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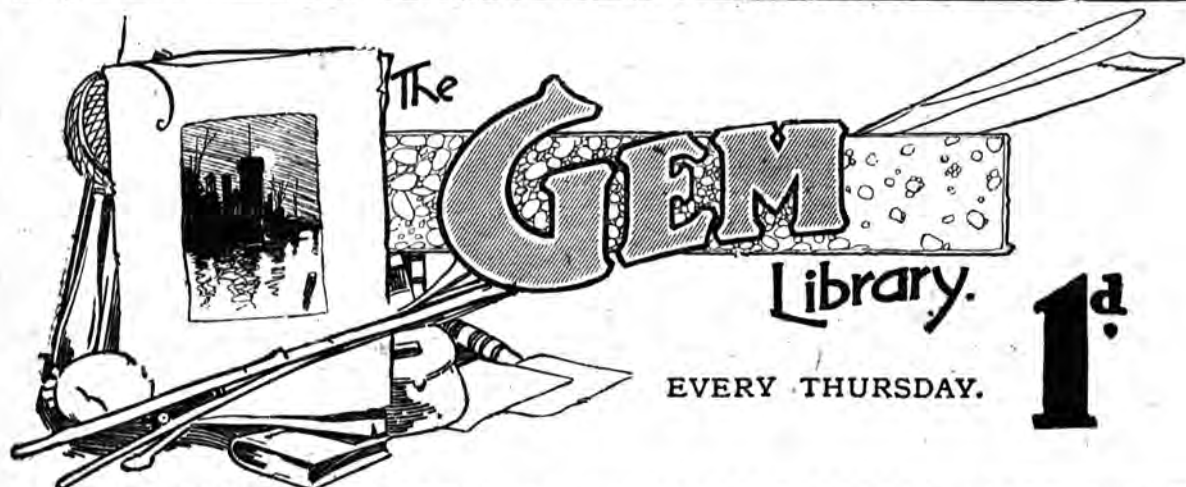
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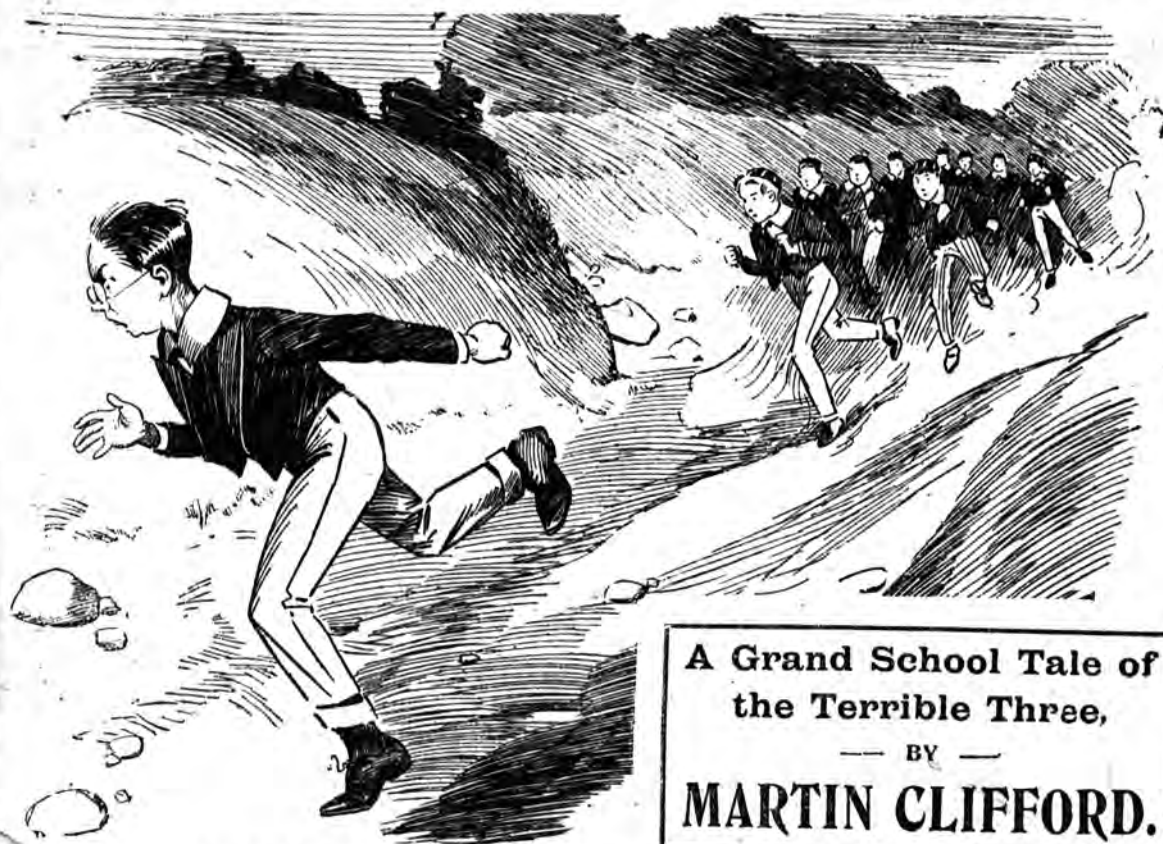



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SKIMPOLE'S NEW IDEA.



A Grand School Tale of
the Terrible Three,

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CHAPTER 1.

Something Like an Idea.

TOM MERRY had been sitting silent for some time. The dusk of the May evening was deepening over St. Jim's, and the gas was lighted in Tom's study in the School House. Manners and Lowther were busy.

Lowther's pen was scratching away at express speed through a German imposition. Manners, the amateur photographer of the Merry Hobby Club, was mending a printing-frame. And so Tom Merry's two chums had not noticed, for some time, the unusual shade of thought upon his sunny brow.

But Lowther's pen ceased at last to travel over the paper, and he looked up.

ANOTHER TALE OF TOM MERRY NEXT THURSDAY

No. 13 (New Series).

"There, that's done!" he said, with a sigh of relief. "Fifty beastly lines from beastly Schiller, knocked off in twenty beastly minutes! What do you think of that, kids?"

"Beastly clever!" said Manners.

"What are you doing, kid?" asked Lowther, looking at him.

"Mending the printing-frame you shoved your great hoof on yesterday."

"Well, you shouldn't put your printing-frames on the floor, you know—"

"I didn't! It was Tom Merry knocked it down with his silly elbow."

"Then don't blame me. What are you up to, Tom?" said Lowther, turning round in his chair and looking at the chief of the Terrible Three. "What the dickens are you sitting there looking like a moulting hen for?"

"Eh?" said Tom Merry, coming with a start out of a brown study.

"I say what are you sitting there looking like a moulting hen for?" said Lowther.

Tom Merry laughed.

"I wasn't aware that I was looking like a moulting hen," he replied. "I've been thinking, that's all."

"Well, next time you're going to think, do it in front of a looking-glass," said Lowther, "then you'll be able to work up a more agreeable expression, old chap. Have you been thinking about anything in particular?"

"Yes, rather!"

"Some wheeze up against the New House?" asked Lowther. "I should like to rag old Schneider for giving me that impot., and that isn't possible, so a row with the New House fellows would be the next best thing."

"No rows for me," said Manners, "till I've got this frame mended."

"Oh, I know it's no good speaking to you when you get on to anything connected with your silly photography," grunted Lowther. "What's the game, Tom? Is it a row with the New House rotters, or shall we go along to Study No. 6 and rag Blake and Gussy?"

"Neither!"

"Well, I'm in want of a little exercise," said Lowther looking rather aggrieved. "Why shouldn't we have a row with Figgins & Co.?"

"Well, Marmaduke has just gone away, for a time," said Tom Merry. "Figgins & Co. have gone to see him off at the station. We can leave House rows over for a day or two."

"Yes; but—"

"Besides, I've got something better on."

"Well, get it off your chest!"

"I've been thinking, and I've got a really ripping wheeze," said Tom Merry, with a sparkle in his eyes. "It's a thing we can all join in—ourselves, Study No. 6, and Figgins & Co.—everybody, in fact. We can put rows off for a bit. I dare say you know there was an election the other day—I forget where?"

"What on earth has that got to do with us?" said Lowther, staring. "I suppose you're not thinking of setting up as a candidate for Parliament, are you?"

"Yes."

"Eh?"

"Yes, I am. Not the Parliament that meets at Westminster, but a much more up-to-date one—St. Jim's Parliament!" said Tom Merry.

"Eh?"

Manners said "Eh?" this time, as well as Lowther. Both the chums were staring blankly at Tom Merry, as though wondering whether anything had gone wrong with his mental works.

The hero of the Shell smiled serenely.

"You look surprised, my infants!" he remarked. "Oh, no!" said Lowther. "Just wondering whether you were off your rocker, that's all!"

"I've thought out the idea," explained Tom Merry. "I think it's a really ripping one. You've heard of the suburban Parliaments, of course. A lot of chaps meet, in the form of the House of Commons, and speechify and divide, and so on, and elect Ministers of the Crown, and all that."

"I've heard of 'em," said Lowther.

"So have I," said Manners. "I've got a cousin who goes in for that rot."

"It's not rot!" said Tom Merry warmly. "It's jolly good fun!"

"Oh, sorry! I withdraw the word," said Manners gracefully. "If that's your idea, of course I won't call it rot."

Manners put a strong accent on the word "call," as if to imply that he reserved the right to think as he liked about it. Monty Lowther looked reflective.

"I think there's something in it," he said. "We can extend the franchise to all the juniors of both Houses, and the elections will be great fun."

"Well, that's so," admitted Manners. "Chaps can represent the towns they come from, and the majority will form the Government, and the other rotters the Opposition."

"That's it," said Tom Merry, with a nod. "There are more fellows in the School House than in the New House, so there's pretty certain to be a School House Government and a New House Opposition."

"Ha, ha! Good!"

"I don't know," said Manners, shaking his head. "Blake and his gang are certain to set up in opposition to us, and split the School House vote."

Tom Merry's brows wrinkled a little.

"Well, I shouldn't wonder," he remarked. "Blake has a peculiar idea that he's leader of the School House juniors, and until he gets that idea out of his head, we shall never really get him to see reason."

Monty Lowther laughed.

"You won't get the idea out of his head with anything short of a crowbar," he remarked.

"We can go along and talk to them," said Tom Merry.

"On an important occasion like this they may be willing to talk sense. Anyway, before we allow difficulties to block up the way, we ought to see what can be done. If we form the Government we shall put down cheeky juniors with a strong hand."

"Good! Those chaps in the Fourth can never be brought to show a proper respect for the Shell. Chuck that thing into the fire, Manners, and come along!"

"Rats!"

"Oh, come along, kid!" said Tom Merry, rising. "Study No. 6 will be at tea now, and we shall catch them. Nothing like striking the iron while it's hot."

"But I want to use this frame in the morning."

"Lots of time for that," said Tom Merry cheerfully, jerking the frame out of the hand of the amateur photographer, and pitching it upon the bookshelf. "Come along."

"But look here—"

"Follow your leader, kid!"

"Oh, all right!" said Manners, with a grunt. "Get along!"

The Terrible Three left the study. It was less than a minute's walk to Study No. 6, the famous apartment occupied by Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy, Tom Merry's rivals for the leadership of the School House juniors. The door was closed, but the click of cup on saucer and fork on plate showed that the four chums of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's were at home.

Tom Merry knocked at the door.

"Come in, fathead!" sang out the cheery voice of Jack Blake.

The Terrible Three kicked the door open, and marched in. Study No. 6 were sitting round the tea-table, and the room looked very cosy. Blake had just finished carving a ham, getting wafery slices of meat off a bone that looked as if it were too bare for a dog to gnaw with satisfaction. He looked up at the chums of the Shell.

"Hallo, kids! You've come at the wrong time."

"How's that?" asked Tom Merry.

"Out!" replied Blake. "I mean we're out of grub. This ham has seen service, and it's come nobly to the front again, to save us from actual famine. It isn't everybody who could carve a ham like that."

Tom Merry looked critically at the denuded bone.

"You're about right there, Blake," said he. "I don't think we'll ask you for any of that ham. We've had tea, as a matter of fact."

"There's no telling what a skilful carver with a sharp knife may do," said Blake, cocking his eye thoughtfully at the ham. "If you'd like to take tea with us, I'll do my level best with this."

"That's all right; we're not hungry."

"Very well, then. You can have the bone just as it stands, Gussy."

And Blake passed the ham-bone, dish and all, over to D'Arcy. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of the School House, screwed his monocle into his eye, and took a survey of the bare bone with a far from favourable expression.

"Weally, Blake, I thought you were carving for me," he remarked.

"Oh, no, Gussy! I had made up my mind to let you have the bone," said Blake generously. "When supplies are running short, you won't find anything mean about me."

"But weally, Blake—"

"I've carved for Herries and Dig and myself. You have all that is left on the bone. I know you're hungry."

"Yaas, wathah, I certainly am hungwy, but I do not anything' on that bone to satisfy the hungah of a mouse," said Arthur Augustus.

"It's amazing how much you can get off a bone like that

when you try," said Blake encouragingly. "There's the knife. We shan't mind if you take the bone up in your fingers and go for it, though."

"I should certainly wese to do anythin' of the sort." "Oh, please yourself, Gussy! Worry it any way you like," said Blake. "When you've finished with it, Herries' bulldog can have a go."

"Hewwies' bulldog can have a go now, Blake," said D'Arcy disdainfully. "I certainly shall not take the trouble to wowwy a bone like that. I wegard you—"

"Pass the butter, Gussy!" said Herries.

"With pleasure, Hewwies. But I say—"

"Salt, Gussy!" said Digby.

"There you are, Dig. But I say, Blake—"

"Won't you sit down, kids?" said Blake, turning towards the Terrible Three, who were grinning at the scene, and the indignation of Arthur Augustus. "There's only one chair, and that's rather rocky, but there's a whole floor, and it's quite at your service."

"Quite!" said Digby. "There's the window-sill, too, and the coal-locker."

"Oh, never mind!" said Tom Merry, with a rather distrustful look at the spare chair. It had been made by Blake himself, who had taken up carpentry as a hobby, and to Tom Merry's knowledge it had broken down on more than one occasion. "We're not tired. We'll stand."

"Please yourselves, dear boys. You don't mind us going on with our tea, do you?"

"Oh, not at all!"

"Certainly not," said Lowther. "I've paid for admission, in my time, to see the animals feed at the Zoo, and I'm not likely to want to miss a show of the same kind gratis."

Blake rose to his feet.

"There's a door and a window to this study," he remarked. "Which do you prefer as a mode of exit, Lowther?"

"Oh, pax!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "We haven't come here to row. Pax!"

"That's all very well—"

"Of course it is. Go on with your tea, and if Lowther makes any more jokes we'll scrag him. They're rather rotten, anyway!"

"Are they?" exclaimed Monty Lowther. "I say—"

"Cheese it, and let your uncle speak!" said Tom Merry severely. "We've come here to tell you kids—"

"Who are you calling kids?"

"To tell you young gentlemen of the Fourth Form about a new wheeze."

Blake gave an expressive sniff.

"Hum! We're beginning to know your wheezes, Tom Merry. Is it anything up against the New House?"

"Not this time."

"Something up against the Grammar School, I suppose? We shall have to look into it very carefully before we follow your lead in that direction, my pippin. We know you!"

"The last wheeze up against the Grammar School came off rippingly," said Digby. "Let's give Tom Merry his due, Blake. He isn't a duffer always."

"No; there are lucid intervals," admitted Blake.

"But what's the idea?" asked Herries.

"It's not up against the Grammar School," explained Tom Merry. "It's not up against anybody, as a matter of fact, though of course, it will bring a certain amount of kudos to the School House."

"A certain amount of what?"

"Kudos."

"What's that? Something to eat?"

"No, ass! It's fame, glory, credit—"

"Oh, I see! Why can't you talk in English, Tom Merry?"

"I suppose I ought to here, among you youngsters," said Tom Merry witheringly. "Well, then, my idea will make the School House go ahead; but to effect that, of course, it will be necessary for all School House fellows to stand together and rally round the old flag—"

"What old flag—"

"Ass—"

"Look here," said Herries. "I'm not going to be called an ass! If you start that again you'll go out of this study on your neck."

"Yaas, wathah! I quite agree with Hewwies in wefusin' to be chawactewised as an ass. It is an infwaction of his dig."

"Well, don't be asinine, then," said Tom Merry. "I was speaking metaphorically—"

"Why don't you talk sense instead?"

"Of course, metaphors are wasted on the intellect of the Fourth Form," said Tom Merry. "Never mind, I'll try to explain the matter to you in words of two syllables—"

"Oh, cheese it," said Blake, "and go ahead!"

"How can he cheese it and go ahead at the same time?" Monty Lowther wanted to know.

"Dry up! Go on, Tom Merry, and don't take the rest of the evening about it!"

"Yaas, wathah! Dwy up, Lowthah, and pway don't start workin' off wotten jokes on a long-suffewin' study."

"You see," said Tom Merry. "There has lately been a change of Prime Minister—"

"What on earth has that got to do with us?"

"It is probable that it will lead to a general election—"

"Suppose it does?"

"Well, as elections are in the air, it's time St. Jim's came to the front in that line. We are thinking of having a St. Jim's Parliament—"

"My only hat!"

"What do you think of the idea? Same kind of parliament as they have at Westminster, you know, only with improvements."

"Good wheeze!" exclaimed Blake heartily. "I've seen something of that sort of thing at home on the holidays, and there's heaps of fun in it."

"Then you cads—I mean kids—are willing to come into the thing?"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "I wegard the ideah as wippin'!"

"Certainly," said Blake, "we'll join you—rather! We elect Ministers of the Crown, and so forth, and make laws binding on the electors?"

"That's the idea!"

"You want me to be Prime Minister—"

"Quite a mistake. I had booked that for myself."

"Oh, don't be an ass, you know—"

"Anyway, it depends upon the vote of the House," said Tom Merry.

"What House—the School House?"

"No, duffer; the House of Commons of St. Jim's!"

"Ah, I see! Well, that's all right!"

"Only the School House will have to stand together and rally round the old flag," said Tom Merry, with a sniff in the direction of Herries. "The New House bounders are certain to come into the game, and we don't want to be divided among ourselves. The School House ought to form the Government, and the New House the Opposition."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Something in that," admitted Blake. "So long as you chaps are reasonable, I don't see why we shouldn't work together first-rate."

"That's what I was thinking. The Fourth Form ought naturally to treat the Shell with a proper respect—"

"Rats! Catch anybody respecting you Shell-fish!"

"If you are going to raise difficulties at the start—"

"I'm not. It's you who are raising difficulties by talking mere piffle," said Blake. "You are a new boy at St. Jim's—"

"I'm a what?" exclaimed Tom Merry indignantly.

"What are you talking about?"

"You're a new boy practically," said Blake obstinately.

"Anyway, I was here before you, and naturally I take precedence, and so does the Fourth Form. The Shell doesn't amount to much. We tolerate you bounders—"

"Yaas, that is twee. We tolerate you boundahs—"

"Look here," exclaimed Manners wrathfully. "If you kids don't talk sense—"

"You are intewwuptin' me, Mannahs!"

"Oh, cheese it!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "No good rowing at the beginning of a really good wheeze. Are you all ready to join in the idea?"

"Oh, yes, as far as that goes."

"Then I'll go over and see Figgins about it," said Tom Merry. "Come on, kids! We'll get Figgins & Co. to come into the thing, and then issue election writs—"

"My hat! That will be going strong."

"May as well do the thing in style. We ought to call a general meeting of the electors of St. Jim's first, though," said Tom Merry thoughtfully. "Perhaps an election poster up in the hall would be a good wheeze. It would attract attention."

"It would, and more attention than you might like, if the House master cut up rusty," said Jack Blake.

"You have to run risks when you go in for elections—"

"Well, get off and tell Figgins. I expect he's back from the station by this time. We'll travel along to the common-room and spread the news, and get the fellows ready for the meeting. We must have plenty of School House chaps there, or the New House will try to run matters on their own!"

"Right you are, Blake!"

And the Terrible Three quitted the study to go in quest of the rival firm at St. Jim's; and they spotted Figgins & Co. just coming in at the gate in the dusk of the May evening.

CHAPTER 2.

Figgins & Co. Cheer Themselves Up.

FIGGINS & Co. were only three again for the time. Figgins, long-limbed and muscular, the crack bowler and fieldsman of the junior eleven, Fatty Wynn, plump and cheery, and Kerr, the thoughtful and canny Scot, were the three ancient members of the Co. The latest addition to their number, Marmaduke Smythe, had gone away with his "pater" for a run abroad, and Figgins & Co. had just seen him off home at Rycombe Station.

There was a slight shade on the faces of the Co. as they came in at the gates. Marmaduke had had his faults, but they had liked him well, and they missed him.

"He was a decent sort," said Figgins. "We had practically cut all the nonsense out of him, and he was a good chum. I wish he hadn't gone!"

"So do I," assented Kerr. "He'll be back in a few weeks, though. What are you thinking about, Fatty?"

Fatty Wynn came out of a brown study.

"I was thinking it's a pity we didn't have more notice about Marmaduke going," he said slowly. "We might have got up some big feed to give him a send-off."

Figgins chuckled. "Never mind; you shall welcome him with a stunning feed, Fatty, when he comes back. We'll save up our ha'pennies for that purpose."

Fatty Wynn brightened up.

"Well, that's a jolly good idea, Figgy, and it's thoughtful of you."

"Here's Tom Merry," went on Figgins, as the hero of the Shell approached. "I rather think a House row would be the thing now, to cheer us up after seeing Marmaduke off. Shall we collar that bounder?"

"Good wheeze!" exclaimed Kerr. "Let's frog's-march him round the quad. We want cheering up, Figgy!"

"Come on!"

"I say, you chaps!" said Tom Merry, approaching unsuspectingly. "I want to speak to you on a most important matter. I was just going up to your House. Manners and Lowther are gone there to look for you. Here, I say! What are you up to?"

"Collar him!" shouted Figgins.

Before Tom Merry could dodge, Figgins and Kerr had seized him, and the next moment the plump arms of Fatty Wynn were round his neck.

"Here, I say! Hold on!"

"We are holding on!" chuckled Figgins. "Bowl him over—"

"But I—"

Over went Tom Merry, and Figgins collared his shoulders, while Kerr and Fatty Wynn took a leg each in a powerful grip.

Tom Merry struggled furiously.

"You New House rotters! I—"

"Bring him along!"

"I tell you I want—"

"You want to be yanked round the quad—"

"I don't! I—"

"Can't let you off," said Figgins, with a shake of the head. "We have just seen Marmy off at the station, and we want cheering up. Yank him along!"

And Tom Merry was yanked along.

He struggled in vain; three strong pairs of arms were too much for him; and each time he wriggled he was bumped upon the ground, so that he soon gave it up.

"We'll take him to the School House and chuck him into the hall," said Figgins. "Come along! It's kind of us to take you home, Tom Merry!"

"You howling rotters—"

"Ha, ha! Come on!"

"Rescue!" bawled Tom Merry. "Manners, Lowther! School House, rescue!"

Manners and Lowther looked out from the porch of the New House, whither they had gone to look for Figgins. The instant they saw the plight of their chief they dashed like the wind to the rescue—so quickly, in fact, that before Figgins & Co. saw them coming, they were on the spot.

They dashed right into the New House Co. and knocked them right and left. Tom Merry was dropped upon the ground, and Figgins rolled over him, and then Fatty Wynn and Kerr were added to the heap. Tom Merry gasped and squirmed under the weight of the New House trio.

"Ow—ow—ow! Gerrup! I'm suffocating!"

Manners dragged Figgins off, and Lowther did the same for Fatty Wynn. Tom Merry jerked Kerr away and staggered to his feet.

"Sock it to 'em!" shouted Lowther excitedly. "Down with the New House!"

"Hold on, Monty!"

"We're going to wipe up the ground with them!"

"No, I tell you! Stand back, Figgins! Don't be an ass, Manners. It's pax!"

"Looks like it, doesn't it?"

"Well," said Figgins, grinning, "if it's pax I don't mind. You look rather rumped, Tom Merry, but we had to do something to cheer ourselves up, you know, after seeing Marmy off!"

"Well," gasped Tom Merry, "I'd like you to cheer yourselves up some other way next time you're downhearted. I was coming to speak to you in a friendly manner—"

"Well, we couldn't guess that, could we?" said Figgins. "But I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll march you back in the same way to the spot where we picked you up."

"Willingly!" said Kerr.

Tom Merry laughed. He did not accept the generous offer.

"Oh, cheese it! I overlook your fat-headed idiocy!"

"Do you want some more?"

"Rats! I was coming to speak to you, to propose to you—"

"Oh, dear! You must ask mamma."

"Don't be an ass, Figgy—I mean, a bigger ass than you were born!"

"He can't help it," said Lowther. "He grows, you know. Naturally, he gets a bigger ass every day."

"We've got a new wheeze on, Figgy," said Tom Merry hastily, before Figgins could reply to Lowther's remark.

"It's a really ripping, first-rate wheeze."

"I've heard that before," said Figgins. "Still, we want amusing now, and we're willing to look into the thing. What is it?"

"We're going to have a general election—"

"Eh?"

"And hold a St. Jim's Parliament—"

"My hat!"

"And we want you to join in. It will be ripping fun. There will be a Government and an Opposition. Of course, we shall be the Government!"

"Of course you won't!"

"It will depend upon the voting," said Tom Merry practically. "What do you think of the idea?"

"Well, I dare say we can knock it into shape," said Figgins, scratching his head thoughtfully. "We elect Ministers of the Crown, and all that, I suppose?"

"Yes; but—"

"You want me to be Prime Minister?"

Tom Merry laughed. It was Blake's question over again.

"Well, no; but that will depend," he said diplomatically.

"We shall have to work things out as we go along, and be guided by circumstances."

"Well, we'll help you out," said Figgins magnanimously.

"We're always willing to help a lame dog over a stile. It's a go!"

"Will you come to the meeting, then?"

"Yes; rather. Where is it?"

"We haven't decided yet; but—"

"And when is it?"

"We haven't decided that, either. But there's going to be a poster put up in the hall of the School House."

"Rats! If we're in this thing, you School House chaps are not going to run it all on your own!" said Figgins decidedly. "Shove the poster up in the quadrangle, where everybody can see it."

"Well, it's getting dusk."

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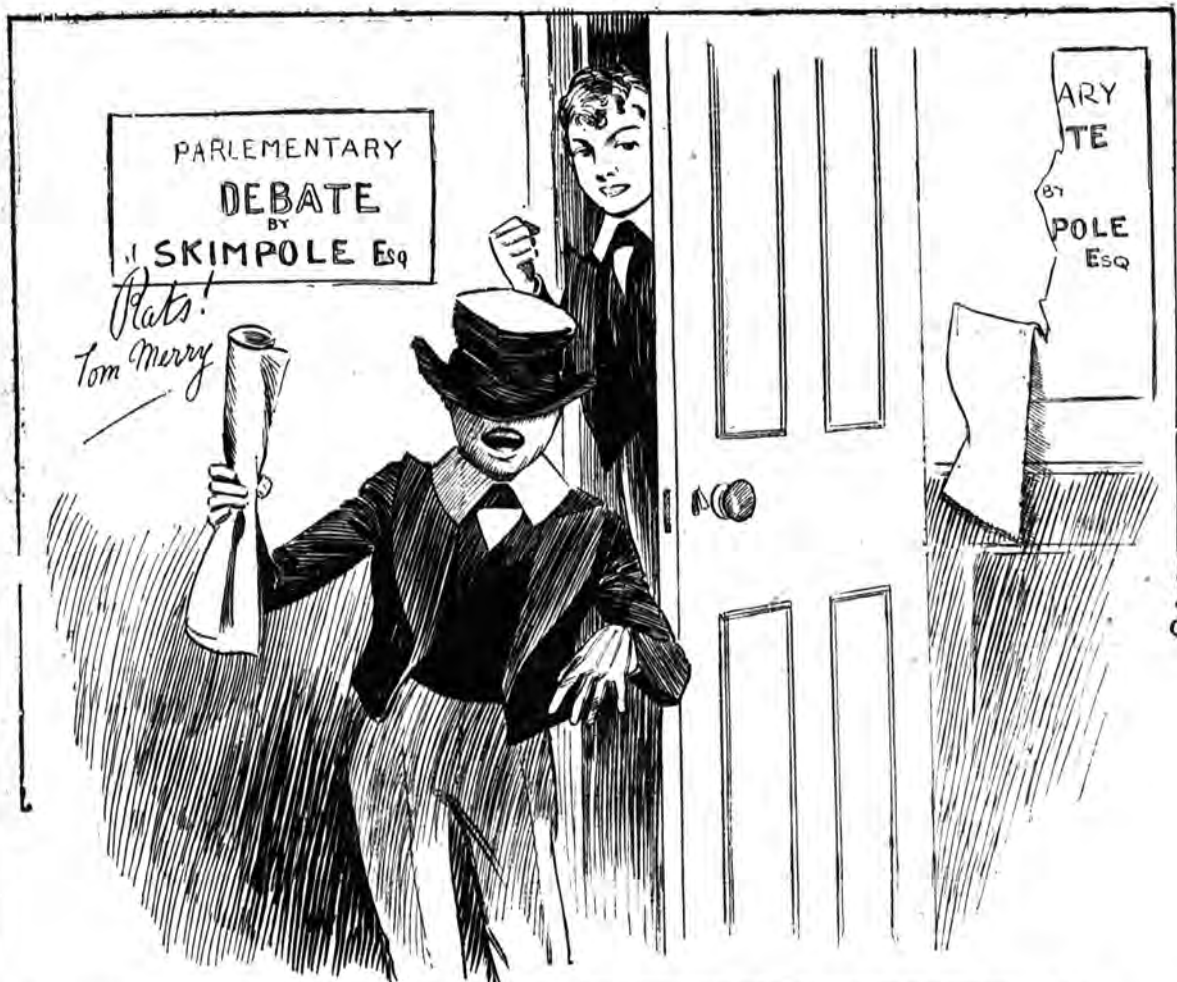
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NEXT
THURSDAY

TOM MERRY AND ALAN WAYWARD

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Tom Merry reached out, and crushed Skimpole's hat over his eyes with one fell swoop of his fist.

"It will be light enough to read a poster for half an hour yet."

"Oh, very well! Anything for a quiet life."

"That's settled, then. We'll go and get a snack, and then come along," said Figgins. "To be quite frank, I think it's a good idea, Merry; and we'll back it up."

"Good!"

The New House trio marched off. Fatty Wynn glanced sideways at his leader.

"I don't know whether you were speaking seriously, Figgins," he remarked; "but I can't say I agree with you."

"Don't you think it's a good wheeze, Fatty?"

"Oh, I wasn't alluding to Tom Merry's idea!"

"What the dickens were you alluding to, then?"

"You said we were going to have a snack—"

"Ha, ha!"

"I don't know what you feel like, but a snack won't do me any good after a long walk in the lane," said Fatty Wynn. "I always get extra hungry in this May weather. I'm going to have a jolly good feed before I turn up at any old meeting!"

And Fatty Wynn kept his word.

CHAPTER 3.

Skimpole's New "Ism."

TOM MERRY dusted himself down as Figgins & Co. walked off. Manners and Lowther watched him, and Monty Lowther sniffed.

"Better have let us wipe up the ground with those rotters, Tom," Lowther remarked. "They'll be getting their ears up if we don't sit on them."

"My dear chap, it's pax."

"Yes; but we could have made it pax after licking them."

"We don't want to start a Parliamentary campaign with an assortment of thick ears and black eyes!" Tom Merry

remarked. "No harm's done. Blessed are the peace-makers! Shut up, and come along!"

The Terrible Three re-entered the School House. A youth with a large head, adorned by tufts of hair and a big pair of spectacles, was standing on the top step. It was Skimpole, the amateur Socialist of St. Jim's. Skimpole was the brainy man of the Shell, and Socialism was merely one of the "isms" he had taken under his wing.

He dug a bony forefinger into Tom Merry's ribs as the latter passed him. Tom Merry swung round with a gasp.

"You ass, Skimpole!"

"I want to speak to you, Merry."

"Well, don't bore me with your beastly bony fingers, then!" said Tom Merry, rubbing his ribs ruefully.

"What's the trouble? If you're on the detective business again, I don't want to know anything about it, so I warn you."

Skimpole shook his head.

"I have given up my detective work for the present," he replied. "My efforts were not in the slightest degree appreciated in the school."

"Ha, ha! You're right there."

"Besides, now that this Parliamentary business is coming on, I shall need all my time for Socialistic work," said Skimpole. "I understand that you are getting up a St. Jim's Parliament, in which matters can be thrashed out the same as in the real place, only unencumbered by ancient, obsolete forms of procedure?"

"Exactly."

"It is a good idea, Merry."

"Thank you. You hear, chaps? Skimmmy says it's a good idea. We may consider it examined and passed, then."

"Don't rot, Tom Merry. I am speaking seriously. Don't you see what a grand opportunity this affords for spreading the light in the school?"

"What light—the gas?"

"Certainly not! The light of Socialism, I mean. You see, with the fellows formed up in a parliament, and the rest of the school admitted to the debates, we shall be able to explain the great truths of Socialism to the whole of St. Jim's."

"But—"

"I think that the seniors ought to be admitted to the debates, and the masters as well, if we could get them to come. We could explain that it would improve their minds—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Then, a few telling speeches on the subject of Socialism would open their eyes to the terrible facts of modern existence—to the fearful state into which society has fallen, when the luxury of the rich is like a superstructure raised upon the depths of misery into which the poor have—"

"My dear ass—"

"Consider the fearful state of the inhabitants of the slum areas, where poor people are packed sixteen to the square inch—I mean the square yard—no; that cannot be correct—I cannot remember the exact figures, but I know they are terrible—packed sixteen to the square something, with nothing to eat but—"

"Rats!"

"Oh, no, Lowther! Cases of poor people eating rats are, fortunately, rare, but their sufferings are terrible."

"So are ours," said Manners. "Sheer off, old chap."

"I wish to touch your hearts—"

"Clear!"

"I myself have long been touched."

"Yes, by Jove, I believe you have—in the head!" said Lowther. "Do you think we are going to run a school parliament for the special purpose of letting you hear yourself spout? Not much!"

"Think of the sufferings of the toiling millions—"

"Think of the sufferings of the fellows if we let you speechify!"

"I regard that remark as heartless, Lowther. Not that I blame you. I have lately become imbued with the great truths of Determinism—"

"My only hat! What words he gets hold of. What is it, Skimpole?"

"It is the—the creed of the Determinists," explained Skimpole lucidly. "You see, nobody is really to blame for anything. You are to blame if you blame anybody. No; not exactly to blame, because nobody's to blame—I mean, if you say a thing is wrong, you are wrong, because nobody is wrong—or, rather, you're not wrong, because there is no such thing as wrong; but you would be wrong if—"

"Ow, leave off! You'll make my head ache!" howled Lowther. "What idiotic book have you been getting all that piffle from?"

"It is not piffle!" said Skimpole indignantly. "It is Determinism, and it is one of the greatest modern—modern—modern—"

"Inventions?"

"No; that's not the word. I forget it exactly, but it doesn't matter. You see, we are all human attributes to heredity and environment—"

"Ow! Four syllables at a time, by George!"

"Heredity and environment explain everything," went on Skimpole, unheeding. "You see, if you are a criminal, Lowther—"

"If I'm a what?" roared Lowther.

"I don't mean that you are a criminal," said Skimpole, backing away hastily. "I said if you were a criminal—"

"You'd better not say anything of the kind, if you don't want me to wipe up the linoleum—with you!" growled Lowther.

"You don't understand argument," said Skimpole disdainfully. "But, to take another case. Suppose Tom Merry was a murderer—"

"What?" roared Tom Merry.

"Of course, I'm only supposing."

"If you suppose like that, Skimpole, I shall jam your head against the wall, so you had better leave off supposing!"

"Well, say, we'll take it that Manners is a thief—"

Manners seized the youthful Determinist by the throat, and backed him violently against the wall.

"Now then, what's that?" he demanded wrathfully.

"Ow! Leggo! I was only putting a case!"

"Do you want me to bang your head on this wall?"

"No, certainly not! Ow!"

"Then you'd better take some other case!" growled Manners.

Skimpole wriggled himself free.

"You don't understand argument," he said witheringly. "But, to take another case. We'll suppose that Gore, for instance, was a criminal. Would it be right to blame Gore? No, my friends; I maintain that it would be wrong. For Gore gets his nature from his ancestors—that's heredity. He gets his training from his surroundings—that's his environ-

ment. Gore is entirely made up of heredity and environment, therefore, Gore himself can't be to blame for being what he is. Every quality he possesses is the effect of a cause. You see, every cause can be traced to an effect—I mean, every effect can be traced to a cause, and nothing happens without something having caused it to happen, as we know by the light of Determinism."

"I think we knew that before," Tom Merry remarked. "I fancy it was known some millions of years ago, though, of course, I don't remember as far back. I fancy that's fearful piffle you've got hold of this time, Skimpole."

"Of all the asses I ever heard of or read about," said Manners thoughtfully, "I think Skimpole takes the Peek Frean! A thing has only got to end with 'ism' for him to take it up and chew on it!"

"Lots of asses like that," Lowther remarked. "I'd advise you to burn the book you got that rot from, Skimpole. You'll be working it out next that it won't be wrong for you to neglect your prep., for instance."

"Certainly not! It would be the result of heredity and environment."

"Then it wouldn't be wrong for the Form master to lick you for it?"

"Oh, yes, that would be wrong!"

"It couldn't be; it would be only the result of some more heredity and environment!" grinned Lowther.

Skimpole scratched his head. He evidently hadn't looked at it in that light.

"I haven't quite thought out that part of it," he admitted.

"You can't think these things out in a moment, you know. But to come back to the parliament. You want me to be Prime Minister, I suppose?"

"Something wrong with your supposing apparatus, if you suppose that!" said Lowther, with a shake of the head.

"We only want you to shut up!"

"That is rather rude, Lowther; but, as a sincere Socialist, I am bound to overlook all personal offences, and labour to improve humanity," said Skimpole. "As a Determinist, too, I cannot blame you. Your rudeness is undoubtedly the effect of a base training amid filthy and sordid surroundings!"

"Eh?"

"Base and sordid training in early youth," went on Skimpole, now fairly mounted upon his hobby-horse. "Base and sordid surroundings, and training at the hands of degenerate and self-indulgent parents, will account for—Ow, ow, ow!"

Bump! bump! went Skimpole's head against the wall, and then he was dropped in a sitting posture on the mat. Then the indignant Lowther marched off, with his chums laughing heartily, and the amateur Socialist-Determinist was left sitting on the mat, staring blankly after them.

CHAPTER 4.

The Poster.

JACK BLAKE came out of his study, followed by his three chums. There was satisfaction in each of the four faces, doubtless the result of successful labours; for Blake carried in his hands the poster destined to call the juniors of St. Jim's to the general meeting of electors.

The poster was daubed up in red and black ink, and certainly looked imposing. As Blake said, a high style of art was not expected in election posters. Certainly anyone who had expected it in this case would have been disappointed. But the lettering would catch the eye; that was the chief thing.

Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther met the chums of Study No. 6 in the passage. Tom Merry glanced at the poster.

"So you've fixed it up?"

"I'm just going to fix it up," said Blake.

Tom Merry laughed.

"I mean, you have written out the thing. Figgins suggests putting it up in the quad, instead of the hall, so that fellows of both Houses can read it."

"That's a good idea!"

"Let's have a look at it before it's posted up," said Lowther anxiously. "It's rather risky leaving a thing of that sort in the hands of Fourth-Formers."

Blake glared.

"Let's have a look at it," said Manners.

The poster remained folded under Blake's arm.

"You can look at it when it's up," he said.

"But we want to see it if it's all right."

"If it isn't all right," said Blake, "it will remain all wrong. This poster is going up as it is, and that's flat!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy. "I wegard Lowther's suggestion as impertinent. The postah will go up just as it is, deah boys! We should distinctly wefuse to altah a single word, you know!"

"That's all very well."

"Of course, it is!" agreed Blake. "Come along!"

And the Fourth-Formers marched out into the quad. Tom Merry followed, laughing, and Maners and Lowther gave in. Blake looked about him when he was in the open air. A big elm at a short distance from the School House entrance seemed to be an appropriate place, and the Fourth-Formers marched over to it. The poster was flattened out on the broad trunk. The poster being written only upon a double sheet of foolscap, was not of great dimensions, and there was plenty of room on the broad trunk to extend it almost flat.

"Tacks!" said Blake laconically.

"You hold the poster," said Digby. "I've got the tacks. Where's the hammer?"

"I've got the hammer, Dig."

"Hand it over!"

"Oh, that's all right! I'll dwive in the tacks, deah boy. We want the thing done properly!"

"You'd better give me the hammer. You'll do some damage with it."

"Oh, wats! Pway pwoduce the tacks, deah boy!"

Digby produced the tacks, and Blake extended the election poster on the trunk of the big tree. D'Arcy took a grip on the hammer.

"Hold the tacks in position, Dig, deah boy, while I hammah them in!" he said.

"No fear!"

"I weally think you oughtn't to be lazy on a gweat occasion like this, Dig! Pway hold the tacks! I might hammah my thumb by mistake!"

"You might hammer mine!" howled Digby.

"Yaaa, I shouldn't wondah! Accidents will happen when you are dwivin' in tacks. If you won't hold them for me, pway hand them ovah, and I will do my best, at the wisk of hammahin' my beastly thumb!"

"Here you are!"

"Thank you! Now—What's that?"

D'Arcy swung back the hammer. "That" was a howl from Herries as it clumped on the side of his head. Herries danced, clapping his head, and D'Arcy turned round and looked at him in surprise.

"Bai Jove, Hewwies, old chap, what are you dancin' like that for? This isn't a time to twy a new step, you know!"

"You confounded ass, you've bumped your confounded hammer on my confounded head!" roared Herries.

"I am vewy sowwy! I thought I felt a jar," said D'Arcy. "Pway don't put your head in the way of my hammah again, Hewwies, old chap!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Tom Merry. "He's not likely to. Keep out of the way of that hammer, kids! Gussy is dangerous at close quarters."

"I am weally not dangerous at close quartahs, unless you are clumsy, and get in the way of the hammah," said Arthur Augustus. "I have been called a lazy boundah, because I don't like doin' wuff work, and I am determined to show you that when it comes to usin' a hammah I can keep my end up with anybody. Have you got that postah all wight, Blake?"

"Yes. Don't keep me waiting all night."

"Certainly not, deah boy. I have othah mattahs to attend to afteh this. Digby, do you weally wefuse to hold the tacks while I dwive them in?"

"Yes, rather!" said Digby, with emphasis.

"Vewy well. I am just goin' to begin, Blake. Pway don't show those signs of beastly impatience; it is bad form, and you may put me off my stwoke."

"Buck up, ass!"

"I wefuse to be called an ass."

"Are you going to use that hammer, or are you not?" roared Blake.

"I am certainly going to use it. I could not dwive in the tacks without it. I wegard that as a wathah widiculous question, Blake."

"Ha, ha, ha!" shouted the Terrible Three.

"Pway don't make that feahful noise, you boundahs! You may put me off my stwoke, and then I may bwain Blake by mistake."

"My—my hat, I'll—"

"I am just goin' to begin, Blake. Here goes, deah boy!"

Arthur Augustus held a tack upon the poster, and hammered at it. He gave his thumb a smart tap, and uttered a yelp. But he was not to be beaten. He tapped the tack lightly to hold it, and then swung back the hammer for a heavy stroke to drive it right in. Blake gave a fendish yell as the hammer clumped on the side of his head.

D'Arcy jumped.

"Blake, you quite startled me! Ow—ow!"

Blake had dropped the poster, and seized the swell of the School House. He sat D'Arcy down in the quadrangle, and jerked the hammer away. Then he planted his boot upon the fancy waistcoat of Arthur Augustus, and wiped it there.

"There, you howling ass!" he gasped, rubbing his head. "I'll teach you to clump me on the napper with a hammer!"

"Ow! You howwid wottah! You have wuined my waistcoat!" wailed Arthur Augustus.

Blake grinned.

Arthur Augustus staggered to his feet. He eyed the waistcoat in dismay; there were very plain traces of Blake's boot there.

"Blake, I no longah wegard you as a fwriend—"

"Oh, go and eat coke!"

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort. I am sowwy to have to bwreak an old fwriendship, but before this matter pwceeds any furthah I am goin' to give you a feahful thwashin'!"

"Sheer off!"

"Certainly not; I am goin'—"

Blake made a sign to Herries and Digby. They seized Gussy one by either arm, and ran him off the scene, vigorously but vainly protesting.

Blake rubbed the bump on his head.

"Lend me the hammer," said Lowther, "I'll shove the thing up for you."

Blake sniffed.

"I can manage it all right, Lowther."

"But—"

"Rats!"

Blake put up the poster again, and drove in the tacks to keep it in position. A crowd was already gathering round the tree. In the failing light of the May evening the glaring black and red of the election poster could be easily read.

"Hallo," said Gore, of the Shell, "what sort of rot is this?"

"Oh, some more piffle of Tom Merry's," said Mellish. "Hallo, I didn't see you there, Tom Merry. I say, this is a jolly good idea of yours about a St. Jim's Parliament."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Well, you ought to be a quick-change artist, Mellish!" was all he said.

"Let's read the notice," said Jimson. "Get your fat cocoanut out of the way, French; I can't see through wood."

"Order, there!" said Blake. "You can all read it without shoving."

"Order, order!" said Lowther.

There was not much order among the crowding juniors, but they were all able to read the poster. It ran as follows:

NOTICE!

To the Juniors, Seniors, and Masters of St. Jim's.

It having been proposed, seconded, and adopted, by an influential body of School House juniors, to have and to hold a Parliament at St. Jim's:

"We, the undersigned, do hereby and thusly call a General Meeting of all Fellows of both Houses at St. Jim's, for the purpose of discussing the matter, and arranging the elections.

All are invited, seniors being admitted if they behave themselves, and New House fellows if they wipe their boots and don't talk too much.

The meeting will be held at seven p.m. precisely, *al fresco*, there being no room in the school, at the disposal of the electors, sufficiently large to admit them all.

The place of the meeting is behind the chapel green, and fellows are requested to bring all the illuminations possible, as the moon will not be up till the meeting is over.

Given under our hand and seal, in Study No. 6, in the cock-house at St. Jim's.

(Signed) JACK BLAKE,
ARTHUR DIGBY,
G. HERRIES,
ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY."

"I say, our signatures ought to be there!" exclaimed Manners warmly. "This thing isn't being run by Study No. 6, that I know of."

"The poster was left in our hands to be drawn up," said Blake.

"That's all very well, but you were really given the scribbling to do; we didn't put the whole business in your hands."

"I don't think that poster can be improved upon."

"It wants our signatures at the bottom."

"Well, I suppose there's no objection to that," said Blake reflectively. "You fellows will shove yourselves into everything."

"Why, it's our idea!" exclaimed Tom Merry indignantly. "Oh, don't argue! You can stick your names on if you like."

"I've got an indelible pencil," said Manners. "Here you are!"

Manners scratched his signature under the list already

there, and Tom Merry and Monty Lowther followed suit. They had just finished when Figgins & Co. arrived on the scene.

"Hallo!" said Figgins, reading down the poster. "That's all right, but that reference to the New House will have to be taken out, or there will be a row."

"I'm not taking anything out of my poster," said Blake. "Then we'll jolly soon have your poster down," said Kerr.

"Will you? I'd like to see the New House rotter who could pull my poster down," said Blake, placing himself in an attitude of defence before the notice.

"Well, I'm one!" said Kerr.

"And I'm another!" said Figgins. "What I say is—"

"Oh, come, Blake!" said Tom Merry. "In an address to the whole school, we can't have any House chipping. Have it taken out like a good chap."

"Well, if you put it like that," said Blake, relenting, "I don't mind. Shove your pencil through it, Manners."

The obnoxious reference to the New House was accordingly blue-pencilled.

"Now are you satisfied?" demanded Blake, with an air of martyr-like resignation.

"Not quite," said Figgins. "There's that rot about Study No. 6 being in the cock-house at St. Jim's. It's in the School House, as a matter of fact."

"School House is cock-house—"

"Rats!"

"Look here, Figgins, I've been jolly patient, but—"

"You've been a jolly ass, you mean, but—"

"If you New House rotters are looking for trouble—"

"We're looking for all the trouble you School House wasters can give us."

"Then I'll jolly soon—"

"Oh, shut up!" exclaimed Tom Merry, pushing between the two excited juniors. "Shove in School House instead of cock-house, Blake. House rows are off."

"It seems to me that you've giving in too much to the New House, Tom Merry."

"Oh, cheese all that! Scratch it out."

"I don't see—"

"Scratch it out, I say!"

Blake hesitated, but he finally took the pencil and altered the phrase. Then he gave Figgins an extremely sarcastic look.

"There you are, Figgy. I hope you're satisfied now?"

"One more thing," said Figgins; "I see you've all got your names at the bottom of the notice. Ours are wanted there too."

"Rot! It's a School House idea."

"Figgins is right," said Tom Merry. "The whole school is going in for this thing, and Figgins & Co. are the representatives of the New House."

"Oh, shove the names down!" said Blake. "Shove down every blessed name of every blessed rotter in the blessed school, if you can find room on the blessed paper!"

So the names of Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn were appended to the poster. The crowd round the elm-tree grew thicker, and various comments were passed upon the idea, more or less complimentary to the originators.

At last Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, came out to see what the crowd was gathered for, and way was made for the stalwart Sixth-Former to read the notice.

Kildare read it, and laughed.

"Whose idea is that?" he asked, looking round.

"The suggestion came from Tom Merry," said Blake.

"We've taken it in hand and knocked it into shape, Kildare."

"Well, of all the nerve!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

The captain of St. Jim's laughed again. He seemed to find something very amusing in that important election notice.

"I say, Kildare," said Blake, "we should be glad to have you come along to the meeting, you know. Seniors are welcome."

"If they behave themselves, I see," said Kildare, with a glance at the poster.

Blake coloured.

"Oh, that doesn't refer to you, Kildare! We know you would—would—"

"Behave myself?" said Kildare gravely. "Well, I take that kindly from you, Blake. It is pleasant for the head of the Sixth to know that the Fourth Form has confidence in him. I don't think I shall come along to the meeting, however—unless you make too much row, and then I shall probably come along with a cane. That's a friendly hint."

And Kildare walked away with a smile on his good-tempered face.

CHAPTER 5.

Skimpole is Busy.

"THE School House will have to muster strong for the meeting," said Jack Blake a little later, as he stood in the doorway with his chums. "We can't have Figgins & Co. turning up with the whole family and any of our fellows missing it. Have you seen Skimpole lately?"

"I saw him mooning along the passage a while back," said Digby. "He had a bundle of foolscap under his arm. I think he had just bought it."

"Making a speech, very likely," said Herries. "He's got to come to the meeting, though, as he is. We're not going to have any School House junior staying out."

"Not much!"

"Let's go along to his study and see if he's there. It's getting near seven. We've got to look for Gussy, too."

"Right you are!"

The three Fourth-Formers proceeded to Skimpole's study. Blake opened the door and looked in. No notice was taken of his tap, but that went for nothing, as Skimpole was often too deeply immersed in great thoughts to notice little things like that. Sure enough, there was Skimpole sitting at the table.

He had a pen stuck behind his ear, and paper before him, and an inkpot, and a pile of heavy-looking volumes. Apparently he was engaged in composing a speech, but the thoughts would not come. He was tapping his forehead as if to assist his brain to work—without much success.

The chums of the Fourth stared at him and grinned.

"Mad as a hatter or a poet!" said Blake. "Hallo, Skimmy!"

Skimpole started out of his reverie.

"Is that you, Blake? You startled me! You should not come in so suddenly upon a fellow who is thinking out social problems!"

"Are you thinking out social problems?"

"Yes; it's a question for the St. Jim's Parliament to deal with," explained Skimpole. "I'm writing out the speech, but I'm getting a little bothered with the statistics. I'm trying to work out the exact proportion to the population of the number of children who died of starvation during the last ten years."

Blake shuddered.

"Well, that's a nice, cheerful subject for a speech!" he exclaimed. "If you start working off any statistics of that sort at the meeting, Skimpole, you will go out of that meeting on your neck, so I warn you."

"My word," said Digby, "I should say so! You'll give us all the ghastly creeps, you born duffer!"

"You don't understand," said Skimpole patiently. "It's by opening your eyes to the horror of present conditions that I shall convert you all in triumph to Socialism. It will be a great day for me when the whole of St. Jim's turns Socialist."

"No doubt. But—"

"It's coming," said Skimpole—"I can feel it coming! Of course, there will be a Labour Party in the St. Jim's Parliament?"

"I suppose so," said Blake rather doubtfully.

"A Parliament wouldn't be complete without a Labour Party," said Digby. "We must be up-to-date, you know."

"Exactly!" said Skimpole. "My idea is a Labour Party, and I shall be the chief of it. I shall move revolutionary resolutions, and wake things up generally. An eight hour day for juniors will be one of the first measures."

"Why, you ass, we don't work eight hours a day!"

"Who said we did?"

"Well, we don't want to do anything more than we do now in that line, do we?" howled Blake.

"I really haven't thought that out, Blake. That is a minor point. I know that an eight-hour day for miners has received the support and approval of all the intelligent classes of the community, and so an eight-hour day for juniors is bound to be desirable."

"Skimmy, old chap, you are really too funny to live!"

"I cannot see anything humorous in that. There are other measures of reform I intend to bring in. The nationalisation of the cricket-ground is one of the most important. The seniors have a far better ground than the juniors. This is evidently unjust."

"We shall all be seniors some day."

"That is nothing to do with it."

"But we shall all have our turn."

"That's not the point. Our duty is to correct present injustice. The ground should be thrown open to the whole school, and used in common."

"Why only the school?" asked Dig. "Why not Rylecombe, and the whole country?"

Skimpole scratched his head.

"Well, yes, why not?" he exclaimed.

ANSWERS

NEXT
THURSDAY:

TOM MERRY AND ALAN WAYWARD.

Order in
Advance.

"Well, you've got the courage of your convictions, anyway," grinned Blake. "Perhaps it's because you don't play cricket, though. Any more social reforms?"

"Yes, certainly! When I am leader of the Labour-Socialist party at St. Jim's, I shall bring in reforms every few minutes. There are the prefects, for example, who are appointed by the Head from the Sixth Form."

"They always have been."

"That is beside the point. We are going to pass a law permitting the Shell to furnish a certain number of prefects, and when the whole of St. Jim's backs up the demand, Dr. Holmes will hardly be able to resist."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Skimpole frowned.

"I really do not see what you are laughing at, Blake!"

"Look in the looking-glass, then," grinned Blake. "Come on, kids; let's go and see if Tom Merry's ready!"

"Don't be late for the meeting, Skimmy," said Dig. "It's at seven, you know; and it only wants a quarter of an hour now."

"Oh, very good, Digby!"

"If you don't turn up you will be jolly well ragged. The School House has got to muster strong to keep the New House rotters out of it."

"Right-ho!" said Herries. "If you forget to come, I shall come and yank you out, so remember that, if you forget."

And the chums of Study No. 6 quitted Skimpole's study. The amateur Socialist plunged his pen into the ink and began to write. Blake, Herries, and Digby went on to Tom Merry's study, and found the Terrible Three just finishing their prep.

"Don't be late," said Blake, looking in. "It's a quarter to seven. A lot of the fellows are on the ground already."

"That's all right," said Tom Merry, looking up. "We'll be up on time. We're close on done this rotten prep. See that the fellows all turn up, Blake."

"Rather! Have you seen Gussy?"

"No, not since Dig and Herries marched him off in the quad."

Blake giggled.

"He's gone off on his dignity somewhere," he remarked. "We've got to hunt him up, or he'll cut the meeting. So long!"

And the Fourth-Formers went off in search of the swell of the School House. Tom Merry scratched away with his pen. A sound outside the study door drew his attention a little while later.

"What on earth's that?" he asked. "There's somebody tapping away with a hammer or something in the passage."

"Can't be anybody fastening the door up for a lark?" said Lowther.

"No; it's not at the door."

"Have a look, and punch whoever it is in the eye," said Manners.

Tom Merry laughed, and rose from the table. He opened the study door quietly and looked out into the passage. Skimpole had just finished tacking up a notice on the wall.

"What on earth are you up to, Skimpole?" exclaimed Tom Merry, in amazement.

Skimpole glanced at him.

"Oh, just a little notice to the Shell, Merry! It's about a Parliamentary debate I'm going to hold after this meeting."

"The dickens you are!"

"Yes; and here, I've got my speech that I'm going to make. If you like, you can take a copy of it for the next number of the 'Weekly.'"

"I don't like."

"Better think twice about it," urged Skimpole. "'Tom Merry's Weekly' has been pretty rotten lately, you know, and a good, stirring report of a speech on Socialism and Determinism will give it a leg-up."

"Declined with thanks."

"But really, Merry—"

"Rats! Clear off! We're busy!"

And Tom Merry retired into the study and slammed the door.

"It's only that ass Skimpole—"

The door reopened, and Skimpole's big head and big spectacles looked in.

"I say, Tom Merry—"

Tom Merry made a jump towards him, and Skimpole disappeared. Tom followed him into the passage, and, with a big blue pencil, scrawled a footnote upon his notice of the forthcoming Parliamentary debate.

"Rats, Tom Merry!"

Then he retired into the study again. The door opened.

"I say, Merry, I really think you shouldn't have—"

"Will you clear out?"

"But you shouldn't have—"

"We've got to get our prep. done before the meeting. You see, we've no time to kill you. Will you travel?"

"Yes, but—"

Tom Merry made a rush to the door in exasperation. Skimpole skipped out and slammed it. Tom Merry dragged the door open. Skimpole was about to erase the inscription Tom had scrawled upon his notice, but Tom did not give him time. He reached out, and crushed the amateur Socialist's hat over his eyes with one fell swoop of his fist.

Skimpole gave a yell.

"Now, get along!" said Tom Merry, with a grin of satisfaction. "As a Socialist and a champion of the submerged millions, you oughtn't to be wearing a silk-hat, so you've only got what you deserve."

"Really, Merry—"

"Oh, seat!"

And Skimpole "scatted." Tom Merry was grinning as he closed the door of the study.

The chums of the Shell finished their prep. and went downstairs. They met Blake, Herries, and Digby in the hall, looking as if they had lost something.

"Hallo, aren't you coming to the meeting?" asked Tom Merry.

"We've lost Gussy."

"Gussy! What has become of him?"

"That's what I want to know. We haven't seen him since Dig and Herries walked him into the gym. and left him there."

"He's not in Study No. 6."

"No; we've looked there."

"Better advertise for him in the Agony Column of the 'Times,'" said Monty Lowther. "I'll draw up the advertisement for you, if you like. Lost, stolen, or strayed, one of a collection of four monkeys—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" shouted Tom Merry and Manners.

Blake gave them a freezing stare.

"I suppose it was looking into the looking-glass in early youth that gave Lowther the impression that he was a funny man," he remarked. "I don't deny that he's funny to look at, but—"

"Hallo, here's Gussy!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was just entering the School House. The juniors made a rush for him. The swell of St. Jim's adjusted his eyeglass and gave them a cold stare, and then turned on his heel and walked out again. But the chums of Study No. 6 were not to be rebuffed. They ran after D'Arcy and surrounded him in the quadrangle, and the swell of the School House was forced to halt.

CHAPTER 6.

D'Arcy Makes It Up.

"Gussy—"

Arthur Augustus waved his hand haughtily.

"Pway do not address me, young fellows, I have no desire to hold any furthah converse with you. I no longah wegard you as fwends."

"My dear ass—"

"I wufuse to be chawactewised as an ass. I wegard you as a set of wuff boundahs. It has always been my desire to keep my circle of fwends select, not to say swaggah. I wufuse to continue the acquaintance of such beastly boundahs."

"Oh, Gussy, Gussy, don't be so severe with your uncle!"

"Pway don't wot, Blake! I have given the subject a gweat deal of careful thought, and I have come to the conclusion that I can no longah wegard you as fwends."

"Too bad," said Blake, winking at Tom Merry; "and we were thinking Gussy would make such a ripping candidate for St. Jim's Parliament."

Arthur Augustus started.

"Eh, what's that, Blake?"

"Oh, it's too late now, of course, as you no longer regard us as fwends, but really you would have made a good member for Colney Hatch—I mean for Study No. 6."

"Same thing," said Monty Lowther.

Blake glared.

"If you don't leave off trying to be funny, Lowther—"

"Yaas, I find Lowthah's wotten jokes wathah twyin', especially now the weathah is gwowin' warmah," said Arthur Augustus. "But were you weally thinkin' of me as membah for Study No. 6, Blake?"

"Could we think of a better representative, Gussy?"

"Well, no, that is quite twue, but you chaps vewy seldom allow me to take the lead in any mattah, in spite of the evident pwopwerty of my doin' so," said Arthur Augustus. "I should be quite willin' to stand for election."

Blake shook his head solemnly.

"Then I'm sorry it's too late."

"But it is not too late, deah boy."

"Oh, yes, it is; we can't possibly back up a candidate who no longer regards us as fwends."

"Oh, of course, I am willing to weceive an apology."

"I've no doubt you are; but how are you going to get one? That's the giddy question," Blake remarked.

"Weally, Blake—"
"Never mind; Dig will make a good candidate."

"Weally, I am quite willin' to waive the apology, and allow mattahs to return to their old footin'," said D'Arcy, after a moment's thought.

"Then we'll think about it," said Blake. "Now let us go to the meeting."

"Certainly, deah boy. As a mattah of fact, I was wathah hasty in comin' to that decision. I know it is my duty to wewesent the study in St. Jim's Parliament, as the most sensible membah of the inhabitants."

"My hat! What must the others be like?" murmured Monty Lowther.

"Pway, did you address me, Lowthah?"

"Oh, no, Gussy."

"I fancy I heard you make an impertinent wemark."

"Let's get to the meeting," said Manners.

"Wait a moment. Is there time before the meetin' for me to give Lowthah a feahful thwashin', Blake?"

"No, there isn't," claimed Blake, seizing D'Arcy by the arm and marchin' him off. "You just come along."

Arthur Augustus wriggled in his chum's muscular grip.

"Pway don't be so beastly wuff, Blake. You are wumplin' the sleeve of my beastly jacket, you know."

"I'll rumple your neck if you don't buck up."

"I wufuse to buck up. It would not be consistent with my dig—"

"Take his other arm. Herries. Help him with your boot, Dig, old chap."

"Certainly!"

"Pway don't be such wuff bwutes!" exclaimed D'Arcy. "Upon second thoughts, I will buck up, deah boys."

"Come on, then!"

The juniors hurried on towards the spot selected for the first meeting of the electors of St. Jim's.

They overtook Figgins & Co. on the way, with a crowd of New House juniors.

"Hallo," said Figgins, with a cheerful grin, "this meeting is catchin' on, kids! The whole of the Lower School is going."

"Good!" said Tom Merry. "The School House will have a majority, I expect."

"Oh, I don't know," said Kerr; "the School House vote will be split."

"I don't think so. Blake will make concessions for the good of the whole of the House."

"Yes, rather!" said Blake genially. "So long as Tom Merry keeps his place, and admits that Study No. 6 is top study in the School House, we sha'n't be inclined to quarrel with anybody."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Catch us admitting anything of the kind!" said Manners. "It's you chaps who have got to show a proper respect for your elders, or else there will be trouble."

"I fancy there will be trouble, then."

"I wathah fancy there will, undah those cires," said D'Arcy. "I am pwetty sure that there will be twouble, deah boys."

"Oh, come on, and leave them to argue it out!" grinned Figgins. "The New House is sticking together well on this business. I dare say we shall be able to carry off the whole thing, if we're careful."

"We'll try!" said Kerr determinedly.

"And if we get the majority, and run things our own way, it will be a triumph, as it's a School House wheeze," chuckled Figgins.

"We should have to give a bumping good feed to celebrate a thing like that," Fatty Wynn remarked.

"Here we are!" exclaimed Figgins. "My hat, there's a crowd, and no mistake! I rather think St. Jim's Parliament will be a success."

There was certainly a large crowd on the ground. Behind the chapel green was a considerable space, not overlooked by the windows of masters or prefects, a great advantage in the eyes of the juniors of St. Jim's. And there it really seemed as though the whole of the Lower School had gathered.

Boys of the School House and the New House had turned up in force, and every Lower Form was fully represented, from the Shell, the top of the Lower School, to the inky little fags of the First and Second Forms.

Even a few of the Fifth had come along out of curiosity to see what the new junior idea was like.

Tom Merry glanced round with an eye of pride.

The election poster had called up a mass meeting seldom equalled in the annals of St. Jim's, save on occasions of football matches and cricket ditto.

It was something to have an idea taken up so thoroughly by the Lower School, New House, and School House alike.

Every fellow there was curious to know exactly what the idea was, and how it would work out, and some of the fellows had brought knotted towels, in case it should end up in a House row, as was quite probable.

There was a shout as Tom Merry arrived upon the scene.

"Here's Tom Merry!"

"And here's Blake!"

"Order!"

The Terrible Three advanced to the rails of the chapel green, and halted there, and a curious crowd immediately surrounded them.

CHAPTER 7.

The Meeting!

TOM MERRY looked over the eager crowd, and cleared his throat with a little preliminary cough, as he had heard the doctor do on occasions of speeches in Hall.

"Gentlemen of the Lower Forms—"

"Hear, hear!" shouted Jimson of the Shell.

"Gentlemen of St. Jim's—"

"Hear, hear!" bawled French.

"Gentlemen—"

"Oh, get on!"

"Order!"

"Pway don't intewwupt, deah boys! Tom Mewwy will go on talkin' all night if you give him a pwetext."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Dry up, Gussy!"

"I wufuse to dwy up. I—"

"Gentlemen of St. Jim's—"

"Hear, hear!"

"You are called together upon an occasion unprecedented in the history of the great and glorious college to which we belong," said Tom Merry.

"My hat!" gasped Figgins. "Say that over again, Tom Merry."

"Where does he get those words from?"

"I saw him looking them out in the dictionary about half an hour ago," said Jimson.

"You didn't!" roared Tom Merry indignantly.

"What were you looking out in that dictionary, then?"

"It was a German dictionary, and—"

"Oh, was it? My mistake. I thought you were looking out long words for a speech. Where did you get those snuffers from?"

"If you want me to speak in words of one syllable—"

"I don't want you to speak at all, as far as I'm concerned."

"Shut up, Jimson!" shouted Figgins.

"I'm not going to shut up for any New House bounder here," replied Jimson, who belonged to the School House.

"Then I'll jolly soon make you."

"I'd like to see you do it."

"Then I'll—"

"Hold on! Stop it, Figgins!"

"I'm going to make him shut up."

"Hold on! We can't have any fighting here!" said Tom Merry. "Jimson, shut up for a little while, there's a good chap! If you must go on talking, go round the chapel and talk there."

"Look here, Tom Merry—"

"You can't be allowed to interrupt the meeting. Gentlemen of St. Jim's—"

"Hear, hear!"

"You are called together—"

"I warned you not to intewwupt, deah boys! Now he's startin' again at the beginnin', and we shall have it all over again," said Arthur Augustus.

"Shut up, Adolphus!"

"I wufuse to do anythin' of the sort! As a mattah of fact, I don't see why Tom Mewwy is makin' a beastly speech at all. I could explain much more concisely. You wequire a fellow of tact and judgment on an occasion like this!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Choke him, somebody!"

"I wufuse to be choked!"

"Gentlemen of the Lower School, you are called together—"

"Look here, Tom Merry, we've had that often enough!" said Figgins. "I'm not the chap to interrupt another chap when a chap is making a speech, but if the chap keeps on repeating himself, it's time a chap interrupted the chap—"

"My hat!" said Lowther. "What a lot of chaps!"

"Don't interrupt me, Lowther!"

"You're interrupting Tom Merry!"

"Because he won't get finished. What I say is—"

"Weally, Figgins, the meetin' isn't intewested in what you

any. It's what I say that they are waitin' with gweat eagerness to hear, deah boy! Gentlemen of St. Jim's—"

"Oh, cheese it!" said Blake. "Tom Merry's too long-winded, and Gussy's an ass! Back me up, you chaps, and I'll ring off a really good speech!"

"Blake, you are intewwuptin' me!"

"Order!" roared Manners. "What we want is a chairman to keep order, and make the silly cuckoos speak in rotation!"

"That's quite wight, Mannahs! I am perfectly willin' to be chairman!"

"You want a chairman who can keep order," said Figgins. "I'm chairman of this meeting, and I can lick any chap who interrupts!"

"You'd better start with me!" roared a score of School House voices.

"I'll start with any one of you, or any two at a time!" retorted Figgins. "If I can't wipe up the ground with any two School House sweeps, why—"

"Order!"

"Don't you yelp at me, Monty Lowther!"

"I'll yelp at any New House rotter I like!"

"I'll jolly soon—"

"That you won't!"

"Weally, deah boys—"

"My word!"

"Oh, shut up!" shouted Tom Merry. "Look here, if this meeting is going to proceed and not turn itself into a free-flight, we've got to elect a chairman, and give him powers to keep order."

"Hear, hear!"

"Now, as the originator of the idea of a St. Jim's Parliament, I think I ought to be chairman."

"Really, Tom Merry," said Skimpole, "I think it is as much my idea as yours, as—"

"Go it, Skimmy!"

"Give us some Socialism!"

"Certainly," said Skimpole, taking the ironical shouts seriously, and dragging a big folded bunch of foolscap out of his pocket; "I am quite willing to enlighten you on the subject of the burning questions of the day! I have made a calculation that if all the children who died of starvation in London alone last year were—"

"Shut up!"

"No, go on!"

"He'll give us the creeps. Gag him!"

"It all the famished orphans—"

"Ow! Shut up!"

Figgins gently flattened Skimpole's already battered hat over his eyes. While the amateur Socialist was struggling to get it off again, amid yells of laughter from a ribald crowd, Tom Merry went on again.

"I propose myself as chairman of the meeting."

"I second," shouted Manners and Lowther together.

"And I third!" exclaimed Blake, rather unexpectedly backing up the chums of the Shell. "Tom Merry for chairman."

"Never!" roared Figgins & Co.

"Hands up for Tom Merry as chairman!" yelled Blake.

A forest of hands went up. The rivals of the School House being at one on this point, the voting was heavily in favour of Tom Merry, and the New House were simply out of it.

"The 'Ayes' have it!" said Blake, looking over the crowd. "Do you ask for a count, Figgy?"

"No," growled Figgins, who knew perfectly well that when the juniors of the larger House were united, they always had the majority.

"Does anybody want a count?"

"Rats! No; Tom Merry is chairman!"

Tom Merry took off his cap, and bowed.

"Many thanks for your kind support, gentlemen! I am perfectly willing to take the position of chairman of this meeting."

"Buck up, then; it will be dark soon!"

"That's all right; we've got some bicycle lamps here!" said Blake. "Tom Merry is chairman, and we're a committee to help him keep order."

"Good!" agreed Figgins.

"Yaa, wathah! I weally insist upon ordah bein' kept, deah boys!"

"There's Gussy starting again!"

"Weally, Fwench—"

"Order!" shouted Tom Merry, waving his hand. "I shall now proceed with my speech."

"No, you won't!" interrupted Blake promptly.

"What do you mean, Blake? Why, you were backing me up for chairman!"

"Chairman keeps order while the speakers speak," said Blake. "You just introduce the speakers, that's all."

"Why, you young ass—"

"I leave it to the meeting," said Blake.

"Hear, hear!" shouted the meeting delightedly.

The juniors were laughing heartily. Tom Merry was fairly caught. But the good humour of the hero of the Shell was unflinching.

"Well, if the meeting upholds Blake—"

"Yaa, wathah!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Then I'll leave my speech till later. I don't care! Which of the speakers speaks first? They're all as rotten as one another, so it really doesn't matter which!"

"I speak first," said Blake, "because—"

"Ahem!" said Figgins. "I speak first, because—"

"I speak first, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, "because—"

"Oh, dry up, all of you!" said Monty Lowther. "It's my place to speak first, because—"

"You'll never agree at that rate," remarked Digby.

"Suppose you take the speechifiers in alphabetical order."

"Good wheeze!" shouted a dozen voices.

The chairman nodded.

"Very well. The speakers will be taken in alphabetical order, gentlemen."

"Then I speak first!" crowed D'Arcy triumphantly.

"You?" grunted Figgins. "You're a D."

"No, deah boy; I'm an A—Arthur Augustus!"

"Christian names don't count," said Blake. "There aren't any A's among the speakers. We shall have to start with B, and that stands for Blake."

"Weally, Blake—"

"That's right!" grinned Digby, who, of course, had thought that out before proposing the alphabetical test; "Blake's first speaker!"

"I don't see it!" said Figgins. "I—"

"Weally, Digby, deah boy—"

"Silence!" shouted the chairman. "Blake speaks first!"

You've brought it on yourselves, so it's no good grumbling!"

"If you allude to me like that, Tom Merry—"

"As chairman, I shall allude to you as I like!"

"As speaker, I shall dot you in the eye if you're not jolly civil!"

"Order!" exclaimed Kerr. "We can't have these School House kids quarrelling with one another like this!"

"Quite so!" said Tom Merry. "Shut up, Blake! I'm surprised at you! Get on with your speech! First, though, don't forget the five-minute rule."

"What five-minute rule?"

"The rule of the Merry Hobby Club—no speech to exceed five minutes."

"Hobby club rules don't apply to an election meeting."

"Yes, they do, if I'm chairman of the election meeting."

"You won't be chairman long if you're not jolly careful."

"Order! Any speaker checking the chairman is thrown out on his neck, and the next man alphabetically takes his turn."

"Jolly good wule!" exclaimed D'Arcy, who was next alphabetically.

"Five minutes is no good to explain a really good idea."

"It's as long as anybody wants to listen to you."

"Rot! I tell you—"

"I put it to the meeting," said Tom Merry, holding up his hand. "Does anybody want to listen to Jack Blake for more than five minutes?"

"No!" came back in a roar from a hundred throats.

"There you are, Blake! That's settled!"

"Oh, all right!" said Blake, with a sniff. "You don't deserve to have a speech from a chap like me at all. As a matter of fact—"

"Of course, we don't!" said Reilly. "We haven't done anything to deserve it that I know of."

"Are you looking for a thick ear, Reilly?"

"Yes, if you can give me one!"

"I'll—"

"One minute gone!" said the chairman, consulting his watch. "You've got four left, Blake!"

"Don't be an ass, Tom Merry! You don't count the time I take in explaining things to that fathead from Belfast!"

"Who are you calling a fathead?" demanded the boy from Belfast, looking warlike.

"I'm calling—"

"Two minutes gone!" said Tom Merry.

"Better get on with the speech, Blake!" chuckled Figgins. Blake looked wrathful, but he thought so, too; and he cleared his throat, and began.

CHAPTER 8.

The Speeches.

"GENTLEMEN of St. Jim's—" "Excuse me a moment!" said Lowther, with an air of great deference. "Is this your own speech, Blake?"

"Of course, it is, fathead!" "You're not repeating Tom Merry's speech by mistake?"

"No, I'm not!" roared Blake. "Oh, sorry! It sounded as if you were." "Gentlemen of St. Jim's," went on Blake, with a red face, amid a bubbling of laughter all round him, "you are called together on an important occasion—"

"Lowther's right!" ejaculated Figgins. "He's repeating Tom Merry's remarks, not that they're worth repeating!"

"Order, Figgins!" "Oh, all right! Wire in, Blake!" "An important occasion," said Blake. "We, the juniors of the School House, have thought of a ripping wheeze. The first rough suggestion came from a boulder you all know, one Merry—"

"Well, I like that!" ejaculated Tom Merry indignantly.

"Well, if you like it, shut up, and don't interrupt!" said Blake. "This idea, gentlemen of St. Jim's, is to hold a school parliament—improved upon the one which I believe you are aware is held at Westminster."

"Yes, I believe we are aware of something of the sort," said Lowther sarcastically.

"It will be called the St. Jim's Parliament," went on Blake. "Votes will be conferred upon all the juniors of St. Jim's, and any candidate nominated by a respectable body of electors will be allowed to stand for election."

"Good!" said Tom Merry.

"The number of the new parliament will be fixed at twenty," said Blake. "That will be a good working number—"

"Who told you so?" demanded Manners.

"I've thought it out—"

"Yes, you'll catch us—"

"Shut up, Manners! Now, as I was saying—"

"Time's up!" said Tom Merry, snapping his watch.

"I'm not finished yet."

"Can't help that. Time's up!"

"I've been interrupted."

"You know the rule; you've had your five minutes. We can't stay out here all night. Time's up, and this is where you slide out."

"Slide out!" roared the crowd, who seemed to have had enough of Blake's eloquence.

Jack Blake glared round him wrathfully, but there was no gainsaying the vox populi, so to speak. He retired with his speech unfinished.

"Now, then," said Tom Merry, "Digby next."

"Pwae excuse me, Tom Mewwy—"

"No time now, Gussy. Stand up, Dig."

"I must weally insist upon bein' heard. I come before my friend Digby as a speakah, and though I am the last fellow in the world to put myself forward in any way, I must weally insist upon my wights bein' recognised."

"Well, you're both D's—"

"D stands for duffer," murmured Monty Lowther. "Quite right; they're both D's."

"We are certainly both D's," said Arthur Augustus. "But the second lettah of my name is A, while the second lettah of Dig's is I. Therefore—"

"Oh, cut it a little shorter!"

"Therefore," repeated D'Arcy, with emphasis, "I take precedence of Dig alphabetically."

"Oh, all right!" said Dig. "Get up and speak, and make it as short as you can."

"I am afraid that I cannot agree to do anythin' of the sort. I wish to move a resolution and submit it to the meetin'—"

"Buck up, then!"

"A resolution to the effect that the five-minute rule shall be temporarily suspended in my favah—"

"Yes, that's likely."

"Impossible!" said the chairman decidedly. "We shall never get through."

"I do not suggest a permanent suspension of that extremely salutawy rule," said D'Arcy. "I think it should be suspended temporarily in my favah—"

"Won't wash! Mind, all this is coming out of your five minutes."

"Nothin' of the sort—"

"Two minutes and a half gone already."

"I pwotest—"

"If you take up the time protesting you won't be able to make a speech," said Tom Merry warningly. "I give you that as a friendly hint."

"I do not wegard your conduct as eithah friendly or respectful, Tom Mewwy. I demand that my resolution be put to the meetin'."

"Very well. The speaker submits that the five-minute rule be temporarily suspended in his favah. Yes or no."

"No!"

The "No" was a roar; and there was not a single "Yes" audible. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy adjusted his eyeglass and surveyed the meeting in surprise.

"Oh, vewy well!" he said. "I weally had about a quartah of an hour to fill up, but I will endeavour to cwam my wemarks into five minutes."

"Only one minute left."

"I do not wegard that as fair, Tom Mewwy. It is not ewicket. I weally have not commenced my speech yet, and I certainly cannot condense my observations into the extremely nawwow space of one minute—"

"Thirty seconds left."

"Gentlemen of St. Jim's, I have only a few wemarks to make—"

"Thank goodness!" said Kerr.

"If that boundah intewupts me again I shall give him a feafhul thwashin'. Gentlemen of the Fourth Form and the Shell, on this auspicious occasion you will be glad to hear me say—"

"Time's up!" exclaimed the chairman.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Time's up! Clear!"

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort. I have not even commenced my speech, and it is impos. for me to cleah without havin' made a few wemarks—"

"Clear out! Time's up, and you're taking up Dig's time. One down, another come on," said Tom Merry. "We can't stay here all night."

"Weally, I pwotest—"

"Go and protest somewhere else, then. Half a minute of your time gone, Digby. I'd advise you to buck up if you're going to speak."

"Buck up!" howled a score of voices.

Time was passing, and the dusk of the May evening was deepening to darkness. Some of the fellows had lighted bicycle-lanterns and slung them on the chapel rails, and these shed a dim glimmer upon the scene.

"Buck up, Dig!"

"Right-ho!" said Digby. "Clear off, Gussy. You're in the way, old chap."

"I am sowwy, but I must wefuse to clear off until I have addressed the meetin'," said D'Arcy firmly. "It is impos. for me—"

"Are you going to get out?"

"Undah the ciros, I must distinctly wefuse to get out."

"Oh, take him away, somebody!" said the chairman.

"Where's that giddy committee that was going to keep order? Yank him off!"

"I wefuse to be yanked off! Figgins, if you lay your hands on me in that wuff way I shall administrah a feafhul thwashin' to you pwesently. Blake, wewense me at once, or I shall no longah wegard you as a friend. Lowthah, you uttah wottah, I considah you a wude beast! Mannahs, take your beastly fingahs out of my beastly collah! You are wumplin' my collah and hurtin' my beastly neck, you uttah beast!"

"How much time have I got left, Tom Merry?" demanded Digby, as D'Arcy's voice faded away as he was dragged off.

"Two minutes!"

"I think the time ought to be extended as—"

"Nothing of the sort. This is a political meeting; not a night out. If you've got a speech to make, make it."

"Well, I've got something to say," said Digby. "Gentlemen of St. Jim's—"

"Same old opening," said Manners, who was a chess player. "Why don't some of you try something new?"

"Shut up, Manners! How can a chap talk while you are yelping? Gentlemen of this old and honoured school—"

"Hear, hear!"

"You have heard something of the latest idea. It is a jolly good idea, though the first crude conception came from the usually dense duffers you know as the Horrible Three—I mean the Terrible Three. We're going to have a ripping school parliament of about thirty members—"

"Twenty," said Blake.

"Thirty," said Digby emphatically.

"Twenty!"

"Thirty!"

"Twenty!"

"Who's making this speech?" exclaimed Digby indignantly. "Shut up, can't you, Blake? I say we're going to have a parliament of about thirty members—"

"Twenty!"

"Chuck him out!" roared a dozen voices.

"Yaas, wathah! I wegard Dig's speech as wathah

wotten, but every gentleman has a wight to expect othah gentlemen not to intewwupt him."

"Of about thirty members," said Digby victoriously; "and as I was saying—"

"Time's up—"

"Oh, hang that, Tom Merry! Between Blake and Gussy I haven't had time to say a word—or hardly more than a word—"

"Can't help your troubles. Time's up, and you've got to clear. Figgins comes next. People, this long-legged rotter is our esteemed friend Figgins of the New House," said the chairman, introducing the speaker. "To those of you who have never heard of the New House, I may explain that it is an old, miserable casual ward where all sorts and conditions of rotters hang out—wasters who wouldn't be admitted to the School House on any terms—"

There was a roar from the New House juniors. A cabbage-stump from an unknown hand caught the chairman on the chest, and he sat down suddenly on the ground against the chapel rails.

"Gentlemen of the New House and rotters of the School House," began Figgins gracefully. "You will naturally like to hear a decent, sensible speech after all the piffle you have stood for the last twenty minutes—"

"Hear, hear!"

"Who threw that cabbage-stump?" roared the chairman, scrambling to his feet.

"Shut up!"

"Let Figgins go on!"

"Let him get finished, for goodness' sake!"

"Who threw that—"

"Don't interrupt!" howled Blake. "I'm surprised at you, Tom Merry."

"Why, you were interrupting yourself just now!"

"I wasn't; I was interrupting Digby."

"I mean you were interrupting—"

"I don't care what you mean, and I'm not a giddy chairman, anyhow. A chairman ought to keep order, not transgress on a chap's five minutes by talking a lot of rot about a mouldy cabbage-stump!"

"Order! Get on with the washing, Figgins!"

"Yaas, pway continue, Figgins, deah boy. We can stand it."

"What I say is, that's it's a jolly good idea to hold a St. Jim's Parliament," said Figgins. "But we shall have to be careful in the management of it, or it will be mucked up by these School House rotters!"

"Hear, hear! Rats! Right-ho! Bah!"

"So long as New House fellows have the upper hand, there's no reason why the thing shouldn't go swimmingly," went on Figgins, undaunted by the yells and hisses of the School House crowd. "If we let School House wasters get to the top, the thing will end in a muck-up. That's all I've got to say—"

"Quite enough, too," said Monty Lowther.

"But I'm willing to submit to the voice of the majority," went on Figgins. "A chap has to give and take, and so long as the School House kids aren't cheeky, I'm willing to leave House rows out of it. We want a parliament with about fifteen or sixteen members; it's no good having a crowd, and I should suggest sixteen as a comfortable working number."

"Twenty!" said Blake.

"Thirty!" said Digby.

"Sixteen!"

"Twenty!"

"Thirty!"

"Time's up, Figgy!" exclaimed Tom Merry, looking at his watch. "You've had twenty seconds over, and that comes out of Herries' time. Herries comes next."

"That's all very well!" said Herries indignantly.

"Of course it is!" agreed Tom Merry. "Get up on your hind-legs and speak, old chap, if you've got anything to say. Time's passing, and you're entitled by the rules to bore us for four minutes and a half."

Herries came forward. Herries was not a fluent speaker, and when he was excited or confused his brain worked slowly; indeed, Digby had declared that it sometimes stopped working altogether. This was probably a libel; but really on the present occasion Herries seemed to be non-plussed.

"Gentlemen, this is Herries, a member of a well-known collection of duffers kept in No. 6 in the School House!" said the chairman. "He will have the honour of addressing the meeting. Fire away, Herries!"

"Certainly!" said Herries. "Gentlemen of St. Jim's—"

"Hear, hear!"

"I have the honour of addressing the meeting," said Herries, catching that phrase from Tom Merry, thinking

it a rather neat one. "On the present important occasion I—I—I have the honour of addressing the meeting."

"Hear, hear!"

"Go it, Hewwies, old man!"

"I—I—I have the honour," said Herries, growing more hopelessly confused every moment by the crowd of eyes gleaming at him, and the laughter and shouting. "As I think I said before, I—I have the honour of addressing the meeting."

"Three more minutes!" said Tom Merry.

"Don't interrupt me, Merry!" said Herries. "You'll put me off my stroke. I—I—I was going to say that—in short—I have the honour of addressing the meeting, and—and I have—the honour—of—addressing the meeting."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a formidable yell of laughter. Some of the previous speeches had tickled the audience greatly, but Herries' effort seemed about the richest of all. The juniors laughed till the tears ran down their cheeks, and the ringing merriment banished whatever shred of self-possession the speaker had left.

"Two more minutes!" said the chairman.

"Yes—yes, exactly. I—I have the honour of addressing the meeting," said Herries. "On the present important occasion I—I have the honour—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Of addressing the meeting—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Herries paused. Even he realised that he was repeating himself; but whatever he had intended to put into his speech had gone completely out of his head. He opened his mouth several times like an expiring codfish, and no words came forth; while the spectators shrieked themselves almost into hysterics.

"My hat!" said Lowther. "This is worth watching! It's a new system of jaw-gymnastics, you know. At least, I suppose that's what it is."

"Get on with the washin', Hewwies, old man!" said Arthur Augustus encouragingly. "If you like, I will finish your speech for you, deah boy."

"One minute more!" said the chairman. "Buck up, Herries! It's the last lap."

Herries bucked up.

"Gentlemen of St. Jim's," he stammered, "on—on the present important occasion I—I—I—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I have the honour of—"

"Got it!"

"Of addressing the meeting—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was the last effort of Herries. That last roar of laughter was too much for him, and he retired covered with blushes. Blake patted him on the shoulder.

"Good kid!" he said. "It's not every fellow who can make a speech like that. Now, then, whose turn next?"

"Kerr!" said Figgins promptly.

But the juniors were still shrieking with laughter, and it really seemed as if there would never be order enough restored for the next speech.

CHAPTER 9. An Exciting Finish.

"ORDER!"

"Silence for the speaker!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Order! Shut up! Fair play, now!"

The laughter died down at last. Chuckles still broke forth every few moments, but there was sufficient quietness for the next speaker to come forward. Kerr, the Scottish partner in the New House Co., was the next man alphabetically, and he was waiting with visible signs of impatience for a chance to speak. The five-minute rule was rigid, and the minutes were flying. Tom Merry grinned as he looked at his watch.

"Only one minute left, Kerr," he remarked. "Better make the best of it, old chap."

Kerr was a canny Scotsman. He wasted no time in argument, but plunged directly into his subject.

"I've got a few words to say on this subject, kids. I back up all Figgins said—"

"Hear, hear! Good old Figgins!"

"And I've got some more to say, too. I think the St. Jim's Parliament ought to be held in the box-room in the New House—"

"Rats!" exclaimed Blake. "The empty garret in the School House is just the place, of course. Cheek!"

"Shut up, Blake, and let Scotty get on!"

"I think that the parliament should meet in the New House," said Kerr. "We should be able to keep better order. I also think—"

"No time for what you also think!" said Tom Merry.

"Time's up!"

"You don't mean to say it's a minute yet, Tom Merry?"

"It's a minute and two seconds!" said Tom Merry severely. "You've exceeded your time, Kerr. Never knew such a talkative lot of bounders. Now then, Lowther, you're next!"

Monty Lowther stepped up, as Kerr slowly and unwillingly retired. Kerr felt that he had been done, but argument was useless. Herries had involuntarily taken up most of his time; but nobody seemed to mind, excepting Kerr himself.

There was nothing confused about Monty Lowther. He was as cool as a cucumber, and keen as a knife. He stood with his hands in his trousers' pockets in an easy attitude to address the meeting.

It was possible that the very easiness of his attitude made the crowd inclined to heckle him, for there were catcalls galore before he started.

"Order!" shouted Tom Merry. "Silence for Montague Lowther, Esquire!"

"Better shut up!" said Lowther. "You can make a row another time, you know. I've got a few words to say you had better listen to. I've been thinking out the idea, and I've got an important point to touch on. It's a question of the constituencies. Each member of Parliament has to be elected by a constituency, and I think we had better adopt the suggestion of making up each constituency of a certain number of voters. Say, every dozen fellows can elect a member to St. Jim's Parliament, those dozen form the constituency, and the constituency—"

"Fond of that word, ain't he?" Figgins remarked.

"And that constituency," repeated Lowther, "will take its name from the largest town represented among the dozen voters."

"Good idea!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Well, not bad!" said Blake thoughtfully. "Yes, upon the whole, I think we can adopt the plan. Of course, I should have thought of it later."

"Weally, I had somethin' of the same sort in my mind already, deah boys, but it had not taken definite shape, you know."

"I think the plan would work out well," said Lowther. "You see—"

"I say, isn't time up?" demanded Kerr.

"Ten seconds more," said Tom Merry, looking at his watch.

"Same thing. This is where you slide out, Lowther."

"I'll slide out when I like, Kerr!"

"You'll slide out now!"

"Time's up!" said Tom Merry. "Off you go, Monty! Now, then, it's Manners next. Buck up, Manners! Gentlemen, this is Henry Manners, whom you all know to be a

"Duffer!" said Figgins.

"Whom you all know to be a respectable and prominent member of the School House society," said Tom Merry.

"Go it, Manners, old son!"

Manners rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He had his turn at making a speech, and he wasn't going to miss it; but he couldn't think of anything in particular to say.

"Go it, Manners!"

"Well," said Manners, "my idea is that St. Jim's Parliament ought to pass a law making it compulsory for the school authorities to rig up a good dark-room for the amateur photographers of the Merry Hobby Club—"

There was a shout of laughter. The juniors had wondered what Manners was going to say, but they had hardly expected him to start on his hobby at that moment.

"You see," went on the speaker, "it's rotten having to develop your plates and films in a cupboard under the stairs, and the daylight-developer isn't a thing you want to use always, though I've got one. So I think—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I think that a proper dark-room for the juniors, properly fitted up and ventilated, would be a boon and a—"

"I say, I hope the meeting isn't over!" exclaimed the voice of Skimpole, as the amateur Socialist came bustling through the crowd. "I've just fetched a special speech."

"Shut up! Manners is talking."

"Yes, I can hear him; but I have no doubt that Manners will be willing to shut up, as I have something of great importance to say."

"Shut up, Skimpole!"

"Chuck him out!"

"My dear friends and fellow-citizens of this great and glorious community—"

"Shut up! It's Manners' turn—"

"Sit on his chest!"

Skimpole was quieted with some difficulty. Then the chairman glanced at his watch, and found that Manners' time was up, and the amateur photographer retired.

"Merry, next," said the chairman. "I will not proceed—"

"Chairman comes last, if at all," interrupted Figgins.

"Fatty Wynn comes next."

"M comes before W—"

"Very likely, but Fatty comes before chairman!" grinned Figgins. "Besides, you've had a part of a speech already, and chairman has to come last with his few words."

"Oh, very well—roll him on, then."

Fatty Wynn came forward. The expression of his face showed that he had something to say. He hurriedly thrust the remains of a jam tart into his breast pocket, and wiped his mouth as Figgins pushed him into view.

"Go it, Fatty!"

"Certainly!" said Fatty. "There's an important point in this new scheme that has been, I believe, overlooked. You have talked about the constituencies, and the place of meeting, and the number of members, but I haven't heard any allusion made to the refreshment-department—"

"Ha, ha, ha! Good old Fatty!"

"And, then, another point equally important. Wouldn't it be a jolly good idea to celebrate the opening of St. Jim's Parliament with a big feed, by general subscription, to include fellows in both houses, and all the Lower Forms," said Fatty Wynn. "I should be happy to place my services as cook at the disposal of—"

"Fellow-citizens of St. Jim's, if you will listen to me—"

"We won't Skimpy! Dry up!"

"Oh, I don't mind!" said Fatty Wynn good-naturedly.

"I had about finished, anyway."

"Thank you, Wynn!" said Skimpole. "It is quite right of you to withdraw your useless and idle speech in favour of the important things I have to utter. You have all been wasting your time. Talk about Nero fiddling while Rome was burning! Here you are, talking mere piffle, while the crisis long foreseen by wise men is arriving in the history of the world. Socialism—"

"Boo! Rats! Scat! Chuck it!"

"Socialism is coming, like the flood tide setting in, to sweep away the bloated capitalist class, and overwhelm them on the tessellated staircases and marble floors—I mean the marble staircases and tessellated floors—of their mansions. Socialism is at hand, and ere long I hope to see this school converted to the new and glorious creed. Those interruptions do not deter me. I do not even blame you for them. As a Determinist, I know that you are really not to blame, as nobody is to blame for anything, and everything in existence is equally right and wrong. There are, in fact, no right and wrong, but everything—"

"I wonder what on earth he is talking about," Lowther remarked. "Have you the faintest idea, Skimpole?"

"The day is coming when the sunburst of Determinism—I mean Socialism—will rise on the earth like the full moon on the dark night, and the vulture of capitalism will be seized by the throat, and nipped in the bud—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You may laugh! Yes, my friends, my misguided but beloved brothers, you may laugh! You may laugh!" roared Skimpole. "But it is coming! Ha, ha! I see it in my mind's eye! I feel it in my heart! Ow, ow! Who threw that cabbage stump at me?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Am I discouraged by this ribald laughter? Am I downcast by the grinning of a crew of foolish youths, with no more brains than would go on a penny-piece? Certainly not! I hurl back your laughter in your teeth. I say—"

"Cheese it, old man! Back-pedal!"

"I say that the day is coming! I warn you to prepare! In the St. Jim's Parliament I shall be the leader of the Labour Party, and I shall preach the news of Socialism on every occasion—"

"Cut it, you ass!" muttered Tom Merry.

"I won't—I—"

"Do you want to be ducked and frogsmarched, ass?"

"Collar him!" shouted Pratt.

Skimpole looked at the crowd closing round him, and thought Tom Merry's advice too good not to be followed.

He broke into a run, and dashed away; but the excited juniors were not to be denied. They dashed after him. The amateur Socialist disappeared, with a crowd of juniors tearing in fierce pursuit.

Tom Merry laughed.

"Well, the meeting's at an end, now," he remarked. "Let's get in. After all, the matter's settled now, and St. Jim's Parliament is going to be a great success."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

And the meeting broke up.

THE END.

(Two Splendid Tales again next Thursday, entitled: "The Parliamentary Candidate," by Martin Clifford; and "The Black Vulture of Pollat," a story of Alan Wayward.)

The Second Long Complete Tale.Grand New Series.**THE SWOOP****OF THE HAWK**

BEING A STORY
OF THE FURTHER
ADVENTURES OF

ALAN
WAYWARD

By INNIS HAEL.

CHAPTER 1.

A Perilous Mission.

IF the fellow makes a success, he'll start a blaze throughout Armenia that may well set the whole of Europe alight." The speaker was Angus Hamilton, the British Consul at Van, who, seated among the palms on his verandah, overlooking the blue waters of the lake, was talking to Alan Wayward and the Sheikh Jelaluddin.

The two had only just returned from Erzerum, whither they had accompanied Ahmed and his wife, Zillah, on the first stage of their journey to England. And though nearly a month had elapsed since the consul had pressed on them the stirrup-cup, after almost dragging them from the clutches of Hadir Bey, the treacherous Governor of Bitlis, yet Alan felt that the warm cordiality of Hamilton's greeting had lost none of its first generous flavour. A hearty dinner had given way to coffee and cigarettes on the verandah, where the warm spring air, tinged with the faint salt keenness of the lake, instilled a delightful sense of lazy elasticity into muscles over finely strung by a month's ceaseless mountain travel.

"I'm afraid I wasn't half awake to what you've been saying," said Alan, aroused by the sudden silence to a guilty sense of dozing. "This is such a perfect lullaby after the continual clatter of the road that I was nearly off to sleep."

"Oh, I've been there myself," laughed the consul. "I was telling your friend, the sheikh, of a move that's on in these quarters, and he appears to be rather interested over it. The gist of the thing is this. There's a fellow called Mahon, who calls himself an Armenian regenerator. As a matter of fact, he's a Russian, and is acting hand in glove with the authorities over the border. His ostensible game is to lead five to ten or twelve hundred Georgian Armenians into this territory, with the avowed object of asserting the standard of Armenian independence. Of course, the real aim is to give Russia an excuse for massing its army corps on the frontier, and, if events get thick enough, coming in to restore order. The Turks here seem supine to the verge of imbecility. They probably hope it will come off, in the idea of letting Kurds and Armenians cut each others' throats till they tire of it, and the Powers get riled enough and jealous enough to eulchre Russia's little game."

"It will be particularly rough on the Armenian Christians and the foreign missions," said Alan, now wide awake.

"That's just the point," assented Hamilton, throwing a biscuit to the great wolfhound at his guest's feet. "And I'm pretty certain that boulder Mahon is hand in glove with your old friend Kasim, the bandit of Sipan Dag. By the way, I suppose you heard that the new Bey of Bitlis tried to take Kasim?"

"No. Did he?" asked Alan eagerly. "Did he succeed?"

"Rather not!" laughed Hamilton. "Kasim simply wiped

the floor with him. Only about three out of the five hundred troops he sent returned. They were ambushed and slaughtered nearly to a man."

"He's a treacherous brute," said Alan. "But he struck me as an able kind of chap. Why do you think he is in it?"

"Because your two old friends, Saponyadi and Rastan, fled to him for shelter," answered Hamilton, "when I sent in a requisition for their arrest. And one of my dragomen reports that the two of them were in Van this afternoon, and left at sundown, after meeting Mahon himself, in the direction of Ala Dagh."

"I don't know that range," said Alan.

"It's the one that lies between Sipan Dag and Mount Ararat," explained the consul. "The significance of the move lies in the fact that the Ala Dagh is the headquarters of Hassein, the grand old Beg of the Haideranli tribe, one of the finest lot of mountaineers one could hope to see south of the Grampians. They're Borderers, you see. And unless Mahon can square them or eat them up, Hassein, with about fifteen thousand of his war dogs lies bang on the flank of any move he can make."

"Well," said Alan lazily, "does it make any difference to you if these fellows get at each other?"

"What else am I here for?" said Hamilton quietly, with a level glance that made Alan feel rather uncomfortable. "English commerce don't need me here. I'm a kind of mashed political agent, with one eye on the Bear's paw and the other eye on the various kinds of chestnuts he's always shoving into some fire for wild cats to fight over. What do you think, sheikh?"

The sheikh's black eyes gleamed in their sunken orbs and his fingers twitched round his staff.

"I think, effendi," he answered, "that thou hast not told us this for nothing. Thou art hard pushed to find two men of discretion and valour who may bear surely thy word to Hassein."

"Verily thou art very wise," purred the consul softly, playing with the sheikh's magnificent vanity.

"Praise Allah!" assented the sheikh, sublimely oblivious, as he took a huge scoop of snuff.

"Did I need, and did Islam need," pursued the consul, with a steady, disconcerting stare at Alan's grinning countenance, "two sure men, one deep versed in wisdom, and one reckless in daring as the lion, should I not come to thee, O Jelaluddin and to thy disciple?"

"Say on my son," said the sheikh. "If Islam needs me, lo, I am here. And if Allah bids me turn from my path to help even the poorest of His worms, shall I not at least hearken to thy prayer?"

For a moment, as Alan remarked to him later, Hamilton Effendi gasped beneath the pungent simplicity of the remark as if he had unexpectedly received a "biff on his boko." But he gulped down the reflection on his dignity, and if his eye

had the glimmer of a glare in it, the sheikh was serenely unconscious of the fact.

"Will ye bear my word to Hassein?" he asked abruptly.

"What is the word?" asked the sheikh.

"To be on his guard," said Hamilton. "To sweep back Mahon and his Russian spies across the border. To do it on his own authority, and let Petersburg and Stamboul fight out the responsibility later."

"We will bear the word," said the sheikh gravely. "Come, my son," he went on, turning to Alan; "we will start at once."

"Oh, that be dazzled for a yarn!" protested Alan. "I haven't slept in a bed for a month, and I'm dog-fagged."

"Shall the sluggard attain wisdom?" sighed the sheikh, in a voice slightly ironic. "Lo, wisdom compelleth my tired limbs, who am old. Yet thou, who art young, and over-vain in strength, dost bray like an unreasoning wild ass, bemoaning thy logs. Arise! The night wind will refresh thee, and in discipline thy courage will return."

"How far is the beastly place?" growled Alan, glaring at the appreciative, subtle smile on the lips of the consul.

"Man," said Hamilton, with a friendly, sudden grip on his shoulder, that dispelled on the instant all wayward ill-humour, "if I could do it myself, it wouldna be anyone else I'd ask. It's the nicest bit of adventure you could possibly be let in for. Hassein's a gentleman. I've half an idea he's a bit of a Scot. He'll never rest till he's rooted out Kasim—ay, and Idrin, too! You've the chance of a lifetime to wipe the slate clean of old scores, while doing your duty as a decent Britisher."

"I'm on alright," grinned Alan. "I'd do it anyhow, you know, though I think you're a cunning swab to do us out of a bed free of bugs for once in a way! But I'd walk my boots off to get even with Kasim for the traitor trick he played us. And as for Idrin—well, as you know, I did three months in one of his slave gangs, without counting a turn at the bastinado. And though I'm not a particularly rancorous animal, by George, I'd like to be in at the turning, when someone's pack gets at the old fox!"

"They have about two hours' start of you," said Hamilton, as he stood on the verandah steps, watching Alan and the sheikh mount the horses, which he had ordered to be led round.

"But as they had two pack mules, which probably bore presents for Hassein, you should easily overtake them. I rely on you to get there first."

"We will!" said Alan.

"Inshallah!" chimed the sheikh, who hated promises that did not leave a wide margin for the annotation of Providence.

"Better leave me that dog of yours, Wayward," said the consul, as Alan whistled the wolfhound.

"He'd worry you to death," said Alan ambiguously. "Come on, Clock!"

"What on earth do you call him 'Clock' for?" asked Hamilton.

"Nearest I could get to his native title," laughed Alan. "And as he's a nailer for marking time, and has a dial all his own, I've Anglicised it. So long! Can we push the gees?"

"Till they drop," called Hamilton. "Look me up to report."

They clattered through the deserted streets, through the silent bazaar, and out on to the Ala Koi road.

"Do you know the road, sheikh?" asked Alan, as he scanned dubiously the ill-defined track, and the waste of land around them.

"As far as Kunduk," replied the sheikh, "a babe might follow it. Then we shall leave the village on the left. It is an ill-conditioned street of hovels on the northern creek of the lake, and full of Kasim's jackals. The Ala Daghs rises above it, and there the track is rough. Most men, mounting it, pass far to the south, along the road to Bayazid, whence they may take the ridge, when travelling is easier. And by that easier road Mahon has doubtless gone, for pack-mules cannot climb the other."

"I believe you know all roads," said Alan. "Thou art a very wolf for tracks."

"Some there may be that I know not," said the sheikh. "But this I knew by merit, having passed it once, as now, for the undoing of an evil-doer. Whence, my son, thou mayest learn that a good deed is as a serving-maid who but serveth one plate that she may follow it with another. Between us and Kunduk lie close on thirty versts. Thence to Hassein's strong place, ten versts of mountain. Let us press on then while we are on the flat."

The night was calm as a drop of dew. No moon shone; but the stars, like globules of liquid gold, seemed to sway round the silent riders as in some stately rhythmic dance. Here and there the lake gleamed violet and distant on their left, in a veil of mist. Here and there a solitary collection of half-buried hovels shewed brown, mouldy jowls out from glistening, livid acres of sprouting barley. Here and there the black goats'-hair canvas of Kurd tents reeled past, to a sudden, startled cry, the echo of barking dogs, and Clock's rumbling defiance. Hour followed hour, and still the two riders never slackened rein, riding now with the automatic, dream-cradled, almost motionless swaying that makes man and horse seem but as one entity.

"Behold the Ala Daghs, and our path, by the cascade on the right!" said the sheikh, for the first time breaking the silence of four hours.

Alan looked at him and marvelled. For himself, despite the hard training of the last four months, his breath was coming in long, hard gasps, his back seemed to be tickled by a thousand tongues of fire, his tongue was dry as a carpet. But the old sheikh, with his white beard sweeping to his waist, his ivory-coloured cheeks faintly aglow with a tone of pink, sat easily, lissom, and spoke as smoothly as if his voice had had command of a long night's rest.

"Did I not say well to thee, that wisdom disciplines the rebellion of lazy limbs?" said the sheikh, as if divining the import of Alan's shining eyes. "Let us dismount and lead the beasts, for the road is very rough, and somewhat perilous."

He led the way, thrusting through what seemed an impenetrable thicket, that after ten minutes' strenuous toil yielded to a wild and desolate glen, up which there trailed a track worn by the feet of goats and wild sheep.

If the ride on the level had been, as it were, swung to the measure of a cradled dream, the arduous track of the mountain was, by comparison, hobbled by nightmares of effort.

"'Tis eleven years since I passed this way," said the sheikh placidly, as they halted, panting, in a labyrinthine tangle of thorny brushwood. "But with perseverance we shall force a path through."

It was only by perseverance that they did. Many a time had Alan Wayward plucked victory from the very teeth of defeat in the stubborn contests of the football field, and in the no less stubborn trials of temper and control in the ring. And the lesson of it kept him silent now, and humbled too, as he contrasted the sheikh's invincible patience and indomitable will with his own uses of authority and leadership in those old and so distant Marlborough days. For though the darkness was intense, though the obscure track was overgrown and brambled beyond description, Jelaluddin plodded steadily on, with never a complaint.

"Where that peak falls to the right," he said, pointing aloft to a snow-clad pinnacle that hung like a beaked nose over the shrouded jaws of the forest, "there is a guardhouse. There we will seek the trail afresh. For the snow will still be crisp and unmelting there; and if Mahon has passed, his tracks will tell us."

But despite perseverance and dogged pluck, two hours had passed before they emerged from that interminable tangle; and even the sheikh was fain to confess, as so many others have so often done, that a short cut in the dark is an ambiguous blessing for all but lovers.

Yet the guardhouse was there, and its suggestion of a spell of rest had nearly provoked Alan into a cheer, if he had not caught sight in time of Clock's bristling ruff. Then, on the alert, and peering through the grey, confusing light—child of the blackness above and the snow beneath—he saw that the ground was all freshly trampled; and noted, too, with a swift start, that a single yellow ray of light trickled through the shuttered casements of the rough stone structure in front. At the same moment, the sheikh's arm encircled his neck, and drew his ear to the level of the whispering mouth.

"They are there, Mahon and his men," he breathed. "Let us circle round a little, and tether our horses in that clump of firs to the north. Bid thy dog be still. And wind thy turban round the nostrils of thy horse, even as I do, lest they neigh. For, meditate, my son, and reflect what shame it would bring on us if we allowed these evil-doers to come full of presents to Hassein, and find us there empty-handed and discountenanced. Verily, even a good man—yea, and a very good—openeth his ear more largely to him who comes with two pack-mules than to him who arriveth with hungry horses. Wherefore, my son, we will even lead apart the pack-mules; and since they are destined for Hassein, to Hassein will we lead them; and the rest of the horses we will drive into the forest. So, perchance, Allah may send wisdom to those evil men, and we shall have much merit for affording them the opportunity to reflect."

"Truly thou art wise, O sheikh," said Alan, nearly convulsed with mirth; "and I am but thy foolish disciple."

"Even truth spoken by accident hath merit," murmured the sheikh, whose simplicity was far from being devoid of an acute and probing shrewdness. "Wherefore, my son, babble not; but follow me. Neither must thou sneeze."

The half-crisp snow gave them padded way along the fringe of trees, and in another half-hour they had compassed the semi-circle, and tethered the muffled horses beneath a great clump of firs.

"Bid thy dog lie still," whispered the sheikh; "and see that thy feet touch not leaf or twig."

Together they crept forward, two spectral shadows glancing from tree to tree, till they stood at the gable end of a shed, where the uneasy shuffling of hoofs betrayed the presence of horses. Silent, wraith-like as cloud-wraps, they glided from stone to stone, and turned the angle giving into the stable.

"A guard!" breathed the sheikh, pointing to a black,

huddled form on a pile of filthy straw. "Bind him with thy sash, while I gag him!"

He bent down, and with the end of his staff hanked out a reeking sod from the earth at his feet. Then noiselessly creeping forward, he sneaked the man's gun from his inert hand, and plumping suddenly on his chest, jammed the choking sod in the spasmodically gaping jaws. True as his shadow, Alan fell on the guard at the same moment, lashing hands and feet together in an inextricable tangle.

"Behold the pack-mules," said the sheikh, rising, "and their packs at their side! Hasten, my son, and load them and lead them forth! Take a turn of the lead-ropes round their nostrils, that they squeal not, and wait me where our horses are tethered. When thou hast arrived, I will release the other beasts and drive them forth."

Alan obeyed, and in less than ten minutes he had led the laden mules to the appointed rendezvous.

"What the dickens is he doing!" he muttered, peering through the darkness, as minute after minute went by, and still the sheikh did not appear.

Yet, in good truth, the sheikh was doing his best.

Alan had scarcely vanished round the corner of the shed before Jelaluddin, leading out two of the horses, sent them scampering homewards with a rousing spank from his staff. He had been in the act of releasing two more, when out of the gloom of a manger a figure sprang at him. It was the second horseguard, who had been taking his siesta at his ease.

The impact had bowled the sheikh over, and the two lay for a good two minutes in the mud, with a grip at each other's throat that effectually restrained any vocal efforts. The guard was a wiry little Turcoman; and he had nails like a wild cat, and used them. But the sheikh was hard as a stirrup-iron, and once the surprise of the first shock was over, his outraged dignity lent him the strength of two men. Before the guard had realised what he was up against, Jelaluddin was astride of him, and with his long, lean hands lovingly gripped round the Turcoman's throat, was banging the guard's head against the earth to the accompaniment of: "Dog! son of a dog! Would'st lift thy hand against the prophet of Bagdad? That, and that, and that will teach thee wisdom!"

The "that" was the thumping of the Turcoman's head on the sodden earth. And if it did not inculcate wisdom, it at least effectually silenced him. When he was quite limp, the sheikh rose; and none too soon. In the excitement of the struggle Jelaluddin had ignored the squealing and stamping of the terrified horses. But the noise had not passed unobserved in the stone shanty whence the light had gleamed. And as the sheikh rose to his feet, and regained possession of his staff, the door of the shanty was thrown open, and Saponyadi, followed by a burly, short man Jelaluddin rightly divined as Mahon, rushed out.

"Whack! whack!" went the sheikh's staff, felling with two mighty blows two of the three remaining horses.

Then, wheeling like a humming-top, he met the rush, and with a whack to right that smote Saponyadi across the teeth, and a whack to left that crashed against Mahon's ankle, the sheikh bounded from the cover of the hangar and bolted for his own tethered steed.

Half a dozen shots followed him, but they fell into the void. Alan was already in saddle, with the mule-leads in one hand and the sheikh's bridle in the other, as Jelaluddin raced up.

"Praise Allah!" panted the sheikh, as he leapt on to his horse and seized one of the leads from Alan's hands. "Ride on, my son; for, indeed, I think those evil men whom I have striven to correct will be most anxious to follow us! Wherefore it is wisdom to ride very hard, even if thereby it pleaseth Allah to allow our necks to be broken for thy unregenerateness."

CHAPTER 2. A Grim Hour.

THEY had a good start, and they used it. The long climb up the mountain had sufficed to breathe their hard and wiry ponies, and the little beasts followed the level ridge at a sturdy gallop, that soon left behind the sound of the angry voices in the shed.

"They're sure to follow us," said Alan. "We'd get on far quicker without the mules."

"Nay; for I stunned two of the horses," said the sheikh. "And it will be some time before either Saponyadi or Mahon will feel inclined to ride. This is a very good, steady pace; and even if we are pressed, we have always time to cast the packs over the precipice."

They rode on for a full hour, at first along a fairly defined track through towering pines; but as they proceeded the track grew narrower, and finally ended in a fork, where two mere goat-paths sprayed off—one following the ridge, the other winding round the face of the cliff above a precipitous jumble of red crags and yawning abysses.

The sheikh halted, and looked round. The night had clouded over, great slate-hued masses of cloud piling up bank on bank

from the direction of Ararat, and blotting out such peaks and bluffs as had hitherto served for guides.

"Verily, I know not which is the way," said the sheikh.

"We'd better keep to the ridge," suggested Alan. "It will be shorter, anyway, than that tortuous path down below; and we shall escape the danger of those chaps behind taking the upper path and rolling rocks down on us."

"It is a wise reflection," said the sheikh. "Let us, then, push on."

But the path proved anything but encouraging. The pines seemed to be creeping nearer and nearer together, and again and again they had to dismount and force a way through. Finally, at the end of half an hour, they came to a serried mass of timber that defied all progress; and it was only after a long and tedious search, with face to earth, that the sheikh discovered an oblique goat-track leading down from the ridge in the direction of the lower and discarded path. Down this they turned, leading the horses with difficulty; for the way was very steep, and the snow slushed beneath their feet. They had negotiated half the descent, when suddenly Clok gave a low growl and sprang forward. Instinctively they halted, peering right and left into the darkness.

"What was that?" whispered Alan as a low, continuous moan, indescribably uncanny in that desolate spot, reached their straining ears.

"It is some hunter, wounded perhaps," said the sheikh, tethering his horse and mule—an example which Alan quickly followed.

Then urging on Clok, the two followed the dog swiftly into the undergrowth on the left of the track, to halt after some twenty paces as they saw the dog suddenly pause and give vent to a dismal howl.

"By Jove, it is a wounded man!" cried Alan, striking a light and bending over a huddled mass lying in a mire of crimsoned snow. In his excitement he had spoken in English, and, to his amazement, a trembling voice answered him in the same language.

"Thank Heaven it's a white man!" said the man. "I'm dying. But there, ten paces away, in rug—under saddle—my daughter."

"Your daughter!" echoed Alan, too startled to think of action.

"I was coming from Tiflis to Van," said the man, evidently rallying his fast-failing forces. "Our caravan was attacked by a bandit, Kasim, my men said. I, with my wife and child, fled up mountain. We were pursued. My wife was caught; I got away, wounded mortally. Gave out here. For Heaven's sake save child and rescue wife! Seek in pocket—money, pearls, name."

He sank back. A foam of blood gushed at his lips, and with a quiver his head lolled sideways, his glazed eyes turning in a last desperate prayer towards the interior of the bush. Alan, following his glance, dashed forward, to return in an instant, bearing in his arms a golden-haired girl of some three or four years of age, who seemed too numbed with cold and terror to even cry.

The expiring man's eyes gleamed in a last flash, and he forced himself up.

"I—trust—you!" he gasped hoarsely, then fell back dead.

"This is awful," said Alan, wiping the cold sweat from his face, and looking anywhere but into the frightened blue eyes of the child in his arms.

"It is the will of Allah," said the sheikh, bending over the dead man and transferring the contents of his pockets to his own. Then, quietly and systematically, he scooped the snow over the rigid figure, and rolled about and over it a number of great stones.

"So shall the wolves not disturb his rest," he said. "Come let us go on!"

In silence they regained their horses, and in another half hour debouched on to a lower track. But the mutter of the threatening storm was now growing louder, and though the clear span overhanging the precipice on their left gave a kind of livid grey light, their progress was slow and painful. They had thrust the pack mules between Alan, who was bringing up the rear, and the sheikh, who led the way in front, and as every now and again a vivid streak of lightning cut the darkness, Alan could not help observing that the animals were growing more and more nervous, and were, obviously shoving towards a stampede. He called out a warning to the sheikh, fearing lest a sudden rush of the mules should hurl him over the cliff.

The sheikh for answer waved his staff, and brought it down with a thwack on the quarters of his pony, at the same time shaking loose his rein. They were going slightly down hill, and entering a narrow gorge, and as Jelaluddin's pony shot forward, followed by the racing mules, a livid flash of lightning that seemed to circle round the whole heavens illuminated the savage scene for two good seconds, revealing to Alan's startled gaze the galloping beasts in front, and at his side the great wolfhound, running with ears pricked forward, his ruff erect, and his lips drawn angrily back.

"Are they all gone mad?" thought Alan, as his own horse

tugged frenziedly on the curb, bounding forward after its comrades.

As if in answer to his question, there rose through the intense blackness succeeding that dazzling flash, a long, mournful whinny, that seemed to be taken up by a hundred tongues, swell into a wild howl, and die away in long-drawn, whining snarls.

"Wolves, by Jove!" shouted Alan, after a chilling moment, in which his heart had seemed suddenly to cease beating.

It was a dread word, there on those bleak wilds, and one that might blanch the cheek of the stoutest. For with the break-up of the long winter, the famished packs would follow the fear-sweated trail of the horses with relentless ferocity.

And even as he dashed into the gorge after the others, loosening as he did so the revolver in his belt, a great gaunt shape hauled at his horse's neck from out of the fringe of the undergrowth. But that one, at least, was not destined to taste even mule flesh again. For in mid-air Clok's fangs met his throat, rolling him over in a death-grip that ravened deep in the spinal column, crunching the life out. But the pack was in full cry now, and though as Clok raced on, they paused for a moment to fall on the body of their leader, that operation was concluded almost before the great hound had regained his master's side.

Alan was riding furiously. He had no need to urge his horse, which, with long mane and tail streaming, and its foam-flecked mouth straining forward, was racing in the grip of a mad fear. The pace was terrific, and held death at every step on that rock-strewn, dangerous road. But, fast as it was, it was no match for the gaunt, fleet shadows that, spreading through the woods, seemed fairly to skim the ground as they raced to get in front of the terrified horse. Twice Alan fired, taking a snap-shot; but his aim was uncertain, the light too bad, and his heart sank like lead within him as he looked on the baby-face lying huddled in the shawl against his breast.

"A mule! Kill a mule!" The sheikh's high-pitched voice floated down the wind, awaking the Englishman to a sudden realisation.

He dug his spurs deep in his pony's flanks, savaging it to a frenzied effort that brought it alongside the nearest mule. Then, bending over, Alan jammed the barrel of his revolver in the unfortunate brute's ear and fired. For one moment he turned as he raced onward, and saw the grey shapes leaping, snarling, and gnashing round the fallen animal. Then on again, on and on through the interminable gorge! It seemed to be hours, though not ten minutes had passed, before again that bleak, blood-chilling whinny wound through the trees, telling of the pack once more upon the trail. They were coming on faster now, more tireless than before, refreshed by their meal, scant enough among their hundred maws. Alan's brain reeled as he saw that the sheikh's horse was labouring heavily. But his hand was firm as with set teeth he sacrificed the second mule, and urged his pony alongside the sheikh's.

"Another respite," he gasped, and at the same moment the two were almost jerked from the saddle, as their ponies stopped dead, with legs outplanted, and snorting nostrils, outstretched above the brink of a great ravine.

"We've missed the track," he cried. "We're done. No man could climb these rocks either to right or left. In another five minutes the pack will be on us."

A splitting peal of thunder drowned his words, and as if it had been a signal for a war of the elements, flash after flash of lightning, red and blue and green, lit the wild scene, while the roll and rattle of the thunder roared from peak to peak.

The two had sprung to the ground, holding their plunging ponies.

"See," yelled the sheikh, pointing to the ravine. "There is a tree bridge. Give me the child. Tie it on my back. Guard thou the bridge, that the wolves follow not."

In the vivid flashes Alan looked, and the sight made him dizzy. From side to side, a thousand feet above a roaring, yellow torrent, two great pines spanned the abyss, their snow-swept stems glistening white and lashed together, a bridge indeed, but a bridge no horse nor man might pass on foot.

Mechanically he obeyed the sheikh's directions, lashing the child in the shawl to the sheikh's back, and for double security binding his turban round and round the fragile burden and Jelaluddin's shoulders.

Then the sheikh, creeping forward on hands and knees, began his perilous voyage across the slippery bridge. Alan watched him in an anguish of suspense. Half a dozen times the sheikh lay full length, gripping with knee and elbow the frail structure, as a blast of the shrilling wind threatened to sweep him off. But not half way had he gone when again the whinny of the wolves waivered down the wind, and the constant play of the lightning showed their spectral shadows racing down the gorge.

Shrill screams of terror rose from the sweating horses, and clashed weirdly against the fierce bay of defiance the wolf-hound sent pealing through the woods. Alan slipped from his shoulders the great battle-axe that had done him such good service during that last stand in the castle of Hadir Bey, and which, despite Hamilton's chaff, he had refused to part with.

He dared not attempt the bridge with those sure-footed

beasts in the rear. But he made up his mind that the sheikh and that golden-haired maid should at least have time to gain a place of safety if, as a last resource, he had to hurl the bridge into the depths. Luckily, however, for him, the terror of the horses saved him from the full force of the attack. For the maddened ponies, baffled by the piled up rocks on either hand, charged back along the road by which they had come, and for a moment the wolves, cowed at heart, scattered dismayed before so unexpected an attack. But only for a moment, for as the horses dashed past, the pack turned, and took up the hunt again, all save eight or nine, who, being further ahead, had converged after the ponies' flight on Alan and his dog, and now came sweeping down upon them, red-mouthed and ravening.

Half a dozen times Alan's revolver spat into the darkness, and though the successive howls told of some hits, the others came on.

Then ensued a scene which held the sheikh, now safe on the opposite bank, rigid with fascination. The lightning seemed to gather like a halo of blue flame round Alan's whistling axe, as again and again it flashed slashing at the leaping, gnashing beasts all round him. It was an affair of seconds, yet seconds that lived in the memory of both for many days. Twice Alan had felt the hot breath of a leaping beast on face and neck, and the tearing snap of angry teeth on his shoulders. But one Clok pulled down with a grip that crunched the spine, and the other Alan had dashed aside, with a blow that rammed the sharp, steel-shod haft of his battle-axe through the roof of the creature's mouth into its brain. Of the seven wolves that came to the attack, Clok had accounted for three, and the others lay hacked to death by that terrible flashing axe.

Trembling though he was, and sick with the fetid breath of the wolves, Alan turned steadily to the bridge, urging the dog before him. Clok went, nothing loth. He was evidently acquainted with such modes of transit. For, with his haunches a-crouch, and his fore-paws planted well forward, he went ahead shoving himself by little spasmodic jerks. He was on the other side, and barking furiously, as Alan was barely three-quarters of the way across.

"Hasten, my son! Hasten!" yelled the sheikh.

But his words were caught by the wind, and whirled away, leaving Alan all ignorant of the danger that was threatening him rearward.

He was awakened to it by a bullet singing past his ear, and turning his head he saw behind him Saponyadi kneeling in the snow, his smoking rifle still at his shoulder, while crawling after him on the bridge came Hastan, followed by Mahon.

"Wonder how they escaped the wolves?" he asked himself, as, reaching the sheikh's outstretched staff he leapt safely to earth.

Then, careless of Saponyadi's rifle, he turned to the bridge, and with half a dozen blows had split asunder the great thongs binding the logs together, and forced them apart. A scream of terror rang from Rastan's lips, and as Alan hurried into the abyss one of the pine stems on which Mahon and Rastan clung, the Greek with the agility of a monkey leapt at the other, and before Alan could hurl it off he had swarmed to earth, sprang to his feet, and was aiming his revolver point-blank at the Englishman's face. But he was not destined to draw the trigger, for the sheikh's staff smote him to the earth, at the same moment as Clok's teeth met in his ankle. The revolver fell clattering into the abyss, after the body of the shrieking Russian, as Alan heaved over the remaining log.

"Nay, but thou shouldst have left the bridge," said the sheikh.

"And the wolves!" said Alan. "Did you not hear them? They are coming back, and our horses are gone. They would have crossed and run us down in no time."

A wild shout of terror from the opposite bank told them eloquently enough that the wolves had returned. The storm had rolled away westward, leaving in its place a pale expanse of dawn-flushed sky. On the opposite bank they could see the pack tearing at the tethered plunging horses, and Saponyadi, his face

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conversed with mortal fear, endeavouring to climb a snow greased pine. They watched him, fascinated. Twice he slipped down, till his feet were almost in reach of the leaping wolves, gnashing beneath him. But with the sheer tenacity of despair, he succeeded in drawing himself up again, inch by dreadful inch, till at last his hands gripped among the lower branches. By that time, all sign of the horses had gone, and the sheikh and Alan shuddered as they watched the blood-flecked pack squat in several rings round the tree, with fierce, hungry, insatiate faces turned upwards.

Then the two men turned away silently, and that was the last they ever saw of Saponyadi.

CHAPTER 3.

A Border Chieftain.

"WHAT art thou doing, my son?" asked the sheikh coldly, casting a look of displeasure on Alan who, bending over the inanimate form of Rastan, was engaged in binding up his torn ankle.

"He'd bled to death," explained Alan, as he finished his task, and tried to force some brandy down the Greek's lips, from the flask that Hamilton had given him.

"So should he trouble us no more," said the sheikh. "As well might thou have shown pity to yonder wolves. Once thou gavest him life, and did he not betray us? Leave him and hasten."

"You're a bloodthirsty being for a prophet," muttered Alan. "We can't leave the fellow here to be torn by wolves or wild dogs."

"He is a serpent and an infidel, and hath no soul," said the sheikh savagely. "Moreover, forgettest thou that thou art not thy own master? Thy word, as mine, is passed to Hamilton Effendi; and already we have wasted many hours. Wilt thou that the land be laid waste for the sake of that dog? Come, I say, and hasten. Behold, thou canst see the castle of Hassein on the shoulder of yonder cliff."

"In that case, let's get," said Alan. "Rastan can't move far with that leg. And we can send back for him. Give me the maid. I will carry her."

"Nay! She is well where she is. Disturb her not!" said the sheikh, and, gripping his staff, he strode forward, Alan and Clok swinging along at his side. At each step, the castle in front of them rose more plainly to view till, reaching a plateau, shelving abruptly to a lower spur, they saw it in its full extent, perched on the face of a precipitous cliff opposite.

"It seems a stout kind of stronghold," said Alan, scanning the single track that led up the steep incline, and terminated in a drawbridge, that even at that distance they could see was up. The castle itself rose sheer from the face of the rock, and was surrounded on all sides by silent valley land, over which a thick white mist was lying, though here and there could be caught a glimpse as of flashing silver, where the sun's rays slanted on to some reach of the turbulent head waters of the Euphrates.

"We have yet two hours' walk before us," said the sheikh, as he guided himself down the steep declivity.

"And I shall be jolly glad when we come to the end of it!" rejoined Alan.

As they reached the valley land, and were enveloped in the chilly folds of mist, a low growl from Clok called them to a sudden halt. Alan laid his hand on the dog's head, silencing him, and peered anxiously through the fog.

"Hut! Voices!" said the sheikh in his ear.

They stood rigid, listening.

"I tell thee it was the growling of a dog," said a gruff voice, that seemed so near, that Alan gave an involuntary start.

"Some shepherd," was the reply.

"Unless it be one of Kasim's men with word of Mahon," grumbled the first speaker. "It's strange enough that Mahon is so late."

The champing of bits covered any reply the other might have made, and under cover of it, the sheikh bent forward and whispered in Alan's ear:

"Mahon's band!" he whispered. "Doubtless they surround the castle. At all risks, we must have those horses, and make a dash through. On foot we shall be caught, and if that dog, Rastan, lives and is found, we fail in our mission. Follow me. Strike, and strike hard, and once. Yet seize the horse ere the man fall!"

No Indian tracker had ever ears more true, nor foot more wary, than the Sheikh Jelaluddin, and as he stepped forward, following a short circle, not a sound betrayed their presence till they stood in the rear of two forms that loomed up monstrous and shadowy out of the mist.

The sheikh nudged Alan with his elbow, and lifted his staff on high. Alan followed suit with his battleaxe, yet turning it so that the butt, and not the blade, should fall on the unconscious head in front. Then, with a step forward, the two blows fell simultaneously, and with scarcely more than a grunt, both horsemen toppled forward and lunged out of the saddle, while the sheikh and Alan leapt to the horses' heads.

"To saddle!" whispered the sheikh.

Leaving the stunned men where they lay, the two swung silently into the saddle, and turned the horses' heads towards the castle. For a moment they stood motionless, listening. To right and left, to front and rear, there was the faint stir and hum that told of a considerable body of men lying all round; and it was obvious enough to both that not only was their position perilous in the extreme, but that every moment, with its chance of discovery, and its probability of an uplifting of the mist, rendered it more so.

"We have but one chance," said the sheikh, as he shifted the sleeping child from his back to his breast. "We must dash straight through, and trust to the confusion and the mist to cover our flight. Keep alongside of me, my son, for above all we must not be separated."

It was a risky enough chance at the best, for they knew neither the ground nor the disposition of the enemy's forces. But Sheikh Jelaluddin was not a fatalist for nothing. He was quite convinced that if Allah meant him to get through, through he would get, no matter what lay in the road; whereas, if Allah designed otherwise, it was not for him to question His allwise decrees. So, without further ado, he dug his heels into his horse's ribs, and dashed forward. It was a memorable ride. Not once, but a dozen times, they dashed into groups of men sitting round breakfast, of men lying still asleep, of men mounted, and men in the act of dismounting. Out of the mist they came like a thunderbolt, crashing over and through everything in their way, to disappear again into the mist, like a devastating rocket, followed by a powerful volley of curses, shoutings, flying shots, and thudding hoofs.

Alan rocked with laughter as their wild course proceeded, and the pandemonium in their rear grew into a very roar of battle. For Mahon's men, thinking the Kurds were on them, and seeing not a foot in advance, mistook those who were gathering in pursuit for foes, and fired and fought like wild cats. In five minutes the two fugitives had ridden slap through the lines into a belt of sunshine on the further slope, and now, seeing their way, flogged their horses mercilessly up the incline. So when Mahon's men, recognising at last their mistake, dashed into the open, it was to see the sheikh and Alan nearly a mile ahead, racing for the lowering drawbridge of the castle. A perfect hail of bullets swept the ground about them, and was answered by a roaring volley from the walls in front. But it was as though their lives were charmed, and scathless they clattered over the drawbridge and drew rein, breathless with laughter and exultation, in the great courtyard of the castle.

Alan, as he sprang to the ground, looked about him with interest. Hassein Beg was evidently on the alert, for the courtyard was thronged with fierce-eyed, swarthy mountaineers, whose white baggy trousers, gaudily-coloured sashes, and loose-laced waistcoats, made a brilliant effect in the glittering sunlight. They were armed to the teeth, too; lances, scimitars and daggers, revolvers and rifles, setting the sunbeams a-dance, till the air seemed to be alive with points of dazzling fire. For a moment the babel of voices about the two was so great that not a word was distinguishable. But suddenly it checked, and dropped to a dead silence, as there appeared on the steps leading into the castle itself, a man well over six feet, straight as a lance, with the head of a Roman conqueror, and a long snow-white beard, that was in strange contrast to the fiery spirit of youth aglow in his eyes.

"Hoo! Hoo! Hoo! The chief!"

The wild yelling cheer snapped out from five hundred throats, and Hassein, with a flush of pride on his face, stepped forward to greet the messengers.

"Welcome, Jelaluddin!" he cried, as he recognised the sheikh. "And thrice welcome. Thou comest to bless my arms. For we were about to ride out against those dogs below. And welcome, too, to the comely youth at thy side. But what is this thou bearest? A maid of the Franks?"

"For whom I crave thy hospitality and thy sword, O Hassein," replied the sheikh. "I bear news to thee from the Inglex Effendi at Van, whence we have ridden since sunset last night."

"Come, then, inside. Rest and eat, then ye shall tell your news," said the old chief.

Hassein listened attentively, as the sheikh unfolded all that Hamilton had said, and their adventures on the route.

"It is well," he said, as Jelaluddin finished his recital. "My runners bore me word two days ago, that Mahon's men, to the number of twelve hundred, had crossed the frontier. Already my war-dogs are hanging on their flanks, and I wait but for the clearing of the valley mists to sweep them from the earth. And that done, I will ride with thee myself and utterly root out that robber Kasim."

He had taken the child, so strangely rescued, on his knee, and sat toying with her golden curls while she ravenously attacked the omelettes and milk before her.

"Bid my daughter come hither," he said suddenly to an attendant, who hurried away, to return a few minutes later, ushering in a being whom Alan thought the loveliest specimen of womanhood he had ever looked upon.

Almost as tall as her father, fair as a lily, with hair as black as a raven's wing, and eyes of the deepest violet, she looked every whit the daughter of a border line of chieftains who had never bowed a knee, nor parted with an acre, to Roman, Hun, Persian, or Turk, since their great founder had planted his castle on the rock where it still stood, defiant of the two thousand years of the past. Nor did her loveliness shine the less, when, at her father's bidding, she took the child in her arms and listened with flushing cheeks and sparkling eyes to the tale of its wrongs.

"Take her to the women, and see that the child is well tended," commanded the chief, and Alan, watching her as she departed, involuntarily ejaculated, "What a queen among women!"

"Thou speakest truth, young man!" said the chief, with a smile that gave way to a sigh. "Miramé is the last and loveliest of her race, for my two sons both fell in battle against the Russians."

"Have ye need of rest, of sleep?" he went on, with a sudden change of tone. "Thou, old wolf of the desert, needest neither, for of old, I know that thou art made of iron. But this youth—"

"Is learning wisdom, O Hassein," said the sheikh, with a fine smile. "Last night he moaned for a bed, yet in saddle and afoot, he hath shown himself a valiant lover of fatigue. I warrant that if fighting be abroad, he needeth neither rest nor sleep."

"I'm fit enough," growled Alan. "And, anyhow, I wouldn't miss the picnic out to Kasim's. Besides, we've got to bring that girl's mother back to her."

The sheikh shot at him a searching glance, which somehow brought a burning flush to Alan Wayward's cheek.

"Verily, a young man's heart kindleth at the sight of beauty like a thorn to flame," chuckled Jelaluddin.

"The mist lifteth, my lord," announced a messenger, hurrying into the hall. "And our comrades are taken between two fires down below, for Kasim's men have ridden down the mountains, and are pressing the attack."

"To horse!" commanded the chief, and proceeded calmly to gird on his sword; and then, to Alan's surprise, to select from a perch running across a corner of the great hall, a grey, gaunt falcon, that he attached, hooded as it was, to his left wrist with a silver chain.

"We go hunting!" he said with a grim smile, as he caught Alan's glance.

And a goodly hunting array it was that drew up, five hundred strong, outside the castle walls, with lances glittering in the sunshine, scimitars to left of them, and rifles slung across the forked saddle-pommels. At a signal from Hassein, who rode slightly in advance, with the sheikh on his left and Alan on his right, the line advanced down the hill, broke into a trot, quickened to a canter, and then gathering impetus, thundered down in a wild gallop.

It was in vain the Armenians of Mahon turned, and, grouped in serried squares, poured in their volleys. For though some saddles were emptied, it but served to increase the fury of the rest. Through rank on rank Hassein's riders rode, the scimitars of those behind completing the work of the lances in front. Right through them they rode, then, wheeling, charged back the way they came. Men and horses went down before them like corn before a cyclone, and where they fell they lay. Hassein's swordsmen never had need to strike twice. For half an hour the pursuit continued, the riders following up the flying plainsmen, while Hassein's mountaineers drove back Kasim's men, now hard pressed and far outnumbered.

To the watchers in the castle on the hill, it seemed that the valley had been swept by a whirlwind.

"When the chief goes hawking, the sparrows fly," jeered a one-armed old veteran from his vantage-point on the wall, as he watched the column sweep in pursuit around the lower spurs of the Ala Dagh, and vanish from view. "Who's this lame and crippled-faced one riding to our door?"

The diversion was caused by the sight of Rastan, blood-stained and wounded, who was urging his horse furiously up the hill.

"What would you?" shouted the watchman from his tower above the drawbridge.

"I come from Hassein Bey," panted Rastan, lying, "and bear his urgent word to the Lady Miramé."

"Deposit thy arm and ride in," growled the warder, who by no means liked Rastan's appearance.

The Greek complied at once, and next moment was galloping over the lowered drawbridge into the courtyard, whence he was immediately led into the hall between two soldiers who, at a sign from their officer, remained on guard.

Rastan's crafty eyes drooped quickly, after one glance at the stately face of the chief's daughter, who, with the English child still in her arms, had hastened to the summons.

"Lady," he said, "thy father lies wounded, and would see thee instantly, fearing he may not support the journey here. He bade me tell thee bring the English maid, and an escort of four, with a litter."

For a moment the girl's face paled and her lips trembled. Her father was all the world to her, and the news had been blunt.

"Who art thou? I know thee not!" said the officer who had accompanied Miramé.

"I am a refugee from the caravan which Kasim attacked yesterday," lied Rastan fluently. "That child was with it. The mother Kasim hath sent to his stronghold, and I have just learned the fate of the father."

"Lady," whispered the officer, "I like not the looks of the fellow. His tongue is too glib to match the caution of his eyes. Stay thou here, I beg thee, and let me ride out and inquire into the truth of this."

"Order my horse. Prepare an escort with a litter," was all Miramé's reply, and in such a tone that the officer dared no further remonstrance.

In another three minutes the chief's daughter, with Rastan riding at her side, and followed by four stalwart mountaineers on foot, was taking her way down the mountain, in the direction where her father had so recently ridden. As the little party swept round the spur of the hill out of sight of the castle, Rastan pointed to a path leading into the woods.

"They have borne him up that track, into the shade," he said.

She turned her horse's head without demur, cantering lightly up the slope under the wide branches of oak and elm.

"To the right!" called Rastan.

She obeyed his signal, and as her horse swung into a more shaded path, half a dozen shots rang out, and the four men of the escort fell, mortally struck. At the same moment, two forms leapt from the bush and seized Miramé's horse by either bridle, as Rastan, bending forward, suddenly threw a shawl over her head, and seized her by the elbows. It had all been the work of a second, and she had no time to cry out nor to defend herself. Nor did her captors give her time now to struggle. She was lifted bodily from her horse, bound hand and foot, placed in the litter brought by the escort, and the child thrown bound alongside of her. Then sturdy arms seized the litter, swung it up, and started up the mountain at a round trot.

Rastan, mounting Miramé's splendid horse, shook his fist in the direction of the castle.

"Dog of the Haideranli!" he snarled. "I will make thee pay all that I have lost through that thrice accursed Englishman. For thou shalt learn that he who fights against Kasim's strength must count with Rastan's wit."

Then he rode after the litter, taking the by-paths that led through the wilds to the haunt of the robber-chief in the Sipan Dagh.

And it was not till nearly two hours later that Hassein Beg, riding back gaily from his hawking, with the sheikh and Alan at his side, was greeted at his doorway by a pale-faced, chattering-lipped officer, and learned that his daughter had been decoyed from her home by the news of his wounding.

"It's Rastan, Kasim's ally and friend," said Alan, as the officer babbled out the description of the false messenger.

A roar of fury went up from the crowding mountaineers as the old chief turned to them with flaming eyes.

"Who loves me, follows me," he said, and galloped out through the great doorway.

CHAPTER 4.

In the Robber Stronghold.

THE sun was shedding a fire of opals on the snow-clad peaks and ridges above the robbers' stronghold in the Sipan Dagh, when the litter bearing Miramé and the English maid was halted on the plateau before Kasim's cavern.

Next moment, the daughter of the Haideranli chieftain, feeling her bonds cut, and the shawl snatched from her face, leapt to her feet, and found herself confronting the giant frame and not unhandsome, if savage, face of Kasim himself.

"You dog!" she cried, in clear, ringing accents, her cheeks bloodless with the intensity of her wrath, her eyes ablaze with the outrage of the indignity put on her. "Do you know what you have done? By Allah! Before to-morrow's dawn, nor you, nor one of those that call you lord, shall be alive. Thou, a Haideranli! Thou, who hast eaten at my father's board!"

Kasim's eyes dwelt for a long moment on her sombrely. Two years ago, when he had flaunted it among the noblest in the land, he had cherished the sweet aspiration of one day winning her hand, and both his courage and recklessness had marked him out for many an evidence of his chieftain's favour. And if the hope had died out in the shame of exile and outlawry, the savage circumstances of his life had but turned an honourable worship into a haunting and distempered passion. He had listened to the proposal of the Russian spy, Mahon, seeing in it the opportunity, so long sought, of winning by force or strategy possession of the old chief's daughter. And to this end he had taken Rastan and Saponyadi into his confidence, and by reason of bribes and menaces won them to his purpose. His finer instincts blunted by the license of the last two years, he had cozened himself into the rosy belief that, once Miramé found herself in his power, she would yield to his arguments, become his wife, and make his peace with Hassein. His blinded vision



Alan watched the daughter of the chief with admiring eyes.

saw only the regal, peerless beauty of her, and forgot the high pride, the indomitable spirit of her race.

For a moment he quailed before the lash of her words; nor was he oblivious of the fact that her arrival and her ringing defiance had aroused an usual excitement among his followers, a good half of whom were men of the Haideranli clan, and by no means unresponsive still to the old instinctive allegiance to the call of their chieftain. It was a ticklish moment for Kasim, and he realised that a false step might easily provoke a mutiny and wrest from him at one swoop all for which he had risked so much and craved so long.

Mirame saw his hesitation, and her eyes swept the throng of savage faces, recognising at a glance the familiar features of those of her tribe.

"Men of the Haideranli!" she called, her voice thrilled with triumph, "Who will stand by me? Who will protect the daughter of their chieftain from the impious hands of yonder perjured dog?"

She was an irresistible picture as she stood there, with arms outstretched and glorious head erect, superb in the convincing majesty of her undaunted womanhood. And a hundred sabres and rifles leapt aloft in answer to her appeal, as with a wild yell of assent and admiration, a half of Kasim's men forced their way forward, and gathered in a semicircle round her.

But the bandit-chief had not asserted and held good his rule for two years to be flouted by the emotions of a moment.

"Back, ye dogs!" he snarled, turning on them with a fury so savage and menacing that the advancing line halted, irresolute.

Then, as Mirame was about to speak again, he turned suddenly on her, silencing her with a gesture.

"Lady," he said. "You are as safe here as in your father's castle. Yet hostage you must be, till I make treaty with Hassein. In war as in love, wit must win what force cannot hope to gain."

He bowed low, with a grace that was only half ironic.

"An escort of ten for Lady Mirame," he called, and as ten men sprang forward he pointed to the child still lying in the litter.

Before any could touch it, Mirame, mistaking the significance of his gesture, sprang forward, and snatched it to her breast.

"Nay, fear not!" said Kasim, with a grimace. "I devour not children. The men lead you, Lady Mirame, to the cavern where is the maid's mother. There you may rest, and women shall serve you at your command. There, too, I follow you shortly to lay before you the terms of your release and your father's safety."

Mirame, with a disdainful flash of her eyes, swept past him, following the erect figures of her escort to a cavern that, almost opposite that of Kasim's, bulged outward over a dizzy depth of some six hundred feet above the pass by which she had so lately been borne.

She paused for a moment before the file of halting soldiers, her face so grave and stern that not a man of them dared more than squint at her round the corner of an eyelash. She had always loved the big children of the tribe, and as she saw the whipped look of them, a smile bubbled round the dimples at the

corners of her mouth, and was caught up into a sparkle of mischief in the frankly laughing eyes.

"Ye are my serving-maids, whelps of old Hassein's hand," she whispered in a silvery trill that missed Kasim's bended ear. "Those whom Miramé trusts to-day, all the Haideranli honour to-morrow. You have Miramé's trust."

The "Hoo!" that rapped out was like the smite of a great wind on an oak that creaked in its first bow to a superior force. And, amid the clatter of rifle-butts, and the long indrawn sigh that followed, Miramé lifted the skin curtain hanging over the entrance of the cavern and stepped inside.

It was a roomy cavern, and its interior was strangely out of contrast to the desolate wildness without. Persian carpets were piled three inches thick on the floor. Rich divans, thick with cushions, gleaming with a myriad silken hues, lined the walls. Little lacquered tables rose here and there, and tapestries, once destined to grace palaces, hid the bareness of the rock walls. And over all streamed a light as of clouded amber from a great wide casement, windowed with a sort of gelatine, which overlooked the pass six hundred feet beneath and the expanse of the golden-tinged Eastern sky that was already brooding under the sway of the setting sun.

The eyes of the lovely Haideranli took in the whole apartment with one glance that rested on a motionless figure huddled among the cushions in a corner remote from every ray of sunshine. Miramé glided forward, a smile infinitely tender on her lips as she glanced from the still, despairing form on the couch to the wide, inquiring tremulous blue eyes of the child in her arms.

"I bring thee thy daughter," she whispered over the averted face of the woman, and, bending low, she laid the child's soft-flushed cheek against the tear-stained face of the mother. There was a long sigh, a convulsive straining of the arms, a little hushed murmur of "Mamuna!"—and then Miramé stole silently away towards the window that overlooked the road whence rescue must come.

The gelatine window worried her; and, climbing on to a divan, she drew a small jewelled dagger from the folds of the laced waistcoat enclosing her supple waist, and, slashing away the parchment, thrust out her head, breathing in great gasps the fresh pine-scented air.

A sudden clutch at her gown brought her back into the room. "Who are you?" The question was almost snapped at her.

Miramé saw before her a woman, small and lovely, and hair golden as sunshine on ripe corn, with eyes intensely blue, and lips like a trembling, scarlet thread.

"Thy friend," she replied promptly. "And, like thee, prisoner to Kasim. And thou?"

"I am Helen Adair," was the answer. "They have slain my husband. I heard them talking of it. I thought my girlie was killed, too. How came you to bring her to my arms?"

Miramé told her.

Mrs. Adair nodded.

"They are wicked men," she said. "They ask four thousand pounds ransom. I have sent to the consul at Van for it. I am rich. I will send for more to release you, too."

Miramé laughed, and, bending down, lifted the little woman to her side.

"Look!" she said. "Do you see those little points of light dancing among the trees far, far, far down? They are the lances of the Haideranli. My father is chieftain. He is coming for me. You will have no need to pay a ransom."

The clatter of arms outside the doorway, and the harsh voice of Kasim raised in short commands, brought the two women to attention, and, as they stepped to the floor, Miramé's arm thrown protectingly round the trembling form of the Englishwoman, Kasim strode into the room.

"My servants ask me, ere they admit my dogs," said Miramé, with a flash of her dauntless eyes.

The handit-chief walked up to her, and halted at the points of her outstretched fingers.

"A truce to thy reviling, lady," he said, in an accent so sombre and rasping, that despite her courage, the woman in Miramé quailed.

"The hour of thy choice is come," went on Kasim. "The old war-dog, thy father, rides this way, and with him fifteen hundred of his best. But no art of war hath he that Kasim learned not under him. I foresee his every trick and ruse. Yet I would not lift my hand against him."

"Lady," he went on, with a sudden note of sincere passion vibrating in his voice. "I have loved thee for two years. I am a noble, if outlawed. Thy father's little finger can break the outlawry. Without thee, I shall be the foe of Allah and all men. With thee, chief of men and servant of Allah. Pass me thy word that thou wilt wed with me, and straightway thou rejoinst thy father. Baulk me now, and not one of those that march hither shall ever see the Ala Dagh again. My men are now tracking their steps from the heights. Delay not. Thy choice is in thy hands. Thy father's life, thyself, are in my hands. Choose."

For a moment there rested over the cavern a silence unbroken by so much as a breath. Outside, the clatter of arms and men

tramping could be heard, a bark of a dog, a sudden command. Through the window lay the peace of the Eastern sky, coral painted with islands adrift from the west. But in the cavern, silence, profound and absolute.

In the hands of Miramé, held behind her back, two daggers flirted with shadowy sprays of light falling through the slashed window. The face of Miramé was in the dark. Only her eyes shone like stars, sullen with a weight of cloud.

"Choose," snarled Kasim, as a shot rang sharp and clear across the crisp air.

"I was forgetting," sighed Miramé, with a little shudder upward of her chin, as if she were shaking off some clammy touch of a malarial mist.

Then, supple as a young panther, sudden as a flash of lightning, she leapt at the burly giant in front of her, her right hand swooping from above, her left thrusting straight from the elbow.

Kasim's forearm saved his abdomen, but the two-edged blade of the poignard in Miramé's right ripped his cheek from frontal bone to point of jaw.

He reeled backward, curseless for choking, but clutching at the revolver in his sash. Miramé padded after him, terrible in her outraged pride and wrath, bent on his death. Mrs. Adair was crouching moaning over her little maid.

Kasim, circling round, suddenly saw the face of the girl, and, for the first time in his life, his heart was invaded with an overwhelming shudder of fear. Bears he had tracked, wolves fought single-handed, and held his own against mortal odds in many a contest. But this panting, eager woman, with marble cheeks, and eyes like stars on fire, and hands instinct with the silent conviction of death—this he felt he dared not face. Like an angry, baffled wolf he snarled at her, and leapt at the curtain.

"Thou shalt pay later," he rasped over a hot, dry tongue, as he tore the hanging aside and disappeared.

For a moment the chieftainess of the Haideranli stood as if carved in marble, her whole body craned forward as if to spring. Then her hands fell suddenly to her side, a little sob shook the whiteness of her throat, and she walked gropingly to where Mrs. Adair knelt by her child, and encircled the two of them in a convulsive, trembling hug that showed that however strong ran in her veins the blood of a savage warrior race, she was after all but woman still, with all a woman's need of protecting love.

"The little one sleeps," whispered Mrs. Adair presently.

"Come to the window," answered Miramé. "The battle has commenced. Hear the rifle shots. I will show my scarf and give the battle-cry."

In the fading light, the girl's beautiful face seemed to shed a very glow of enthusiasm. Far out from the casement she leant, waving her head-scarf striped with green and crimson and gold in the faint wind.

Then, shrill as the call of a thrush above the wrangle of sparrows, her war-cry chimed above the rattle of the rifles.

"Hi—hoo! Hoo—ha—hai!"

From hill to hill the echo rallied, till "Hoo—ha—hai!" seemed to rock among the whisper of the pines, and make a very cradle of the strife around.

For a moment a great silence intervened, as if each side had called a truce to give time for one long breath. And in the pause of it the girl's voice rang out, clear as one deep note struck in silver.

"Miramé! Rescue!" she intoned, and from beneath them volleyed back the brazen-throated shout of fifteen hundred savage warriors: "Miramé! Rescue!"

"Jade!" yelled a voice from behind, as a savage hand plucked at her ankle—a hand too rough for so dainty a moulding. "If thou criest again, I'll tear thy tongue out."

One fleet glance of Miramé's defiant eyes swept the scowling, gashed visage of Kasim. Then deftly she launched her free foot against the restraining wrist, numbing it to uselessness. And before the infuriated bandit could recover his grip, she had swung herself clear out of the window, and hung balanced on the outside ledge, rebel and sublimely triumphant.

"Miramé! Rescue! Hi—hoo! Hoo—ha—hai!" she chanted in a very delirium of defiance. Then, turning and leaning her head backwards towards the room, she faced Kasim's fury-flushed eyes. "Dog!" she shrieked. "If thou art not gone on the instant, I will fling myself on the wings of Allah. Go. Go to thy death."

Kasim, with one inexpressible look, went.

From her perch the girl, calm now and intently watchful, followed every movement of the troops. The path, hewn out of the face of the cliff, wound up in the shape of the letter S, on one side overhanging an abrupt precipice, on the other overhung by a bare wall of cliff just as abrupt. Had Kasim had all his full force of four hundred strong, not two brigades, nor three, could ever have won through the hail of boulders, shot, and slugs rained on the toiling hordes beneath. Even as it was, with but two hundred men to line the wide extent of ridges, the bombardment was so terrific, the stream of rocks and shot so well directed and sustained, that not even the presence of Hassein, not even the appeal of their captured princess could fibre the mountaineers to the impossible feat of winning through such a storm of death.

Sullenly they fell back, foot by foot, leaving half their number in the narrow way, and seeking shelter and counsel in the fringe of woods half a mile beyond.

Miramé, from her perch, had recognised her father, flung one joyous greeting to him, then with a new sense of fluttering at her throat had followed the fortunes of the long-limbed, broad-shouldered, blue-eyed Ingeliz, who that dawning had blushed so furiously when meeting her gaze. Twice she held her breath, straining clasped, tortured fingers against her heart, as she saw him strive to find a way up the unscalable face of the cliff, only to fall backward on a crossed trelliswork of spear-hafts. Then, as the retreat sounded, and the men faded away after the wailing bugle, her eyes followed him still, and saw him standing at a corner of the pass, pointing upward, talking vehemently to the old sheikh, and ever and again punctuating his argument with a tap of the hand on the head of a great wolfhound panting at his side.

Then night fell, silent, black, impenetrable, and Miramé, with a strange feeling of desolation at her heart, crept from her perch, groped her way to the still impassive figure of Mrs. Adair, and burying her head in her arms gave way to a passion of tears.

CHAPTER 5.

'Twixt Earth and Heaven.

DOWN in the silent valleys, beneath the oaks and elms on the low spur of Ala Dagh, Hassein and his war-dogs had picked up the trail of the abductors of the daughter of the Haideranli. The stark bodies of their comrades were pointers sufficient to tell a child the full tale of the trick that had been played. But no famished wolf was ever surer on a blood-stained spoor, than Hassein's mountaineers on the track of shed feet. Bent double, with nose craned earthward, half a dozen of them had trotted unerringly after the tell-tale track of the litter-bearers, and had proof been wanted that they were on the right trail, was it not supplied by the spoor of Miramé's own beautiful chestnut, whose left forefoot was shod, after immemorial custom, with the point of the toe forming a crescent, curved inward.

Straight to Kasim's den the track had led, and Hassein and his fifteen hundred picked warriors had arrived there within half an hour of Miramé's first interview with the robber.

Yet scarcely nine hundred mustered under the sheltering trees, standing in a grim, serrated semicircle round the chief and his council of officers, apparently indifferent to the whispered conference so laden with their fate.

"Let sentinels be placed," said Hassein, presently. "That done, let all others sleep. All night will Kasim's men keep watch and ward; for well the renegade knows that the Hawk of the Haideranli swoops at dark. In the hour before the dawn, when the livers of the dissolute fail them for fear of the morrow, will we attack. Let four quiet and sure men go forth and seek for all the traces of the Sheikh Jelaluddin, and that valiant youth, his comrade. For my heart is sore because I have not seen them since the sounding of the retreat."

Like clouds to the breath of the wind they sped to his behest. It was as though four foxes crept from a field of corn, laid low by a miraculous scythe, when amid the silent sinking to earth of the nine hundred, the hunters of the dead wormed silently through the trees into the shadowed, awful heart of the night-swathed pass. Cunning hunters they were, brave, tenacious, not easily discouraged. But though they sought far and carefully, no trace could they find of the sheikh or of Alan Wayward. A long hour they sought, and then, crawling noiselessly back, made for the camp.

Yet, during that hour, the sure, unseen finger of Fate, turning its eternal wheel, was drawing nearer and nearer together the chief figures of the drama into the vortex of a final struggle.

Up above, Kasim was conferring with the Tartar giant, Yaldif.

Somewhere, between earth and sky, and very much alive were Alan, the sheikh, and Clok.

"Before dawn comes, Yaldif," the bandit chief was saying, "all our men of the Haideranli will desert. They have seen the old chieftain down below. The call of the blood is on them. We cannot hold the place with a hundred. We must go."

"By the staircase of the tunnel," said Yaldif, with a grin.

"Even so," assented Kasim. "The old hawk, Hassein, will count on my watching through the night. He will not attack till dawn. I will accompany thee now. Thou wilt remain at the top of the tunnel, while I descend and send up one by one those we can trust."

"No need for thee to trouble, lord," growled Yaldif. "I can find my way."

"Doubtless," said Kasim, grimacing to a pang of his wounded cheek. "But I would see how best I may convey the women we captured."

"At thy orders, lord," said Yaldif.

"Lead on," snapped Kasim.

Through the leaden darkness the two glided, passing drowsy

pickets, here and there distributing a brief order, till they halted at a small cavern at the base of the most northern limit of the plateau, and at a spot where the cliff towered upward and inward for a good four hundred feet. Into this cavern they dived, and after half a dozen paces in the darkness, Yaldif paused, reached up his hand, and seized a couple of torches. Lighting one, he passed the other to Kasim.

"It will serve to light thy way down, my lord," he said.

The yellow flare of the resin showed nothing but the solid walls of a cavern about twenty feet square, that to anyone ignorant of its secrets would have baffled scrutiny. But Yaldif treated the northern wall with scantest courtesy, giving it a lunge with his foot that sent swaying inwards a meshed door, carefully encrusted with clay and rock, whose yawning mouth revealed a rough-hewn flight of steps. Holding low his torch, Yaldif preceded his master, and in grim silence the two wound their way up some three hundred steps, till, smashing out the light of his torch against the wall, Yaldif thrust aside a cunning screen of brushwood, and stepped out beneath the stars.

Kasim joined him on the ridge. He had viewed the same scene many times, but never with such interest as now, though it was for just such an emergency he had caused this back stairway to be made. To go two hundred yards in any direction, save one, was impossible. He stood, as it were, on a peak in the centre of a circle of abysses. The steps gave him access to his stronghold, and two or three men might hold that way against a thousand. Yet there was another way down, one he had found himself by accident when hunting a great one-horned goat with the dog, the Ingeliz, Wayward, had won from him; but he chuckled to his soul as he thought of that way, with its awful climb round boulders which a man must master with his finger-nails, and be a big man and dauntless to succeed. A babe might hold that way, he thought, and laughed aloud in his content.

"Hoo!" grunted the Tartar. "My lord laughs. It is well."

"Yes, it is well, Yaldif!" said Kasim. "Those rebel dogs of the Haideranli, who would desert me in my need, will find the stronghold deserted when the old hawk swoops at dawn. Here is the plan: Thou restest here. I go down now, to send up all who are faithful to me. If any man who ever swore service to Hassein come, seize him by the throat and strangle him. There are two or three of such, that I shall send thee. When all of ours are up, I shall bring up the Lady of the Haideranli, and that Ingeliz captive and her daughter. Let the men build tents from the trees, as they come up. The captive is worth much money. And the daughter of Hassein shall be my bride before to-morrow's sun sets, wherefore they must have due shelter."

"Let my lord reflect!" said Yaldif. "If Hassein's daughter make an outcry, he will be alone among the men of her tribe. Let my lord bring the women first."

"Thou hast good scent, old dog," said Kasim. "And I will follow thy counsel, though I think not that any man of the Haideranli will move for some hours yet. For to quell their cursed fears for the Lady, I called them in to-night, in squads of ten, and after rating them, pledged their allegiance in coffee and the cursed Ingeliz brandy drink. And in their cups was the sleep-draught. Nevertheless, it might be that some should wake. Therefore, I will first bring the women. I go. Light me a pace down the steps. Then return and watch."

Yaldif re-entered the tunnelled stairway, lit Kasim's torch, and accompanied his master down some hundred steps. Then handing the robber-chief the torch, he groped his way back to the opening above.

And somewhere, between earth and sky, Alan Wayward, the Sheikh Jelaluddin and the great wolfhound, Clok, were seeking Miramé, daughter of the Haideranli.

In the ways of wisdom, in whose devious by-paths the sheikh was leading his disciple, not the least of his lessons had been to be incredulous of his eyesight in order that he might discipline his eyes into a sure belief of their authority. It was a lesson that appealed to a man who had wielded the willow on many a tough occasion. And when Miramé's bright eyes had distinguished the "Ingeliz" youth—whose appearance had such strange power to make her heart beat beyond her control—and saw him arguing with the sheikh, Alan Wayward had been proving himself a masterful disciple.

The angle into which Fate had guided their steps commanded a perspective of the robber stronghold, and a suggestion of the plateau which capped it. Love, that blinds the lover in the presence of his beloved, lends him the vision of an eagle, and the craft of a wild cat, when his beloved is out of sight and surrounded by danger. And Alan's heart had been on fire for ten long hours. The gracious beauty of the chieftain's daughter, the one slow fleeting glance she had cast on him, whipped all the chivalry of his nature to a noble longing of service. He loved without knowing it. He only knew that he wanted to be of service. There was no braggart desire to shine in her eyes, no hypocritical humility to sneak out of merit due. He had lost the thought of himself, being only and

utterly possessed by the thought of her. And the suggestion of that plateau, outlined like a promise so vaguely against the night, appealed to him like the glinting snick of a ball slipping off the bat into a zone just outside the finger-nails of cover-point.

"Art thou cat or fool," said Jelaluddin, scanning the dark mass of forbidding cliff.

"When thou would'st seize the horses of Mahon, O wisdom of the ages," said Alan fiercely, "did I ask thee if thou wast thunderbolt or shadow?"

"Hoo! Thou growest!" said the sheikh smoothly. "Lead on. I follow."

For a long moment Alan scanned the fading line of that suggested plateau, all unconscious that Clok was looking at him with an intimately intelligent eye. Clok had seen just that attitude once before, and just from that same spot. He had not forgotten either the subsequent scramble, or the succeeding feed on succulent raw goat flesh. To his canine intelligence, this new master was "seeing goats," and Clok was "on." He gave a little whimper, ran forward, looked back, whimpered again, and with one bound was on a rock ten feet above his master's head.

"He hath a devil," grunted the sheikh, with a sudden sparkle in his aged eyes.

"Let's follow it," said Alan, grinning responsively.

He lunged against the rock, setting a back for the venerable prophet, who took it, light as a cat.

And it was thus they climbed the tortuous, perilous face of the cliff—Clok, animated and eager, and abrim with his own importance, leading the way. Alan and the sheikh clambering behind, the prophet negotiating bulging rocks over his disciple's shoulders, the disciple swarming after him by aid of the prophet's never-to-be-parted-with staff. And it was thus, that a good quarter of an hour before Kasim and Yaldif reached the plateau—no longer suggested but defined—Alan, the sheikh, and the dog, had explored it, cursed it, and bemoaned it, and in sheer desperation laid down to rest in the fringe of the brushwood that screened the hidden steps.

The sheikh was gently snoring when the rays of Yaldif's torch awoke Alan to the sense of emergency. He clapped his left hand over Jelaluddin's mouth, and his right on Clok's muzzle. And it was thus they heard the conversation of the brigands, and thus they agreed by some obscure process of thought-reading on a common plan of action, as Yaldif disappeared in the depths with his master.

"When he comes up," whispered Alan.

"You will leap at his throat," went on the sheikh.

"And you will smash his ankles with your staff," said Alan.

"Whereon you will pitch him over the cliff," chuckled Jelaluddin, who, despite his wisdom could never divest himself of his Arabian imagination.

"Rats!" said Alan. "The ticklish part will occur when Kasim brings up the ladies. Not seeing the Tartar, he'll be suspicious, and raise an alarm."

"Behold how discipline hath oiled thy wits, my son," said the sheikh. "For forty-eight hours thou hast not slept, yet thou hast learnt a craftiness that slipped past my tired wits. 'Tis true thou wast refreshed by looking over-youngly in a maiden's eyes."

"Hst!" hissed Alan. "He returns. Let us wait till Kasim returns with the women."

"Hearken," said the sheikh, laying his mouth against Alan's ear. "Kasim will bring first the Ingeliz lady. He would not leave Mirame with that Tartar dog. Wait till then. Then spring on the Tartar. Smite and spare not. And as he falls, follow thou Kasim. I will finish the Tartar. It is not fitting that the daughter of the Haideranli should have to say to her husband that once naught but her spirit stood between her and the mercy of that wolf of the wilds. And verily that way down there must be long for a proud maiden to pass with such as Kasim. On the way thou shalt slay Kasim, and lead forth Mirame."

Motionless they lay in the cover of the brushwood, watching Yaldif pace to and fro. It seemed hours before Kasim returned, pushing before him the half-fainting form of Mrs. Adair, with her child in her arms.

Nor did Kasim wait to waste words.

"Guard her, Yaldif!" he cried. "The daughter of the Hawk is as a wild thing. The Haideranli sleep, else would they swoop to her clamour. But now is she bound, and a shawl covereth her cries."

"Delay not," growled Yaldif, his bony fingers fastening on the arm of the half-fainting Englishwoman.

Slowly, without so much as disturbing a twig, Alan raised himself first on to his knees, and then to his feet. The huge frame of the Tartar loomed over the top of the brushwood, through which the sheikh was creeping, silent, sure, and deadly as any snake.

Alan Wayward crouched, till he felt muscle lying on muscle like steel springs close gripped together. Then, with one bound, he cleared the brushwood, landing squarely against Yaldif's great shoulders, with left hand jabbed hard on the nape of the

neck, and his right arm locked in mortal strangling grip around the Tartar's throat. With a faint stifled cry Mrs. Adair reeled backwards from Yaldif's splaying grip, and as the Tartar swayed his great bulk forward, straining his iron throat against that deadly lock, "thwack" and "thwack" went the sheikh's oaken staff in a dreadfully scientific lateral right and left that took Yaldif's ankles just below the bulge one after the other, depriving him with magical celerity of both his feet, and leaving him throttled and helpless in the remorseless vice of Alan's tightening arms.

In little more than a minute it was all over, and the Tartar lay like a log, senseless on the ground.

"Get thee gone after Kasim," hissed the sheikh, as Alan dived down the black way, the hands of the man of wisdom fastened in the neck-cloth of Yaldif, and with one mighty swirl, sent the Tartar's body whizzing over the precipice into the dizzy depths beneath. Then, lifting Mrs. Adair and the child in his arms, Jelaluddin bore them into cover of the brushwood, bade Clok mount guard, and himself strolled placidly to the entrance, and stood meditatively whirling his good oaken staff.

Alan, meanwhile, was groping blindly downward, counting the steps as he went. They seemed interminable enough. But he was thinking more of the return journey than of the descent; for caustic as the old sheikh's lessons often were, and sometimes seemingly without aptness, yet Alan Wayward had learnt that however ruggedly they were conveyed there was in them a fund of wisdom that being spelt out, meant, "Make of each planting of thy foot, a sure stepping stone to thy object."

He had counted two hundred and sixty before a yellow flicker of light and Kasim's panting breath warned him to grip himself for struggle. Rifle and battle-axe he had left at the foot of the cliff, down below in the pass. But he had his revolver still, and his hand gripped the barrel savagely as he distinguished the willowy, regal form of Mirame, bound, and shawl-enveloped, lunging upward on Kasim's shoulder. The bare rocks of the tunnel offered no shelter, and had the robber's head been lifted, his gaze must have encountered Alan's savage scowl. But the stately daughter of the mountains was no featherweight even for the giant bandit, and his head hung forward, and his breath came hard, as he toiled up the steep steps.

And it was on account of this that his toil ceased before he had either expected or desired. For as he came in reach of Alan's arm, the young Englishman swung him a blow on the temple with the butt of his revolver that would have felled a rhinoceros. Kasim reeled into oblivion backwards, crashing sideways on to the wall, and sliding like a buttered cat down step after step—but not before Alan's left arm had plucked the precious burden from his grasp, and held it for one moment, fluttering like a terrified bird against his own most fearful heart.

"Don't be afraid!" he whispered. "I am the Englishman you saw this morning with your father."

The darkness was as of the grave, and in vain he sought for knots or knife. His knife had been lost in the climb up. The knots he could not find, save those in the shawl, which, after a moment's fumbling, he succeeded in lifting from the girl's head. Then for a confusing moment he was conscious that Mirame's face grew close to his. He could feel the quick panting of her breath, divine rather than see the searching glow of her eyes.

"Thou art the Ingeliz youth?" she whispered, in a strained voice. "Thou swearest it?"

"I swear it!" said Alan, raging inwardly at the trembling of her form against his supporting arm, and suddenly conscious that a dagger-point was pricking at his gizzard.

"Then tell me," came the quick reply, in a fierce whisper, "what wast thou doing when the bugle called the retreat at sunset?"

"I was with my friend the sheikh, seeking a path to search for thee," said Alan. "And my wolfhound found it."

"I saw thee," said the girl, with a long-drawn sigh. "Since thou hast no knife, and cannot loose me, take me—take me in thy arms and carry me, for surely thou art strong."

Alan forgot to count the steps up. Nor could he ever remember how often he paused. It was only when he reached the open air that he was reminded of the time.

"Verily," said the sheikh, after Alan had panted out his tale, "thinkest thou that I am a milch-cow, that I should blink here while thou dalliest in the dark? Thou hast had time—"

"Nay, be not angry," said Mirame, as she slipped to the ground, and stood swaying, while the sheikh's keen dagger severed her bonds. "Did not my father tell me that thou lovest wisdom? And he hath taught me much."

"Ugh!" growled Jelaluddin. "What wisdom could'st thou learn of him? He thought not even to borrow the dagger in thy hand to loosen thy bonds!"

"More than my heart ever taught me before," replied Mirame, with a little ripple of mischievous laughter, and careless of the sudden flush that swept her cheeks. "For, indeed, I was sore afraid lest he should fall and utterly crush me. Oh, the air! the stars! Freedom from that foul den!" she cried, in a sudden

fever of enthusiasm. "But the Ingeliz lady! And the child? What have you done with them?"

The sheikh pointed with his staff to the covert where they lay. And as the girl hastened towards them, he looked approvingly at Alan, who, from the moment that Miramé had fled his clasp, had been engaged in rolling the greatest boulders he could find down the mouth of the tunnel. The sheikh silently proceeded to help him, and for five minutes they toiled together, till the entry to the steps was blocked with an effective barrier that nothing but dynamite or hours of labour could remove.

"It is enough," said the sheikh, as the two rolled a last great boulder across the blocked exit. "One man perchance may worm painfully his way through. I will rest here, for my staff sufficeth to smite the head of any fool who ventures forth. Take thou the women to Hassein, and dally not. Have we not heard that such men of the Haideranli as Kasim hath are drugged. Bid Hassein attack at once."

"There are two!" said Alan.

"Then take the fair Miramé first," said the sheikh, with a little stinging chuckle.

To climb a precipitous cliff with a vigorous man for aid is one thing; to descend it, by the faint, deceptive glimmer of a crescent moon, with a regally beautiful woman for convoy, is quite another.

Had Alan been less strong, or Miramé less sure of his courage, both had met their death a dozen times. But their trust was perfect and mutual, and almost without a word they swayed and hung, held fast now to bare face of rock, now, face almost touching face, to each other, till at last, after what seemed to both like a dreamer's climb into Eden, they stood in a little patch of moonlight, on the narrow way of the pass, where Miramé had seen Alan disputing with the sheikh—was it hours or many centuries, or but a few minutes before?

They were both flushed, panting, almost breathless, and quite breathlessly happy.

The little patch of moonlight was big enough to illumine both their faces. Alan knew it. But he dared not lift his eyes. The girl dared. And her gaze, candid as her great heart, scanned every feature of him, and as she scanned them her soul awakened and sung.

She took a pace towards him, and with a movement wholly impulsive she laid her hands on his shoulders.

"You are a brave man," she said, in a clear, silvery whisper. "Most courteous and most true. I think I could love a man like you!"

"And I," said Alan, suddenly raising his head and meeting the frank, clear eyes, "I—"

Then he paused, afraid of himself, afraid of the sudden flush that had grown into Miramé's cheeks.

He caught the hands slipping from his shoulders, and drew the girl towards him.

"I love you!" he said simply. "Yet I ought not to say it, for you are the daughter of a great chief, and I am simply an adventurer. You—you should have a king for mate!"

"Make yourself a king!" said Miramé, with a wonderful softness in her voice. "I can wait a little while for any crown you bring."

Before Alan could reply, she had glided to his side, her hand was resting lightly on his shoulder, and her voice murmuring softly:

"Two of my father's scouts are creeping along the path from out of that skirt of trees. You shall lead me to my father. See how those creeping forms will rush at this little sigh."

"Hoo-hoo! Hoo, ha, hai!"

It was soft as the flush of a brook over round pebbles. But it passed from the spot where they stood through rank on starting rank, and when, a few minutes later, Alan led their chieftain's daughter into the camp he seemed to be swept away into mid-air, to a cradled murmur of "Hoo, hoo, hoo!" through which he was only dimly conscious of the form of Miramé encircled in her father's arms, with her eyes shining on him, and her outstretched hand beating rhythmic time to the swaying arms that bore him in triumph on a moonlit tangle of crossed spears and rifles.

CHAPTER 6.

The Swoop of the Hawk.

ALAN's tale was soon told, and so experienced a war-lord as Hassein needed no comment to prompt him to action.

"First must we have down the sheikh," he said, "and that lady of the Ingeliz and her child."

To this task he despatched a hundred of his tallest and most expert marksmen, with the order that while ten of them should be detached to escort the sheikh and Mrs. Adair to safety, the rest should, from their vantage on the height, pick off Kasim's sentinels and sharpshooters.

"The fool will think we are in force there, and set all his men to hold the tunnel, or, at least, block it up," laughed Hassein. "Thou, my daughter," he went on, turning to Miramé, "will

wait here and receive the lady of the Ingeliz, and with her go, under escort, to Van; leave the lady with the offendi, and return home."

"Nay, but let the escort take the lady," said Miramé. "I would stay here to greet thee on thy return from victory."

"Thou hast heard my command!" said Hassein sternly.

The girl wound an arm round his neck, and ran her fingers softly through the silvery whiteness of his beard.

"Not a hair of it must be injured," she said dreamily. "And who shall know the count if I go? Leave me twenty men. I will prepare food for thee."

She was very irresistible, and the sheikh wavered.

"Stay, then," he said, after a moment's reflection, and turned towards Alan.

"Young man," he said, his voice quivering with emotion, "between me and thee no words suffice."

Then, rather to Alan's embarrassment, the old chieftain flung his arms about his shoulders, and held him for a moment hugged.

"Give me thy shoulder-scarf, Miramé," said the chief. And as the girl obeyed he bound the soft folds of silk, shimmering with the green and crimson and gold of the Haideranli, round the young man's chest, and knotted it at his waist.

"I make thee captain of the Haideranli for ever," he said, with a proud gesture. "I and thou shall lead the attack. Come!"

Not a sound disturbed the silence of the forest as the eight hundred stole out in two columns after the chief and Alan. Now and again, as the moon shone out from the continuous procession of grey banks of cloud, the crouching figures fell flat and motionless among the stark, unseeing faces of their comrades who had fallen in the first attack. Slow their progress assuredly was as, blotted against the cliff, crouching, crawling, leaping, gliding, they drifted like a winding wisp of mist round the last bend of the great S-shaped zigzag and confronted the straight incline that, about four hundred yards in length, led at the angle of a slanted penholder straight on to the plateau of the robbers' stronghold.

Here they halted, waiting, shoulder growing against shoulder, fingers hard gripped round the weapon each man fancied most. The suspense was sufficient to try the courage of the best trained troops in the world. Any moment might bring an avalanche of rocks, a hail of shot and slugs through their serried ranks that would sweep them in hundreds into the depths. But Hassein was a born leader, and he was waiting for the signal from above. He divined well enough that some unexpected catastrophe had hindered the eyes of Kasim's scouts from "spotting" their progress up to the point they had gained, and he had no mind to risk again unnecessarily the lives of his tribesmen by leading them into some cunning ambush.

Yet, in good truth, he might have led them on, and without danger; for up above consternation and confusion reigned, and the cause of it was Kasim himself. A good hour had passed since the robber-chief had gone hurling headlong down his treasured path of retreat, and he had lain like a log, unconscious all the time. Nor when his reason reeled back to him had he any notion of the time elapsed since his fall. He had not seen Alan; he had seen, indeed, nothing but a dreadful gyrating jumble of fiery star-fish. His first thought on waking was that some rock had fallen and smitten him, and he groped round with his hands to discover the body of Miramé. It was only when he found nothing but the bare rock that a glimmer of suspicion darted like a knife-thrust through his aching head. For a long minute his hands fastened on his beard, and while his head strained back he took a steady pull at his chin. The effect of it was as if he had plunged his pate into a tub of crushed ice. The hurt of it steadied the zigzag of his muscle centres, and brought sight into the glazed vision of his eyes.

"It's Yaldif!" he grunted. "The Tartar beast covets the Lady of the Haideranli!"

No wounded panther's spring could have equalled the leap out and upwards that his tortured soul compelled his bruised limbs to. In our parlance, he was "gentleman" to his nail ends. And the thought of Miramé, there on that deserted plateau with the brutal Tartar, alone—he leapt up the staircase in long, plodding strides, and only ceased when his head and hands and knees struck one symphony out of the obtruding rocks blocking his further progress.

He sat down abruptly, under the rugged compulsion, and in the instant realised that he had been outwitted by the Englishman, and realised how.

"Get ye to the outposts!" he said to the picket as he gained the plateau. "Call up every man! Leave the Haideranli dogs; they are all drugged! Bring every man we have to me here!"

His order was obeyed, and in less than ten minutes he had gathered the whole of his available force in the cavern, and sent them up the tunnelled steps. For his stronghold he cared not. His aim was fixed only on the regaining of the lady of his dreams. No suggestion happened to him of the possibility of his having lain unconscious an hour. He was bent on speed. He thought the "Ingeliz" could not possibly be ten minutes ahead of him. And so, with triumph in his heart, he urged his men up and up, to the glare of forty torches, till they stood with the yellow flare

illuminating the piled jumble of rocks which Alan Wayward and the sheikh had hurled down.

It was the first set-back in cunning Kasim had ever known. He realised all the force of it, and his face went grim and hard as the rocks around him.

"Turn about!" he said shortly. "Follow me! Scouts and sharpshooters will rejoin their posts. Let them pass first in sections. The others remain and follow me."

It had been a kind of picnic, this dive into a tunnel without exit, for the wild, careless Turcomans and Tartars. They trotted down laughing, vying with each other to take three, four, or even seven steps at a bound.

Twenty-seven of them reeled laughing into the open, and trotted across the plateau towards their respective posts of observation. Twenty-seven of them reeled, riddled with bullets in one little ring of moonlight, thirty yards from the exit of the cavern they had left. Hassein's men, four hundred feet above, had sighted for a long half-hour every shadow of the patch the doomed men had crossed.

And while the grey smoke was flirting with the moonshine, Hassein's men charged.

"Hi! Hoo! Hoo! Ha-hai!"

"It's more dreadful than the wolf-packed whimper," thought Alan as, conscious of the scarf he bore, he glanced a glance back, roared the word "Steady!" and dashed up the slope.

Hassein's dogs were in full possession of the plateau within three minutes; and even the old chieftain, calm and placid as he was, seemed somewhat stupefied by the sight of a hundred men grouped variously at commanding posts, yet sound asleep. He threw a swift glance at Alan.

"Is it thy work?" he asked.

"Forgettest thou?" said Alan, a little angrily. "I can fight: I cannot poison. Did I not tell thee Kasim drugged—"

"I remember, hot blood," said the old man.

With one sweep of his cautious eyes he searched the plateau: then with a swift gesture to right and left, he sent his following into a semicircle of rifles, scimitars and lances, that left them like a ring of petrified marbles chiselled on to the amphitheatre of rock they lined.

The chieftain grouped out twenty of them.

"Gather me those drugged swine," he said, "and plant them in safety. They are rebel children of mine, yet my children still. I would say a word with them when dawn comes."

Silent and swift, the twenty made their round amongst the drugged ones, piling some hundred huddled forms into Kasim's own cavern. Not ten minutes had passed since the volley from the heights had given the signal for the attack when, Hassein's command achieved, his mountain war dogs gathered in that grim, silent circle turned their faces towards him in a mute, common impulse, inspired by the echo of a short, sharp command which issued from a cave at the northern end of the plateau.

"Steady, wolves of Tartary!" Kasim's voice rang sure and strong. "The scouts hold the pass. Some few dogs of Hassein have got to the heights above us. I know the way. Ye have but to follow me. We charge down the pass and up the heights."

A great silence grew round his words, and like commas, semicolons and full stops came the sound of weapons gripping into the phrasing of fingers.

Among the eight hundred on the plateau stirred a sigh like a choked chuckle as rifles slung noiselessly loose, and belts were hitched cautiously into loving reach.

Alan's eyes, flashing along the line entrusted to his captaincy, halted on two amber spots peering out of the cave into which the drugged Haideranli had been cast. He blinked for a moment, doubting his vision; then he looked again. The two amber globes were there, fixed and venomous.

"Bah! A cat!" said Alan, fixing his gaze on the cavern, whence had come the sound of Kasim's voice and the succeeding sinister silence.

Yet it was no cat of four legs that glared from the cavern, but Rastan the Greek. Wounded as he had been, supported only to an effort by the force of his implacable spirit of spite and vengeance, he had collapsed on reaching Kasim's stronghold. Kasim had himself laid him on a divan in his cavern, covered him with rugs, and forgotten him. The shuffle of bodies slung carelessly inwards had awakened the Greek, whose subtle mind at once leapt to the significance of this incursion of a hundred addled guests.

Creeping out silently, he saw: and realising the garbs of the Haideranli, he understood and shivered. He had sustained the glance of Alan's eyes, and in his soul grew a great fear, round the shifting corners of which whispered the voices of vengeance and spite. His hand stretched out, and in the darkness grabbed a rifle from the inert hand of one of the drugged bandits.

Twice he took aim, and at the third time fired. The bullet singing past Alan's cheeks, turned his eyes to the sender. The yellow orbs were there, and between them a smoking barrel.

"By Jove! Rastan!" he gasped.

But he had no time to investigate. The shot acted as a signal. And on the echo of it, Kasim's men swept out.

They were half-way over the plateau before Hassein's arm waved aloft. Then Kasim's hundred lost their knees under a

hail of pinging bullets from rifles that had never lost their mark. Not ten staggered to their knees, and of the ten not one knew it as he swept forward to claw his last touch of bed-earth before winging into the void.

Alone, among his dead, Kasim stood erect, untouched save for the angry scar on his cheek, magnificent in his wrath and defiance.

"Yield, Kasim, son of nothingness!" said Hassein, stepping forward a pace.

Kasim's great black beard wagged an emphatic refusal. The robber chief's eyes were fixed on Alan Wayward, and on the scarf of green and crimson and gold that Kasim had seen so lately round the stately shoulders of Miramé.

"Back, chief!" he shouted, his voice hard and startling as a bugle-blast. "My quarrel is not with thee, but with him—him who dares to wear that scarf!"

Only Hassein had moved from his place. The ring of scimitars, rifle and lance, remained intact, every eye of it bent on Alan.

Alan Wayward stepped out from the line of encircling steel, and faced Kasim.

"Thou art a traitor," he said quietly, yet in a tone whose tense accents rang to the furthest limits of the circling throng.

"Once before I was thy guest, and by a foul trick thou didst try to sell me into the power of Hadir Bey. No sword of honour is fit to meet thine. Thou art a dog. A dog's death is all thou canst hope to merit. Throw down thy arms. Thou shalt seek the only death fitting a beast like thee."

Alan loosened his battle-axe, unwound himself from his sash with its gallery of arms, and faced Kasim.

The sky was flawless, an unclouded dome of blue, out of which the horns of the crescent moon sent a little mocking flutter of light on to the faces of Alan Wayward and Kasim.

For all that he stood a good six foot one, the Englishman looked a pigmy against the six foot four of the bandit giant, and the faces of the mountaineers grew long and stern, as they eyed Kasim flinging down his arms and turning, free of his shoulder-hood, to meet the young captain in their princess's colours.

One moment Kasim cast a glance around, then quick as a cat, sprang.

Then suddenly a little sigh, like a shiver of lance-wood against lance, ran through the ranks of the Haideranli. Their new-made captain had stumbled on to one knee, and Kasim's hand had settled in a vice-like grip on his heaving shoulders.

Then a great "Hoo!" went out, for the stumbler had leapt upward, as if hurled from a catapult, and one arm had crooked by a back-catch round Kasim's neck, and the other had fastened on Kasim's throat, and their captain, with the green and crimson and golden token athwart his breast, had swayed his body backward, lifting Kasim in all his giant bulk, full into air, and bending back and back till it seemed as if his loins would break, had thrust Kasim's head over his shoulder into the hard rock beneath his bending loins. Then, before the bandit giant could even squirm, the grip of the Englishman's hands shifted swift as a glimmer of summer lightning.

His right hand locked under Kasim's right armpit, thrusting a hand upward on to the clutch of his brown neck; his left curled round Kasim's under-knee, till the fingers of his hand lay like steel talons in the paralyzed muscles of the brigand's thigh. Then, with a heave that shook a gasp from the eight hundred craning throats, Alan Wayward lifted Kasim's giant form high above his head, and flung him far and fair into the dizzy depths beyond the plateau.

"Phew!" he grunted. "He was heavy!"

"Hoo, hoo, hoo!" howled the Haideranli, running round him. "Thou art worthy—" began the chief, coming towards him with outstretched hands.

"The rat escapes," cried Alan. "The arch-traitor, Rastan!"

He swept through the ring of acclaiming arms, and made a dash for the narrow gut between the rocks by which they had gained the plateau. For, between all his spoiling for a hold of Kasim, he had been conscious of that little glimmer of light round the end of the rifle-barrel of the watchful Greek. So, when he had hurled Kasim to his doom, his first thought had been for the watcher, and he had seen him, gliding like a lizard from cover to cover, towards the pass. And as he called, Rastan doubled into the downward way, and for a moment none knew the meaning of Alan's words.

"He is mad!" cried a voice, as Alan burst through the circle, and, without thought of his arms, raced after the fugitive Greek.

"Let a hundred men stay behind and destroy this place," said Hassein. "The rest—forward. By sections, march."

No man on earth loved life more than Rastan. And none feared death more than he. His ankle, on which Clok had left four galling marks, was paining him terribly; but the thought of Hassein's cold judgment and furrowed face terrified him still more. Like a goat he fled down the pass.

Even Alan, for all his grit, shuddered at some of the leaps this mad goat of a fugitive made. But he followed them, none the less. He had no mind to let Rastan live for more mischief. But, keen as the chase was, Rastan held his way, passed the fringe of wood where Miramé and her escort of troopers waited,

and dived into a thicket that led, bound by bound, down towards the roaring, swollen torrent of the Euphrates.

One idea only lived in Alan's heart—to catch Rastan. He was indifferent for the moment to whatever Hassein might do. He wanted to get the man who had trapped Miramé. And so blinded was he by his one idea, that he saw no more than a glimpse of Miramé's face flashing through the trees as he swept past in pursuit.

But Miramé saw him clearly, and since young love is adventurous as well as protective, she called fifteen of the guards her father had left her.

"I follow the captain, Alan," she said, in her silvery, imperative way. "Follow me. When my father comes, pray him to send runners on my trail."

She was aloft, with a long lance in her hand, looking a very spirit of the woods.

"Daughter of rashness," said an aged voice at her side. "Let a little wisdom and a dog accompany thee."

"Thou!" cried the girl, with a flash of her eyes. "Come. Thou and I will shake the world."

"Allah help us!" murmured the sheikh, as he stretched his long limbs to keep pace with her fleetness, and casting an anxious eye backward, was glad to see a sturdy group of mountaineers following them, while Clok loped along, nosing by his side.

Meanwhile, down and ever down Alan pursued the slippery Greek. Twice he had touched his shoulder. But Rastan had wriggled into the void. Alan braced up his fagged forces and pelted forward, feeling sure of his man. But Rastan had not run in the dark. He knew Kasim's last line of escape, and the creek that held an inflated goat-skin raft that would bear a man without an aiding effort into the still pool beneath Changeri, where Idrin Pacha dwelt.

So, as Alan plunged forward, Rastan slipped from his grasp again, swung like a trodden-on snake to the left, leapt over a boulder, with a drop of twelve feet beyond, and scrambled on his belly into the water.

Alan, poised on the bank, a good thirty feet above the stream saw the head of the disappeared Greek suddenly bob into the swirl of the current, and understood the ruse.

"The badger!" he gasped.

He flung his hands forward and upward, and plunged into the flood. It was delightfully icy. For a moment he lost himself, feeling as if he were a ship in full sail down the grey, wind-swept, cloud-covered Channel.

When he found himself again, he had a grip on Rastan's leg, and was hauling himself thereby on to the float the Greek thought his own.

A gush of water, smashing into his mouth and eyes and ears, obscured for two minutes all sense of what he meant to say to Rastan. They had passed by one of the innumerable cascades that glimmer along the upper waters of the Euphrates, and it was not till they arrived in a great still pool beyond, that Alan gained breath and vision enough to be conscious of things.

And then Rastan startled him with a great shout, that rang weird and wild through the lonely marshes.

Alan could not divine the reason of that shout for the moment; but it came home to him in a few seconds when half a dozen hands hauled him into a great boat, and he saw Rastan's panting mouth jibbering short phrases into the fat, contented face of Idrin Pacha.

"Ha!" said Idrin. "We have got back our slave again. Turn the boat round, my children, and row for Changeri."

Then Alan's forces gave out, and he lay supine, where he had been thrown, in the bottom of the boat, careless for the moment whether death or life awaited him, and quite oblivious of the matter at that was arranging his destiny. Dog-tired, he slept.

He awoke to fact and the desire of life when, with startled eyes, he was aware that the eyes of Rastan and Idrin Pacha were gleaming on him in the old, too familiar courtyard where he had once been bastinadoed.

"It would be better to give him the bowstring at once," Idrin Pacha was saying. "Why wait?"

"No," snarled the Greek. "We have plenty of time. Let him die slowly. Prepare the triangles. Let him be stripped and hung on to the triangles; then let his flesh be torn off with hot flaying pincers, while I talk with him."

"Good!" grinned Idrin Pacha. "That will not take long."

Alan Wayward gritted his teeth as he felt himself borne by four sturdy slaves into an inner court. He made no mean while his garments were stripped from him and he was lashed, spread-eagled, over a trelliswork of iron, to which his wrists and elbows, ankles, knees and waist, were bound by iron wires.

A glint of his eyes sideways, showed him four Nubians engaged in heating long, claw-like pincers in a brazier, whose mouth, three foot wide, glowed with sputtering coal.

"Begin at the small of his back, and work upwards very slowly," said Rastan.

The torturers grinned; then, with their pincers aglow, marched towards Alan Wayward, helpless on the trelliswork.

"Hi-hoo! Hoo! Ha-hai!"

Faint as the mutter of distant thunder it commenced, that weird, wild call, but, from the first echo of it, it swelled into the crashing roll of thunder imminent; and before Idrin or Rastan had time to wriggle from their silken cushions, volley after volley rang out, and voices shrieking gave place to a sudden silence more menacing than any threat.

The torturers had dropped their pincers.

Idrin sat with glazed eyes.

"Hassein is on me! Thou hast betrayed me, dog!" he hissed.

"Get thee to thy guards!" snarled Rastan. "Call all thy men. Stand off the attack. Art thou not Bey? I will settle the account of that dog on the iron!"

The words, crisp, acid, hurtful with scorn, galvanised the flabby Turk. He waddled off his couch, trotted to the doorway, and blew three shrill calls on a whistle.

Rastan, dropping from the divan, ran to the pincers lying smouldering on the floor, plucked one up, and plunged it into the fire. He waited with a sinister patience, watching Idrin round whom had collected a bodyguard of some three hundred Turks. Then, as he saw the iron pincers glowing hot, white-hot, in the open brazier of live coals, he yelled to Idrin:

"Why waitest thou? Charge and slay!"

The next minute he looked around him, and saw that he was alone, save for the figure tripped against the firm trelliswork.

He stirred the iron in the fire, plucked it out, thrust it in again; then, drawing it forth, leapt at Alan.

"This time, dog, I have thee!" he snarled. "Thy eyes go first!" And he thrust the blazing iron towards Alan's face.

"Hoo, Greek!" It was like the bark of a wounded buffalo, this short, sharp shout of Sheikh Jelaluddin.

Hassein's riders rode fast, and his runners outpaced Arab horses when Miramé, the Lady of the Haideranli, was leading. For she had seen Alan pass, feared and followed, with word left to her father's men to follow on. But swift as she had been, she was laggard to the sheikh and the old wolfhound. And while the first cry of the Haideranli marksmen punctuated the last groan of Idrin's watch, Jelaluddin had dashed through the outer courtyard, sure of finding his beloved disciple in some strait within.

"Hoo, Greek!" was all he could grunt, as his trained eyes drank in the drama.

He had nothing with him but his tried oaken staff. But he knew a trick or two with that same staff. "Crack" and "thwack" it went about either elbow of the Greek, and before Rastan could recover from his surprise, the end of the staff had found him in the pit of his stomach, and as he reeled from it, it smote him across the reins, driving him face foremost into the fire of the brazier, from whence he had just plucked the pincers.

That he staggered out of that mortal scald, blind, blistered, and a thing less than a pariah dog, Jelaluddin cared not. He was cutting loose his disciple.

"And I thought thou wast learning wisdom," he growled, as he slashed the last cord free. "Thou art but a babe!"

"Where is Miramé?" gasped Alan. "I saw—"

"Miramé is here!" chimed a mocking voice. "She goes to her father."

For a long moment Alan gazed into the hard eyes of the sheikh. Then he turned and huddled himself into his garments.

"Hark!" said the sheikh, as a great shout of "Hoo, hoo, hoo!" rent the air. "Hassein hath made an end of Idrin. The battle is finished. Thou and I, my son, may go—on our search for wisdom."

"Let us see," said Alan, striding through the arch that led into the outer court.

He stood for a moment, stupefied, as against and in the doorway of the arch facing him he saw Idrin's body hanging limp, with a noose round his neck, and piled on either side of him a great heap of his defenders.

In the middle of the court stood Hassein, and by his side Miramé, superbly beautiful and scornful.

"Is that wisdom?" growled Alan. "Is that the wisdom you promised to teach me?"

"Thou art tired, my son," said the sheikh. "Behold Allah is just and merciful. The evil of Idrin hath smitten him, and has but paid his count."

"Yet I would speak one word with Miramé," said Alan.

"Come," said the sheikh. "If thou speakest now, in humility, thou wilt hear words hurtful. Let her think thou carest nought. So shall she make great ease of thee, imagining thee much more than thou art. Come, Captain of the Haideranli. Bear thy scarf and thy calf-love even after Jelaluddin, for he leads thee to a supper."

With one long look at Miramé's stern face, Alan followed the sheikh down the long, silent path to the consul's house at Van.

THE END.

(Another Tale of Alan Wayward next Thursday. Please order your copy of the "Gem" Library in advance. Price 1d.)



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READ THIS FIRST.

Billy Barnes, Cyril Conway, and Snowy White Adonis Venus are three great chums at Tempest Headland School.

Dr. Buchanan, the headmaster, finds them very troublesome pupils; as does also Herr Ludvig, the German master.

Venus is a black boy, and is taken as a fag by Graft.

Cyril is one half-holiday confined to the class-room, as a punishment, under promise not to leave it. He breaks his word, however, and, rushing from the school, dives from Headland Height to the rescue of Lily, the headmaster's daughter. Cyril refuses to explain his action to Dr. Buchanan, and is just about to receive castigation, when Lily enters her father's study and explains everything.

(Now go on with the story.)

Extraneous Circumstance

"My lad," exclaimed the doctor, when he had got the gist of the story. "You were utterly wrong in not telling me what had happened. Can't you see it?"

"No, sir."

"I might have caned you for a deed—a deed—"

"One that you performed, sir?"

"Nonsense! I am a man. You are a boy. What it might be my duty to do—"

"I say, sir," interposed Cyril, "that won't do—it won't jolly well do! You dived down that height to save a nigger—poor old Venus. He's a caution. Well, you set me the example."

"Do you suppose, boy, that if I choose to smoke a cigar it sets you the example to smoke one?"

"No, sir, that's a different thing altogether. It's all right for a man to drink a glass of brandy-and-water if he pleases, and knows where to stop, but it would be rotten for a boy to do so. But you can't stand there, or sit there, sir, with all your ability, and tell me that it was not my duty to break my word to you, and strive to save your daughter's life."

"Heaven forbid that I should say such a thing, Cyril! As for breaking your word—well, you never did so. Your promise was given to me under ordinary circumstances.

Neither you nor I anticipated extraneous circumstances. I think we both understood that. All earthly promises must be so made, because we cannot know what may happen, and circumstances may alter cases. I am going to say nothing to you concerning your action, Cyril. Words could never express my feelings. I will merely mention that I firmly believe when I am on my death-bed it will be remembered to me. Go away, children; I wish to be alone."

"She saw—saw you kiss me, Cyril!" murmured Lily, lowering her head as they left the study.

"Well, the dear old bunch of crinkled parchment can't see me do it this time, Lily," cried Cyril.

And Miss Spartin never saw that last kiss.

The end of the term arrived, but Venus did not look forward to the holidays, because they would separate him from his friend Cyril. That worthy, on the other hand, was in a state of high spirits, and on the last day of the term he went in search of Venus, whom he found sitting on his bed in the dormitory, looking about as happy as a consumptive monkey.

"Hallo, Snowy White Adonis Venus," exclaimed Cyril, "what's the matter with you?"

"Dere ain't nuffin de matter wid me, Cyril."

"Well, that's all right, because you look as though you had got half a dozen things the matter with you! I've just been talking to the doctor about you; he won't cane you more often than you deserve during the holidays. I say, won't you have a jolly time of it here all by yourself! It will be miserable for me. There's nothing to do at our place, except eat, fish, ride, boat, and a few things like that. Then I can't invite more than half a dozen fellows down at the time, because they would annoy my mother. We always kick up such a row in the holidays! Of course, you can do a few things in the way of larks when there is no one to cane you!"

"Spect you'm got a tuckshop near de place?"

"No. But you don't need that, because you can have anything you like to eat; and when it's that way you don't seem to care for it."

"Neber been dat way; least, I don't seem to remember it."

"That's what comes of forgetting the past! Well, you will have plenty of time to try and remember it; then you can work up all sorts of things. Euclid is rather interesting for those who like it."

"Spect you will work during de holidays?"

"No, my dear Venus; I shall be too busy riding and driving, and all that sort of thing. I shall go for picnics with fellows; in fact, do exactly what I like. My mother likes me to enjoy myself, and I never thwart her in that direction. Of course, you may feel a bit lonely, but I dare say the ghost will give you a look in the dead of night. I say, won't this dormitory feel a bit dreary at night, when the wind is howling round the college and the moan of the sea is heard upon the shore? Well, I hope you will enjoy yourself!"

"Dunno-how I'm going to do dat all alone."

"Well, it might have been worse; you might have had to come and spend the holidays with me."

"Golly, golly!"

"That would have been beastly, wouldn't it?"

"Tink you could take me as a shoeblack, or something like dat? Might clean de knives and sweep de lawn. Tink you could manage it, Cyril? I'd run errands, and—"

"Impossible! Would you like to spend the holidays at our place?"

"Golly!"

"It's a grand old place, you know; about as big as this college, and with hundreds of acres of land. You couldn't walk across the land that belongs to my mother in one day. Billy is coming to spend a week, and I shall have some other friends. You will be here all by yourself."

"Can't be helped. You will be coming back some day."

"Would you like to come?"

"What's de good ob asking such a question? You know dat I can't come; you said so."

"You can't come as a servant, but you are coming as a friend. I got permission from my mother two days ago. We shall journey down together."

"Hooroooh! Hurrah! Golly! Yah, yah, yah!"

"Now, then, you utter varmint," cried Mopps, entering the dormitory in order to get some of the boxes down, ready for the morrow; "how dare you make this row?"

"Hooroooh! Hurrah! Is it really true dat I'm to spend de holidays wid you, Cyril?"

(Another instalment next Thursday.)



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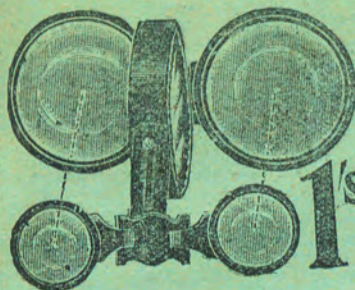
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