout his swallowing dat reminds you ob a hungry hound. He can't possibly be hungry now, and just look what a lot he is going on wid! Golly! He has swallowed a big maggot in dat mushroom now! Yah, yah, yah! It was 'bout free inches long, and—"

A squeaking sound came from Jonathan's mouth, and the expression of horror on his face nearly convulsed Jack and Sam. Pete intended the squeaking to represent the dying cries of a full-sized maggot, though he certainly could never have heard such a sound.

Jonathan kept his mouth open a little, and appeared to be listening, and some of the strangest sounds that a maggot never made appeared to come from his mouth.

Suddenly he leaped to his feet and rushed into the bushes, where they heard him spluttering.

Pete winked at his comrades, and went on with his meal as though he was just commencing it.

"Got rid ob de maggot, old hoss?" inquired Pete, when Jonathan came back.

"I don't believe there was a maggot."

"P'r'aps not. Looked rader like one, too. Might hab been some oder insect; but his eyes and mouf much resembled an ordinary or garden maggot."

"I reckon it must hab been a salamander," said Sam. "No ordinary maggot would hab been able to give tongue like that after it had been cooked."

"Besides, dere's nuffin nasty in a full-sized maggot," observed Pete. "Birds eat a lot ob dem, so do ducks and oder insects. Sit down, Jonathan, and finish your meal, dough I must say dat I consider you hab ober-eaten yourself already. I rader fancy it is de enormous amount ob food dat you consume dat makes your temper so rocky. You ought to take less food and more exercise, and den you would be as sweet-tempered as a barnacle on a ship's bottom."

"You are a fool, and an empty-headed idiot!"

"Well, I can't say dat you'm an empty-stomached Yankee, 'cos dat wouldn't be anyting like de troof. Now, de question is weder we had better remain here for de night, or go on in de caravan."

Pete wanted to remain where they were, because he imagined it would be more comfortable and less troublesome than shifting their position; and, knowing how perverse Jonathan was, Pete went the right way to remain there.

"I'm inclined to tink it would be much better to go on," he observed.

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"No, I wouldn't!" snarled Jonathan. "We haven't finished our meal yet, and by the time we have—"

"Golly! By de time we hab finished it will be time to start breakfast," interposed Pete. "But I should say it would be much safer and better to go on."

"There is no danger in remaining here," declared Jonathan, although he could scarcely have thought what he asserted.

"I say dere is!" exclaimed Pete. "And I tell you plainly, old hoss, dat it will be much safer rushing along de ground, and chancing rhinoceroses or any ob dose insects, dan stopping here and running de risk ob mosquitoes and such-like wild beasts."

"You stupid creature, don't you know de difference between an insect and a wild beast?"

"M'yes!"

"Then why do you call a mosquito a wild beast?"

"Cos he is a wild beast; and, what's more, if he got biting you, he would turn you into a wild beast. You ain't such a mighty tame beast at de best ob times; but dat's your temper, and you can't help it. A man who could help a temper like yours would certainly neber hab it. De fact ob de matter is dat you don't know what a wild beast is."

"Yes, I do."

"Well, what is it?"

"A blood-thirsty animal that—"

"Well, ain't a mosquito a blood-thirsty animal? He's neber happy unless he's going after blood, and he sucks it up like a thirsty man sucks cider frough a straw. I ain't got time to explain de matter funder to you, but if you are so mighty obstinate dat you will remain here all night, den all I can say is dat you must take de consequences, and if a wild savage cuts your head off you won't hab de right to blame me. 'Nuff said."

Jonathan tried to argue de matter further, but Pete would not listen to him. The fact is, Jonathan did not feel at all sure dat Pete was not right, and dat it would be far safer to continue de journey; but he was too obstinate to admit this, and he only kept trying to convince de others and himself dat there was not de slightest danger.

Pete listened, smoked his pipe, and shook his head at everything dat Jonathan said, and this made de inventor fearfully savage.

"It's no use talking to de pigheaded brute!" snarled Jonathan, at last.

"Jonathan, old hoss," said Pete, with a profound sigh, "don't talk like dat dis last night. I don't want you to go to your grave—or, rader, to de hyenas—feeling bad friends wid me."

"What do you mean?"

"Nuffin! Only you will stop here, and dat means death to us all!"

"We are not facing death."

"Not yet, but we shall be in about an hour's time. De savages are in de neighbourhood, but dey won't make de attack just yet."

"How do you know dat there are savages in de neighbourhood?" demanded Jonathan, gazing fearfully around, for de camp-fire was throwing flickering shadows, and their movement gave him rather an uncanny feeling.

"Can always tell when savages are in de vicinity," said Pete, gravely shaking his head. "Dere is a sort ob feeling when dey come creeping nearer and near—Woo! Oh, I don't tink it was anything! Hush!"

Jack and Sam pretended to listen. They knew perfectly well dat Pete was only playing on Jonathan's fears.

There was not a sound to dispel de silence, save de crackle of de camp-fire, for there was not a breath of wind to stir de leaves of de forest trees, nor had de beasts of prey commenced their nightly prowling.

"There—there is nothing," declared Jonathan, who found this listening very trying to his nerves.

Several minutes passed by, when a low growl from Rory caused Sam to give Pete a prod in de ribs dat effectually awoke him.

"What's de matter, Sammy?" whispered Pete.

"Rory heard something or someone," said Sam.

If ever Jonathan's nerves were severely tried, they were so now. The crackling of de fire caused him to start, although perhaps de intense silence of de surrounding forest frightened him still more. It takes a good many years for even a brave man to become accustomed to such a situation, and Jonathan was nothing like a brave man.

He was trembling now, and his breath came in a very gaspy fashion.

Rory quieted down, and de comrades began to hope dat he had merely heard some wild beast in de bushes, when suddenly de savages' war-cry rang out, and spears and arrows fell thickly around de camp-fire.

The deadly missiles appeared to come from all parts, and

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de comrades poured in a heavy fire with their repeating-rifles.

This, no doubt, checked a rush, and several cries of pain told dat at least some of de shots had taken effect.

Jonathan made a rush towards de caravan, but he quickly retreated, for a party of savages sprang between him and de caravan, brandishing their spears.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Comrades at Bay—How Pete Made Gruel, and Administered it to His Patient.

PETE quickly emptied his rifle, and, drawing his axe, he charged towards de caravan, de back of which was open.

Many a thrust was made at him, but such were de blows he dealt with his huge axe, dat de savages scattered before his furious rush; then, with a great leap, he gained de caravan.

Jack and Sam had recourse to their revolvers, for they also had emptied their repeating-rifles. Side by side they fought, although they had little hope of gaining de victory against such odds as they had to contend with. But, now, assistance was coming to them from an unexpected quarter.

Pete emerged from de caravan with his steam man, whose arms were swinging round at their greatest pace, and Pete steered de strange form right into de midst of de savages.

He had not yet used his revolvers, but now he opened fire, and he made dat steam man utter appalling yells.

Even de hail of bullets had less effect on de superstitious savages than did de steam man. For a moment they ceased to fight, and den two of their number were struck to de earth by de arms of de steam man, who was hissing, and, with Pete's assistance, howling in a truly terrific manner.

The party of savages who had cut off de comrades' retreat rushed wildly into de forest, yelling as they went, and Pete fired at their retreating forms.

"Come on, boys!" shouted Pete. "De caravan is de safest place for us. Hurry up, Jonathan, unless you want to get scalped!"

"I am dying!" groaned Jonathan.

"Golly! De man is always dying!" growled Pete. "All de same, I must say he runs bery well for a dying man. Yah, yah, yah! De dying man is de first to gain de caravan."

Pete got his steam man in again, but, as he had omitted to stop his arms, Jonathan received a blow over de head dat stretched him on de floor, and must really have hurt him; den, before Pete could stop those swaying arms, they had smashed a few things in de caravan.

"Well, dat's all right, boys!" exclaimed Pete, as Jack quickly closed de door. "We'm in a much safer position dan we were outside, 'cos we can fire from here widout getting speared in return. Are eider ob you wounded?"

"No," they both answered. "Are you?"

"Nunno!"

"Then I reckon we had better have a look at Jonathan!" exclaimed Sam. "I don't quite believe he is dying. All de same, your steam man caught him a frightful clump over de head."

"I don't 'spect dere's much de matter wid him," said Pete. "Seems to me dat de first ting we hab got to do is to keep dose savages at bay. You know, boys, it would be quite impossible for us to travel frough dese trees in de darkness, so it stands to reason dat we shall hab to defend ourselves all frough de night. You can hear de spears and arrows rattling against de caravan now, if you listen."

It was not at all necessary to listen. Every moment there was a loud blow as a spear struck de caravan, while many of de arrows poured through de opening in front.

"How do you feel, now, old hoss?" exclaimed Pete, glancing at Jonathan, who was now sitting up.

"I am dying!"

"Golly! De man is always dying! To my knowledge he's been dying half a dozen times, and de strange part about it is dat he ain't dead yet. If you tink you will take an hour or so about your dying, it will be all de better, 'cos Sammy is needed to keep de savages off, and he can't attend to you while he's attending to dem. Where are you wounded?"

"All over! I know dat there's no chance of my life. I am going fast!"

"Why, dere's de arrow sticking in de calf ob his leg!" exclaimed Pete, with supreme contempt. "Surely you don't tink a wound in de leg is going to kill you! Here, pull out de arrow, Sammy, while I hold him!"

"No—no, I tell you!" yelled Jonathan. "Don't touch it!"

"What's de man talking about? You can't go frough life wid an arrow frough your leg."

"I won't have it touched! I must have a surgeon, and den I shall take chloroform. I cannot bear de suffering!"

"Ain't it mighty disgusting to hear a man talking like

dat!" growled Pete. "Just as dough we could get a surgeon here! Here, pull it out, Sammy! It would about grow into his flesh by de time we got a medicated man, and even if we got one, all he would be able to do would be to extract de arrow."

Jonathan struggled and yelled, but Pete had got his leg firmly, and Sam drew out the arrow; then he bound up the wound, and the fuss Jonathan made disgusted Pete.

"I must say I don't like pain myself," observed Pete; "but when you'm got it, it stands to reason dat you hab got to bear it, and all de yelling in de world won't do you any sort ob good."

"You are a heartless villain!"

"Well, you can't expect me to start yowling just because you hab got a pain in de leg."

"Pain be hanged! I am suffering agony!"

"Den all I can say is dat you must hab some more wounds somewhere else, 'cos dat little prod in de leg can't be causing you agony."

"The arrow was poisoned, and I'm a dying man!"

"Hellup! De man is dying again. How do you know de arrow was poisoned?"

"I can tell by the pain."

"You said just now dat you hadn't got any pain, but dat it was agony."

"It is!"

"Den don't make such a row ober it. You can't possibly tell weder de arrow was poisoned or not—at least, you can't tell yet. Dat is a ting dat you are likley to know 'bout dis time to-morrow. All de same, what you hab got to do is to go on hoping for de best. It ain't a bit ob good meeting poisoned arrows half way, 'cos in dat case you would get de pain ob mind as well as de pain ob de body. Can you keep dose yelling wretches at bay, Jack?"

"Yes, they are afraid to show themselves, and, fortunately, the camp-fire is giving a good light."

"Well, mind dey don't light a second fire, Jack, 'cos we don't want anything like dat. I dunno what sort ob fuss Jonathan would make ober getting burnt alive, seeing de fuss he makes ober a pin-prick from an unpoisoned arrow."

"I tell you that it was poisoned. My blood is all on fire!"

"Neber knew dat a liquid could catch fire, unless it happens to be petrol, or one ob dose inflammable tings. I suppose you ain't been drinking paraffin?"

"You are a heartless wretch!"

Now, Pete was nothing of the sort. It is true he is rather rough-and-ready, but in case of real illness he is a most devoted nurse, and will go through any amount of trouble without a murmur. In the present case he knew perfectly well that there was nothing much the matter with Jonathan; at least, so far there was not, because even if the arrow had been poisoned, it was very certain that Jonathan would not have felt the effects so soon.

"Look here, Pete!" exclaimed Sam, who guessed what sort of patient they would have to attend to. "You had better look after the wounded man, while Jack and I defend the place."

"Eh?"

"I do not contemplate that the savages will be able to take the place by storm. You see, we should be able to keep them at bay with our rifles and revolvers."

"I know all 'bout dat, Sammy, but I'm tinkin ob de job you are landing me wid. I ain't at all sure dat I wouldn't rader go out and fight de savages. What's dat you want, old hoss?"

"Make me some gruel, and put some spirit in it!" groaned Jonathan, who was now lying on his berth.

"All right, old hoss!" growled Pete. "Don't you tink you had better go to sleep, and hab your gruel in de morning?"

"No, no! Make it at once, and put plenty of spirit in it. It is the only thing for a wound by a poisoned arrow. Port wine is better than brandy, if you take a lot of it, but we have no wine here."

"Nunno, but we hab some whining!" growled Pete. "How do you make gruel, Jack?"

"Why, you— thees one of de demons, Sam!"

"You don't make it wid savages, do you, Jack?"

"No, you—er—the way to make gruel—just tell him the way, Sam."

"You stir some flour into some milk, and boil it, and then you flavour it with—with what the patient desires, and let it cool a little."

"I don't suppose you pour it down de patient's froat while it is boiling, Sammy, and my impression 'bout you and Jack is dat you don't know much more 'bout making gruel dan I do, and dat ain't so mighty much. Still, I will see if I can get de man to take a substitute. Look here, old hoss," exclaimed Pete, approaching his patient, "don't you tink some fried bacon would be sort ob more comforting dan gruel?"

"Idiot! I am far too ill to take anything like that. Make

the gruel at once, and give me a little weak brandy-and-water till it is ready. I am sinking fast, and must have something to keep up my strength."

"Should say I had better send Sammy to shoot anoder rhinoceros!" growled Pete. "I ain't got any milk, 'scept condensed milk; still, I 'spect dat will do."

Pete mixed a little brandy-and-water, and gave it to Jonathan, who sipped it, and said it was not nearly strong enough.

"I'm inclined to advise bacon, nicely fried, for a case like yours," observed Pete.

"I tell you I won't have it!" snarled Jonathan. "It would be the death of me!"

"Still, old hoss, if you'm dying, you may as well die happy, and I'm inclined to tink you won't do dat on de gruel I make."

"It is the only thing I can take. Are you too lazy to make it for a dying man?"

"Nunno! I don't mind making it; weder you mind taking it is anoder matter. Still, we will hab a try."

Pete slopped a tin of condensed milk into a saucepan, then he shoveled in a handful of flour, and stirred it up.

"Do you like your gruel thick, old hoss?" inquired Pete.

"Not too thick. Do make haste! I am sinking fast!"

"He's most bound to call dis too thick!" observed Pete, pouring in a quantity of water. "I wonder if he minds it lumpy?"

Pete had got some of the lumps about the size of walnuts, the others were not much larger than peas. His idea was that if he boiled the fearful stuff long enough, the lumps would boil soft, and Jonathan would not notice them.

In doing this he burnt the gruel badly, while the lumps appeared to harden instead of soften.

"Now for de brandy, old hoss!" exclaimed Pete, taking the bottle off the table; but as he commenced to pour some in Sam called to him.

"What's de matter, Sammy?" inquired Pete, turning, and pouring the brandy all over the top of the hot stove, while some of it got through on to the lamp beneath.

In an instant flames shot up, and as they licked round Pete's hand, he uttered a yell, and dropped the bottle of brandy on the top of the stove.

The bottle was smashed to pieces, and a vast sheet of flame shot up.

"Hellup!" cried Pete. "Send for de fire engine, someone!"

"What are you doing?" cried Sam.

"I'm making gruel, Sammy."

"I reckon that's a funny way to make gruel. It looks to me more as though you were trying to make snapdragon. You will set the show on fire."

"You mad villain!" yelled Jonathan, leaping from his berth in a manner that showed his wound could not have been very serious. "What do you mean by this?"

"Now, look here, old hoss!" exclaimed Pete. "You ain't got de right to get up like dat. How do you suppose dat we are going to cure your leg if you won't allow it to hab proper rest?"

"Do you expect me to lie in this berth while you burn me to death, you silly scoundrel?"

"Nunno; but I don't tink dere's much fear ob de place catching on fire," said Pete, watching the flames with a calmness that was most exasperating to Jonathan.

"You careless ruffian!" he howled. "Do you understand that this fire may mean death to us?"

"Well, I dunno dat I would stop long enough for it to burn me to death," observed Pete. "I tink if it got much hotter dan it is now, I should go to anoder place."

"Fury! If one of us left this caravan we should be instantly slaughtered by the savages!"

"In dat case, Jonathan, my dear old hoss, we will hope for de best. De fire seems to be dying down wid, what you might call, an intoxicating smell, and I hab de feeling dat your gruel will be nicely cooked by dis time. Dere, what did I tell you? De fire is as safe as de Bank ob England. In cases like dis all you hab got to do is to keep calm, and hope for de best. Now, you hop back to bed again, and wait dere till your leg gets well. When I undertake de care ob a patient, I neber allow him to exert himself in any way, and alldough you ain't much good in de world, I 'spect you want to lib a little longer.

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ANSWERS

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DELICIOUS TUCK HAMPERS FOR READERS OF THE "BOYS' FRIEND" PRICE 1^d.

Just you pay a little more attention to de savages, Sammy, and a little less to de fire, and de same remarks apply to you, Jack."

"Well, you see, we are interested parties to that fire," laughed Jack. "The savages are keeping out of harm's way. They find Sam's aim far too accurate to be pleasant, and—"

Pete's awful howl drowned Jack's words.

Pete had picked up the saucepan of gruel, and he had scarcely done so, when he noticed that the handle was nearly red-hot. Uttering that wild howl, which caused his patient to start violently, Pete hurled the saucepan into the air and went leaping about the caravan, clutching at his hand.

But Pete's howl did not cause Jonathan to start anything like the saucepan did, for it dropped right on top of the patient's head, and the gruel was as hot as it was thick, and that was saying a good deal for its heat.

The pain of Jonathan's leg was as nothing to the pain of his head, and his howls eclipsed the one that Pete had uttered.

"Yurooh! Wahah! I'm burnt!" howled Jonathan.

"Den you'm got de consolation ob knowing dat you are not de only one, old hoss," said Pete. "I'm burnt above a bit. But never mind; dese little accidents will happen in de best regulated families. Golly, golly! I would neber hab believed dat de flames from spirit wood hab been so heating. Still, I'm going to scrape de gruel off de floor, and den you will be able to hab your supper. I say, boys, ain't de atmosphere in dis caravan getting cloudy, and it smells like burnt potatoes!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Jack. "You have burnt the gruel!"

"Den Jonathan will feel rader glad, 'cos I'm mighty certain dat de gruel has burnt him, and it is a case ob retaliation."

"I'd like to tie you to a tree and lash you to death!" hooted Jonathan.

"I reckon you would not like the tying part of the business," observed Sam. "After all, the thing was an accident; and if you hadn't made such a fuss over the little wound in your leg, it would never have happened. You ought to be much obliged to Pete for—"

"Obliged to him, be hanged!" howled Jonathan, who was too exasperated to wait for the end of Sam's speech. "Do you suppose I am obliged to the silly brute for nearly scalding me to death?"

"I reckon not. I don't suppose you feel the slightest gratitude for that, but I was going to say that you ought to feel very grateful to him for nursing you."

"Then I don't. Perdition! I don't see how anyone could feel grateful for such nursing as he has given me. I would rather be nursed by a wild beast. He is the clumsiest brute on the face of the earth. I tell you that I am seriously burnt!"

"Well, dere's no particular danger in a burn, old hoss," said Pete; "specially if it ain't a deep burn. Ob course, dere's a certain amount ob pain attached to dem, but you will soon get accustomed to dat. I hab heard dat if you hold a burn close to de fire it takes away all de pain. Mind, I ain't ober tried it, 'cos when I get a burn I prefer to cure it in a gentler sort ob way; but if you like to shove your head into de oil-stove, we shall soon see if it is correct. Now, are you going to take your gruel, or are you not? 'Cos, although you are a patient, we can't fool about wid you all frough de night. We hab got oder savages to attend to, and we wouldn't like to neglect dem in any way."

Jonathan said he was not going to take his gruel, and he said a lot of other things besides, none of which were at all complimentary to Pete.

That worthy, however, did not mind them in the slightest. He helped Jonathan to hobble to his berth, then seated himself beside him in a camp-chair, and gave him strict injunctions to go to sleep at once.

After that Pete smoked his pipe, and every time Jack or Sam spoke Pete hushed them. At last he began to doze, and then he kept saying "Hush!" whether the comrades were speaking or not. After that he commenced to snore, and the awful row he made was quite sufficient to keep any patient awake, to say nothing of nearly driving him mad. Jonathan stood it for some time, and then he punched Pete in the ribs.

"Wake up, you noisy brute!" he snarled.

"Was I asleep dat time, old hoss?" inquired Pete.

"Of course you were!"

"Well, I don't see how I could be making any noise while I was asleep."

"Then I do. You are pretty noisy when you are awake, but it is nothing to the row you make when you are asleep."

"How's dat? Do I breathe heavily?"

"Breathe he hanged! You snore in the most ghastly, horrid manner I have ever heard."

"Look at dat, now! You ain't de first person who has complained ob dat snore. I rader 'spect dere must be something in it."

"It's too awful to listen to."

"In dat case, old hoss, I would advise you to go to sleep, and not to listen to it."

This was no doubt excellent advice, but it was extremely difficult to take, for Pete had no sooner closed his eyes again than his awful snore burst forth.

Then again, Jack and Sam fired repeatedly through the night, and altogether the unfortunate Jonathan had a very rough time of it. He never closed his eyes in sleep, and what made him more savage was that Pete got an excellent night's rest.

He became quite accustomed to the firing, and he slept and snored until the day dawned.

"Well, my poor misguided old hoss," he exclaimed, gazing at his patient, "hab you had a good night's rest?"

"You silly brute!"

"Well, I am glad to hear dat you hab slept well, 'cos dat's a great ting wid a patient. I will make you some more gruel presently."

"I haven't closed my eyes, you silly brute!"

"Golly! De man has been sleeping wid his eyes open all de time! Yah, yah, yah! You must hab looked funny, Jonathan. Sort ob corpse-like, I should say; but dat don't matter. You'm got a perfect right to sleep wid your eyes open if you like. Now, shall I prepare you some more gruel? 'Cos it ain't de slightest trouble to me, and I know how to make it rader better now."

"No, you won't!" howled Jonathan. "If ever I allow you to make any more gruel for me, may I be shot!"

"Well, you hab been shot already frough de leg. Was dere poison in de arrow?"

"How can I tell you, you silly rascal?"

"Catch hold ob de leg and gib it a good squeeze. If it hurts, you can imagine dat dere is poison in de wound; but if you feel no pain, den you can be pretty sure dat it is all right. Now den, boys, are de savages still dere?"

"I reckon not," answered Sam. "They have not shown themselves since it has been light, which is a lucky thing for them."

"Den you can depend on it dat dey won't show demselves again," said Pete; "and dat being de case, we will hab a mighty good breakfast, and den we will return to Jonathan's home, and see de wonderful new invention dat is to make our fortunes. It seems almost a pity dat we did not meet de man before our fortunes were already made. Still, I dare say we can do wid a few more fortunes frown in. Now for de breakfast!"

Jonathan ate a remarkably good breakfast, in spite of his wound. It is true that he grumbled at the food the whole time, and declared that it was utterly unfit for him, but he consumed it, all the same, and appeared none the worse afterwards.

As soon as it was finished, Pete started the caravan, and now Jonathan commenced to grumble again because of the jolting, but as none of the comrades took any notice of him this did not matter.

By the time they reached Jonathan's domicile, which they did without further mishap, his leg was comparatively well, and it is doubtful if he need have limped like he did for the next few days.

However, he soon forgot his wound in making arrangements for the great scheme that was to enrich the comrades, and make his own fortune.

THE END.

A Grand Long, Complete Story of JACK, SAM, and PETE in Next Friday's issue, entitled:

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