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THE MYSTERIOUS HAMPER.

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TOM MERRY

BY
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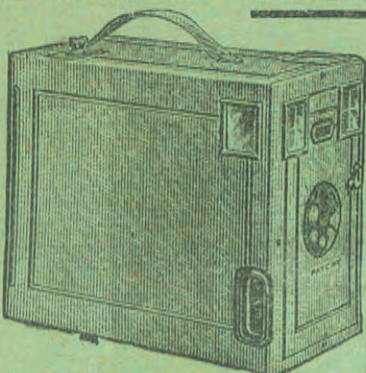
NO. 19.

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VOL. 1.

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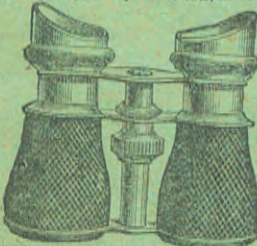
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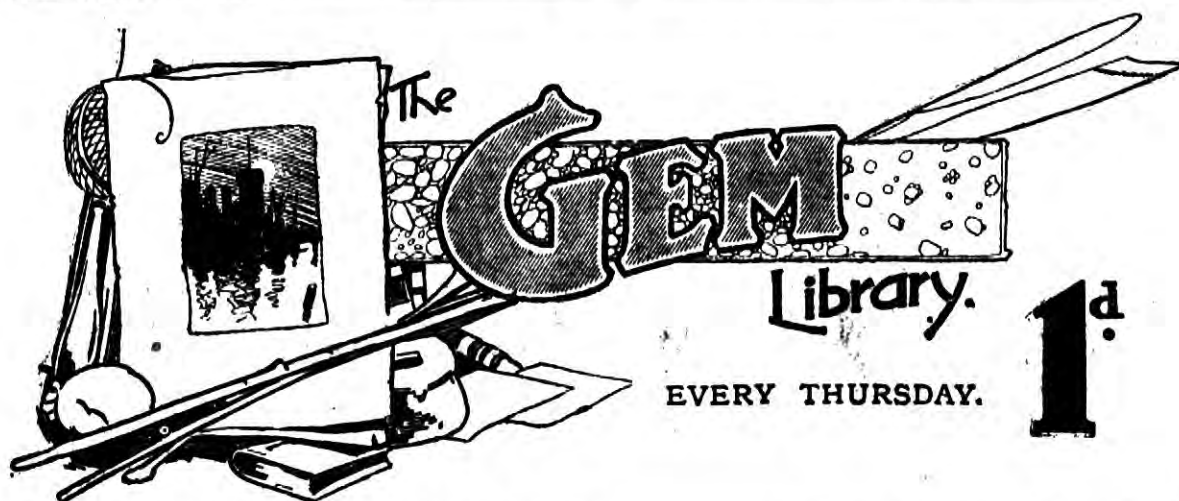


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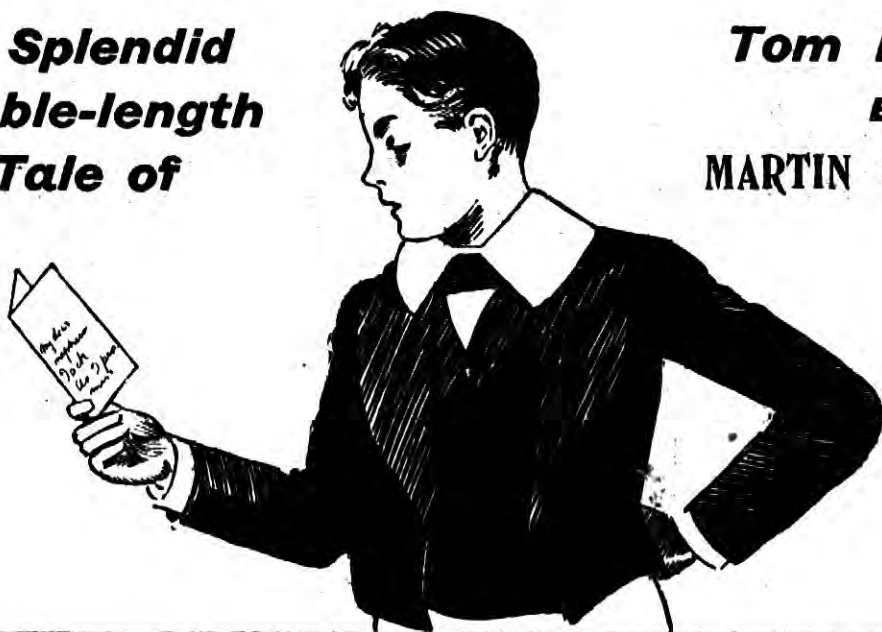
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THE MYSTERIOUS HAMPER.

CHAPTER 1. Figgy's Little Joke.

"H!"
"Oh!"

Tom Merry came sprinting along the upper corridor in the School House at St. Jim's, just as Jack Blake came out of Study No. 6 in a great hurry. The two "Oh's!" sounded simultaneously as the juniors collided.

They met with a biff in the middle of the passage, and

Tom Merry's impetus carried both of them along half a dozen paces before they rolled over on the hard linoleum.

"Oh!"
"Oh!"

Jack Blake sat up and glared at Tom Merry. Tom Merry sat up and glared at Blake.

"You utter ass!" ejaculated Blake. "What do you mean by buzzing along the passage when I was just coming out of my study?"

"You unutterable duffer!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "What

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do you mean by coming out of your study when I was buzzing along the passage?"

"I was in a hurry—"

"I was in a hurry—"

Blake picked himself up and dusted down his trousers with his hand. Tom Merry rose to his feet and set his collar straight.

"You shrieking ass!" said Blake. "If I weren't in a hurry to get down to the gates to meet the carrier, I'd wipe up the passage with you."

"And if I weren't in a hurry to meet the carrier, too, I'd strew you in little pieces up and down the corridor," said Tom Merry.

Blake burst into a laugh.

"Are you going down to meet the carrier, too, then?"

"Yes, rather! I'm expecting a hamper from home."

"And I'm expecting a hamper from my uncle abroad," said Blake. "At all events, I expect it will be a hamper."

He wrote in his last letter that he was sending me a present that would please me, and as he's a jolly sensible chap, I suppose it will be a hamper with grub in it. Let's get along." And the two juniors left the School House together.

Afternoon school was over at St. Jim's, and the quadrangle was crowded in the sunny June weather. Tom Merry and Blake crossed to the porter's lodge, and Tom Merry put his head in the open window.

"I say, Taggy!"

Taggles, the porter, looked up with a grunt. He had had his rubs with Tom Merry, and he did not particularly relish being addressed as Taggy. He gave the junior a freezing glare, and did not answer.

"I say, Taggy," said Tom Merry genially, "has the carrier been here, old son?"

"When the carrier comes at five o'clock, and it's now twenty minutes past," said Taggles sarcastically, "the inference is that he 'as been, Master Merry."

Tom Merry looked at him with great admiration.

"Did you work that out in your head, Taggy, without the aid of a net?" he asked.

Taggles grunted.

"Well, has the carrier left anything for me?" asked Tom Merry.

"There's a 'amper."

"Then why haven't you brought it up to my study?" said Tom Merry severely. "I shall have to report you for neglect of duty, Taggy."

"What price my hamper?" said Blake, looking in. "Has anything come for me, Taggles?"

"There's a parcel."

"A parcel? I was expecting something bigger than that."

Blake looked at the parcel rather disparagingly. It was addressed to J. Blake, at the School House, St. James's Collegiate School, and so there was no doubt that it was for him.

"Nothing else for me, Taggles?"

"No," grunted Taggles.

"And that jolly big hamper for Tom Merry?"

Tom Merry looked at his hamper with great satisfaction. It was too big and heavy for him to carry, which was a great source of satisfaction, for the inference was that it contained something very good. Tom Merry was expecting something from Miss Priscilla Fawcett, his old governess, and he had had a lingering doubt as to what it might turn out to be. Miss Fawcett sent him medicine and cod liver oil often than anything else. But this huge hamper could not be supposed to contain a consignment of patent medicines.

"I say, Taggy, get this up to my study, will you?" said Tom Merry. "I have the Head's permission to receive a parcel from home."

"Same here," grunted Blake; "but I'm blessed if I know what there can be in a little packet like that, to make it worth while sending it from America."

"Perhaps it contains a tip," suggested Tom Merry encouragingly. "A parcel that size would hold a lot of banknotes."

Blake laughed.

"I don't suppose it's stuffed full of banknotes, though," he remarked. "Anyvay, I suppose I may as well take it along." And Blake picked up his parcel and departed.

Tom Merry produced a sixpence from his waistcoat pocket, with the result that Taggles showed a great alacrity in carrying up his hamper.

Blake, however, was first in the School House with his package. He entered Study No. 6, where his chums were awaiting him. The tea-table was laid, but they had not yet commenced tea, leaving that important function till Blake came in, as his expected hamper might contain things acceptable on the festive board.

Digby, Herries, and D'Arcy looked at Blake with mute

inquiry as he came in. Blake slammed down the little parcel on the table. There was the sound of a crack from within.

"Hallo, something's broken!" said Herries.

"Is that all, Blake, dear boy?" asked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, screwing his monocle into his eye and looking at the parcel.

"That's all, Gussy."

"But I thought you were expectin' a hampah?"

"So did I."

"But hasn't it come?"

"It hasn't."

"Weally," said D'Arcy, looking round, "I wegard that as wathah inconsiderate of Blake's uncle. We were waitin' tea—"

"Well, let's see what the parcel contains, anyway," said Digby. "It seems to be fastened up pretty securely, with string and sealing-wax."

"There may be something valuable in it," said Herries. "Of course, grub was what we wanted. Still, I dare say your uncle couldn't very well send a hamper of grub across the Atlantic Ocean. He would have had to send tinned stuff, and we couldn't have eaten it."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Blake cut the string and tore open the paper. A thick fluid ran out over the tablecloth.

"My word," said Digby, "what's that?"

"Somethin' broke when Blake slammed it down. It was weally wathah careless of Blake."

"Looks like oil of some sort," said Blake, puzzled.

"Blessed if I know what's in the parcel!"

"Let's see!"

Curiosity was strong in Study No. 6. Blake finished unwrapping the parcel. Three bottles were exposed to view, and a cardboard box. One of the bottles was broken, and a thick fluid was oozing from it.

There was a letter in the parcel, stained with the oozing oil. The chums of Study No. 6 looked at the bottles in blank amazement.

"Cod liver oil," Digby read out, from the label of the bottle that was broken.

"Tinted Tincture for Pining Patients," Herries read from the second bottle.

"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy. "Lovely Liniment for Little Limbs."

"Dr. Bones's Purple Pills for Pecky People," said Blake. Then the chums of the Fourth looked at one another.

Their feelings were too deep for words.

They had expected a consignment of select catables, and they had received a collection of patent medicines and cod liver oil.

"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy, breaking the painful silence. "If this is your uncle's ideah of a joke, Blake, I cannot say that I should wank him vewy high as a humourist."

"My word!" said Digby. "I should write him a pretty strong letter, Blake, if he belonged to me."

"I'd disown him," said Herries darkly. "A chap who could work off a joke like that should be no uncle of mine."

Blake was looking puzzled.

"I can't understand it," he said; "I can't make it out a little bit. Let's have a look at the letter."

He opened the letter and glanced at it, and then uttered an ejaculation.

"My darling Tommy." That was how the letter commenced, in an old-fashioned, feminine handwriting.

"My only hat!"

"That's Miss Fawcett's handwriting!"

"Tom Merry's governess!"

"The parcel is for Tom Merry!"

Blake's face broke into a grin.

"Ha, ha! That accounts for the giddy medicines. She's always sending him something of this sort. But—but how did the parcel come addressed to me?"

"Blessed if I know!" said Digby. "The label must have got changed somehow. Better go down and see Taggles about it."

"Come on, then! If this parcel addressed to me is for Tom Merry, that one addressed to Tom Merry may be for me."

"Yaas, wathah! Let's go and interview Taggles, dear boys."

The chums of Study No. 6 left the study, and hurried to the porter's lodge. Taggles had just returned there, after taking up the hamper to Tom Merry's study. Blake marched into the lodge, with his followers at his heels, and a wrathful frown upon his brow.

"Taggles, you villain—"

"Which I says, get outer my lodge," said Taggles. "What do you mean by playing tricks at your time of life?" said Blake severely. "I've often remonstrated with you on the subject of your intemperance, Taggles."

"Get outer my lodge, you cheeky young himp!"



Blake & Co. rushed at Skimpole, and bumped him down on the hearth-rug, "Where's my hamper?" roared Blake.

"Where's my parcel?"

"You took it."

"That one was for Tom Merry. It was addressed to me, but it was for him. See? Some silly ass has been changing the labels. If this is your idea of a joke, Taggles, I think you are a——"

"I don't believe a——"

"Where's my parcel?"

"Yaas, wathah! Where is Blake's hampah, you wascal! Pwoduce the hampah immediately. I insait upon the immediate pwoduotion of the hampah."

Taggles's face dawned into something like a grin.

"Then that is what Master Figgins was doing——"

"Figgins!" exclaimed Blake.

"He was in here just afore you came," said Taggles. "He was messing about with the parcels a lot, asking if there wassn't none for him, although I told him there wassn't."

Blake looked extremely wrathful.

"Oh, so it's a jape of that New House rotter! How many parcels came by the carrier, Taggy?"

"Only them two."

"Then Tom Merry must have my one. Come on, kids, we must get that hamper back before those Shell rotters have scoffed the grub."

"Yaas, wathah!"

The chums hurried out of the lodge. A long-limbed, not to say lanky junior, looked at them with a grin as they passed him in the quadrangle. It was Figgins of the New House, and Kerr and Wynn, the famous Co., were with him.

"Hallo!" said Figgins. "Have you had your parcel yet, Blake?"

Blake glared at the humorous Figgins.

"Yes, you ass——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you've come out here to look for trouble, Figgins——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The School House chums were inclined to rush upon their old enemies for a moment. But they were anxious about the hamper in Tom Merry's study. Although the School House boys generally united against the New House, there was a keen rivalry between Study No. 6 and the Terrible Three. If Tom Merry and his chums found provisions in the hamper, there was no telling whether Blake would ever see anything of them.

"I haven't time to knock your head off now, Figgins——"

"That's lucky for somebody," said Figgins. "If you started, somebody would get hurt."

"We regard you with contempt," said D'Arcy, adjusting his eyeglass. "Wun away and play, you wotten New House boundahs."

"Come on," said Herries.

And the chums of Study No. 6 hurried on to the School House, followed by a mocking yell from Figgins & Co.

CHAPTER 2.

The Hamper from Wyoming.

TOM MERRY, Manners, and Lowther, the chums of the Shell, stood round the hamper with beaming faces.

Taggles had carried it up to the study, not without exertion, and had been duly rewarded with sixpence. The dimensions of the hamper pleased Manners and Lowther as much as Tom Merry.

"This is all right," Monty Lowther remarked. "I was afraid Miss Fawcett might be sending some bosh as she has done before——"

"Yes, rather!" said Manners. "There's still a bottle of cod liver-oil hanging about the study from the last parcel from Huckleberry Heath."

"Nothing of that sort this time," said Tom Merry, cutting the cord of the hamper with his pocket-knife. "A hamper this size can only contain a really good ripping spread."

"I should think so."
"It's done up pretty thoroughly," Manners remarked.
"The hamper looks a bit knocked about, too. Get the lid up."

The hamper was opened.
Just inside the lid was an envelope, evidently containing a letter, and upon the envelope was written "To my nephew."

Tom Merry stared at it.
"I say, that's not Miss Fawcett's writing!" he exclaimed.
"And you're not her nephew, anyway," said Manners.

"There's some mistake somewhere."
"The hamper was addressed to me—"
"Better open the letter and see if there's any explanation inside," said Manners. "The wrong letter may have got shoved in. Has Miss Fawcett any nephews?"

"Yes, one in India I believe."
"Then she may have written to him and shoved the wrong letter into the hamper."

"But it's not her writing—"
"Somebody may have written it for her—Uncle Frank, perhaps."

"H'm! I suppose it's possible."
"Anyway, the hamper is for us," said Lowther. "For you; which means for us. We're not going to part with it."
"Certainly not."

"Better look in the letter."
"I suppose it must be the wrong letter, that's all," said Tom Merry slowly. "Anyway, I can't tell till I look into it, so I had better do so."

"Yes, rather, and the sooner the quicker."
Tom Merry slit open the letter.

He gazed in amazement at the heading of the letter inside the envelope. It was: "Spotted Coyote Ranch, Wyoming."
"My only hat!"

"What is it?"
"Look at that."
"Spotted Coyote Ranch! Wyoming! Then the blessed thing comes from America."

"Apparently."
"I suppose you've got an uncle in America, and forgotten all about him," said Monty Lowther. "These things do slip one's memory at times."

Tom Merry shook his head.
"I've got an uncle in India—"
"You may have other uncles."

"No, I haven't," said Tom Merry, smiling. "I've only one, and he's in India with his regiment."
"He may have gone to America without asking your permission—"

"He's in India, I tell you."
"Then this is some other uncle you've forgotten," said Lowther obstinately. "The hamper is for us, and so it stands to reason that you must have an uncle in Wyoming."

"I haven't."
"Look at the letter," said Manners. "How does it begin—"

"My dear nephew Jack—"
"Jack!"

"That's what it says—"
"Curious he should call you Jack when your name's Tom," said Monty Lowther. "But some uncles are queer old fellows, you know. Perhaps it was a pet name you had in your early days, you know."

"It wasn't—"
"I knew a chap whose name was Herbert, and his people called him Johnny," said Monty Lowther. "So I don't see why your uncle shouldn't call you Jack though your name is Tom."

"But I tell you—"
"Besides, isn't your name Thomas John Merry?"

"No, it isn't."
"Sure?"

"Of course I'm sure, you ass!"
"Well, then, I don't quite know how he comes to call you Jack," said Lowther. "There's a lot of mystery about this hamper, anyway; but one thing seems to me pretty certain, and that is, that it's for us."

Tom Merry laughed.
"I'm afraid it isn't, Monty."
"Oh, yes, it is," said Lowther. "You have to take that as the fundamental fact that the argument starts from, you know. You always have to take something for granted in an argument. What does the letter say next—"

"It's not for me, so I can't—"
"My dear kid, it is for you."
"It's to somebody named Jack—"

"I don't see why your uncle shouldn't call you Jack if he chooses," said Lowther. "Especially when he's sending you a whopping hamper like this. Anyway, see what he says in the first line. That may throw some light on the matter."

"Do you think—"
"Yes, I do. Go on."
"My dear Nephew Jack. As I promised you in my letter—"

"There you are!" said Lowther. "Now you've only got to remember the letter he's referring to, and the whole thing's explained."

"But I can't remember any letter—"
"Oh, try! A letter from an uncle—"
"I tell you I haven't any uncles except General Merry in India—"

"Oh, if you're going to be obstinate about it, I've nothing more to say. It seems to me that you're trying to raise difficulties."

"My dear ass—"
"As the hamper is evidently intended for this study, any little discrepancies can easily be explained if you put your mind to it—"

"The hamper can't be for me—"
"I should say not," said a voice at the door, as Jack Blake walked in. "That hamper is for me, you bounders."

"Yass, wathah!"
"If you've started on the grub, there will be ructions," said Digby.

Tom Merry turned round.
"There's some mistake here," he said. "The hamper was addressed to me, but this letter is for somebody whose front name is Jack—"

"Well, my front name is Jack, isn't it?" said Blake, taking the letter. "This is my uncle's hat."

"Then how did the hamper come addressed to me?"
"I've just discovered that Figgins changed the labels."
"The rotter! But there is a parcel for me, then?"

Blake grinned.
"Oh, yes, that's the one addressed to me in my study, and you can have it as soon as you like. I opened it by mistake. It's from Miss Fawcett, and it contained three bottles of medicine and a box of pills."

There was a general groan from the Terrible Three.
"You'd better call for it," said Blake.

Tom Merry shook his head.
"I'll make you a present of it, Blake."

"Thank you for nothing. You're not going to leave the filthy stuff in our study. You can just come and fetch it."

"Shan't!"
"Then we'll shove it out of the window."
"You can if you like, kid. I'm not particular."

"There's a letter with it."
"I'll call in for the letter."
"Lend a hand, my sons," said Blake. "This hamper is heavy."

"Right-ho!" said Herries.
Blake, Herries, and Digby bent themselves to the task of removing the hamper. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy adjusted his monocle, and regarded them with great interest.

"You lazy bounder, lend a hand here," granted Blake.
"I am afraid it would be too much exertion for me, dear boy!"

"Then you shan't taste a blessed morsel that's inside it, ass."

"I refuse to be called an ass."
"Bring it along, kids," said Blake. "We'll get it to Study No. 6, and plump it down on top of Gussy's hat-box."

"Weally, Blake—"
"Come on!"

"If you were to destroy my hats in such a widdulous and wotten mannah, Blake, I should certainly refuse to regard you as a friend any longer."

"It's what I'm going to do, ass, if you don't help carry it," said Blake.

"Vewy well. Undah the circs, I suppose I had bettah help you cawwy the beastly hampah, deah boys. But I regard you as vewy inconsiderate."

The chums of Study No. 6 exerted themselves, and dragged the heavy hamper through the doorway, and it went bumping along the passage.

The Terrible Three exchanged an expressive look.
"Of all the rotten sells!" said Monty Lowther.
"And they haven't even asked us to the feed!" said Manners.

Tom Merry laughed.
"Well, it is rather a sell! If you like, either of you chaps can have the cod liver oil in Blake's study!"

Lowther made a grimace.
"Oh, let's get along to the tuckshop and have a feed! It's too bad! Look here, Tom Merry, I should seriously advise you to swap your governess for Blake's uncle at the very first opportunity!"

CHAPTER 3.

The Mysterious Hamper.

"THERE!" panted Blake.
The hamper was safely landed in Study No. 6 at last. The juniors stood round it with expectant looks. Blake unfolded the letter Tom Merry had handed in. He gave a whistle as he read the first few lines.
"What's in it?" asked Digby.
"Something rather unexpected," said Blake. "I'm afraid it can't be grub in the hamper, after all."
"Not grub?"
"Weally, Blake—"
"Listen to what my uncle says—"
"Oh, read it out!"
And Blake proceeded to read out the letter.

"My dear nephew Jack,—As I promised you in my letter, I am sending you a present, which I think you will like. Before opening the contents of the hamper, however, I wish you to give the enclosed note to Dr. Holmes, and he will—if he chooses and thinks fit—give you permission to make use of what I have sent you. I hope he will do so.—Your affectionate uncle,
"JAMES BLAKE."

Blake stared at the letter, and then at his chums.
"Well, what do you think of that?" he said.
"Blessed if I know what to think!" said Digby. "It can't be anything to eat, or he wouldn't speak of it in that way!"

"Then what can it be?"
"Goodness only knows!"
The chums looked into the hamper. The contents, whatever they were, were wrapped in canvas and closely packed. Blake felt them with his hand, and found that they yielded to the touch; but in places there was something that felt hard, like wood.

The chums were utterly astonished and puzzled. What Blake's American uncle could be sending him, which he would require the Head's permission to use, they could not possibly guess.

"Bal Jove," said D'Arcy; "I wegard this as wathah a wellection upon our judgment, deah boys! Your uncle weally seems to think that we require advice from the Head on vewy twivial mattahs, Blake!"

"Must do as he says," said Blake. "I suppose I had better take this note to the Head? Rather rotten if he doesn't permit us to see what's in the hamper!"

"Yaas, wathah!"
Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther looked into the study.
"I'll have my letter, Blake, please," said Tom Merry.
"It's on the table," said Blake.

Tom Merry took the letter from Miss Priscilla Fawcett from the table. It was dripping with cod liver oil.
"Well, this is a nice state to get a fellow's letter into!" he exclaimed.

"All your own fault," said Blake. "Look at the muck that stuff has made on our table-cloth! You ought to have brought your governess up better."
"Yaas, wathah!"

"What are you chaps looking so glum about?" asked Tom, glancing at the serious faces of the Fourth-formers.
"Isn't there any grub in the hamper, after all?"

"I'm afraid not."
"What is it, then?"
"We can't tell until we've opened it, fathead!"

"Well, open it, then, ass!"
"Can't be did."

"Why not?" asked Tom Merry, in astonishment.
"Read that letter, and you'll see."

Tom Merry read the letter from James Blake. He gave an expressive whistle.

"Rather rotten!" he said.
"Yaas, it is certainly wathah wotten," Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remarked. "It seems to me to be wathah a wellection upon—"

"Well, I'm going to the Head," said Blake. "Look after that hamper while I'm gone."
"Certainly, deah boy."

And Jack Blake, in a very puzzled frame of mind, made his way towards the study of Dr. Holmes, the Head of St. Jim's. A youth, with a very large head and very thin legs, met him in the passage.

"Blake—"
"Don't bother me now, Skimpole," said Blake; "I'm in a hurry!"

Skimpole, the amateur Socialist of St. Jim's, laid a bony hand on his shoulder and detained him.

"It's rather important, Blake—"
"Is it?" said Blake. "Buck up, then! No Socialism,

mind, you owl, or you'll get a thick ear before you know where you are!"

"I was really not going to talk Socialism on the present occasion, Blake. I am, it is true, carrying on Socialist propaganda work, but I hope to effect more by the publication of my forthcoming book than by—"

"Hurry up!"
"I was about to refer to the fact that you are expecting a hamper—at least, the fellows have told me so—"

"It's come."
"Oh, good! I had a suggestion to make—"

"If you want to come to the feed—"
"I should have no objection to doing so, but that is not what I was going to suggest. My idea was that if you have a hamper containing a large quantity of provisions, it would be a grand opportunity for self-sacrifice."

"What?"
"And I was going to suggest that instead of standing a series of study feeds with the hamper, you should give a feed to all the needy persons you can find in the neighbourhood."

"Eh?"
"You would then have the satisfaction of—"
"Skimpole, old chap, you had better take a little run; you're in danger of having your napper banged on the wall," said Blake.

"But, really, Blake—"
"Oh, travel along! If you want to stand a feed to needy persons, I recommend you to sell your watch and bicycle, and you'd raise enough tin—"

"I require a watch and a bicycle, Blake. I am not the kind of fellow to carry opinions to the verge of absurdity. Your hamper—"

"I require my hamper, Skimmy; and I am not the kind of fellow to be talked to death by a howling ass, so travel along."

"But—"
But Blake pushed the amateur Socialist aside and walked on. Skimpole shook his head solemnly as he gazed after him.

"It is uphill work, trying to eradicate the selfishness from the human breast," he murmured; "but as a sincere Socialist I am bound to continue the work. I think I may as well go for a spin on my bicycle now."

Blake tapped at the door of the Head's study. Dr. Holmes was there, and his deep voice bade the junior enter.

"What can I do for you, Blake?" asked the Head, looking at the junior over his gold-rimmed pince-nez with a kindly glance. He liked Blake, as nearly everybody at St. Jim's did.

"If you please, sir," said Blake diffidently. "I've had a letter from my uncle in America; and he's sent me a present and he's enclosed this letter for you, sir."

"For me?" said the Head, somewhat surprised.
"Yes, sir."

Blake laid the letter on the Head's desk.
"He says I'm not to unpack the hamper until you've read this letter and given me your permission, sir," said Blake.

The Head looked more surprised.
"Then I will read it at once," he said.

"Thank you, sir."
Dr. Holmes took up the letter and opened it. His expression grew more surprised as he read it. Then he smiled.

The smile gave place to a thoughtful frown. Blake watched him anxiously.

"Can I open the hamper now, sir?" he asked at length.
"Ahem!" said the Head slowly. "This is rather a peculiar matter, Blake."

"Yes, sir."
"I think you had better leave opening the hamper till I have consulted with your housemaster."

"Y-o-ees, sir."
"I will speak to Mr. Railton as soon as possible. You may go now, Blake."

And Blake left the Head's study, in an extremely puzzled frame of mind. He returned to No. 6, where he found his chums awaiting him. The Terrible Three were gone.

"Well?" said Herries and Digby, as Blake entered the room.

"Well, deah boy?" said D'Arcy.
Blake shook his head disconsolately.

"The Head's read the letter," he said. "He wants to consult with Mr. Railton before he gives us permission to unpack the hamper."

The chums of the Fourth Form looked astounded.
"My only hat!" said Herries. "What can the giddy thing possibly contain?"

"Blessed if I can guess!" said Blake. "I only hope that

we shall get permission to unpack it in the long run, that's all!"

"It's vewy decent of the Head to leave it to us like this," said D'Arcy. "I wogard it as vewy pwopah of him to twust to our honah."

"Yes, he's an old sport," agreed Blake. "We can't look into the hamper. I'm jolly curious. Let's go down to the school shop and have our tea there. The sight of that hamper will worry me if I can't look into it."

"Yaa, wathah!"

And the chums of Study No. 6 left the room, leaving the hamper where it lay, with the lid raised and the mysterious contents still closely packed inside.

CHAPTER 4.

The Terrible Three in Trouble.

PING-PING-PING!

It was the buzz of a bicycle-bell, and three youths, who were strolling along Rylcombe Lane, in the middle of the road, looked lazily up. The three were Monk, Lane, and Carboy, the heroes of the Grammar School and the deadly enemies of the juniors of St. Jim's.

"Hallo," said Monk, looking at the cyclist who was bearing down upon them; "that chap's wearing a St. Jim's band on his hat!"

"He's a Saint," said Lane.

"And there's only one of him," grinned Carboy.

"And there's three of us, and more within call," laughed Monk. "It's some time since we paid our compliments to St. Jim's."

"Now is the chance, then."

"I was just thinking so."

Ping-ping-ping! Buz-zuz-zuz! The cyclist came nearer. He was riding at a pretty good pace, and was evidently returning to St. Jim's after a spin along the country lanes. Frank Monk gazed at him as he came closer, and grinned. There was no mistaking the big head and extremely slender limbs of the brainy man of the Shell at St. Jim's.

"It's that chap Skimpole," said Monk. "You've heard of him. He goes in for Socialism, and Determinism, and isms by the yard."

"I've heard of the aas, rather!" said Lane. "Don't you remember he started preaching to us once when we were at St. Jim's?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Have him off his bike!" grinned Carboy. "Here, Skimpole, get off that bike!"

The three Grammarians stood in the middle of the road, and evidently did not intend to get out of the way. Skimpole either had to stop, or to run into them. Skimpole was a peaceable fellow, and he wasn't looking for trouble just then. Besides, he might have knocked the Grammarians over, but he would certainly have gone over himself as well; so he put the brake on, and stopped.

"Really, I wish you would get out of the way!" he exclaimed, as he jumped off the bicycle. "It is very inconvenient of you to stop me!"

"A sincere Socialist ought to be willing to put up with anything for the sake of his fellow-creatures," said Frank Monk. "I'm surprised at you, Skimpole!"

"Oh, if you would like me to explain to you any points in connection with the grand truths of Socialism, that's a different matter," said Skimpole. "I shall be most happy to do so. I wish I had my notebook with me, and I would read you some extracts from the two-hundred-and-twenty-seventh chapter of my forthcoming book—"

"I've been thinking about the subject awfully seriously," said Monk, with a wink to Lane and Carboy. "According to your principles, I believe, everybody is equally entitled to everything?"

"Well, that is putting it rather crudely," said the unsuspicious Skimpole. "But certainly every human being is entitled to the utmost that any other human being can do for him."

"Suppose I wanted a bicycle, I suppose it would be all right to ask you for yours?" suggested Monk. "As a sincere Socialist, you would have to hand it over to me."

"Oh, no; that is quite a mistake," explained Skimpole. "You are entitled to travel on the railways, for instance, free of charge, because under a proper state of things the railways would be nationalised. You are entitled to all the coal you need, because all the natural wealth of the country belongs to the whole people, and it is absurd to pretend that any special human being can have a special right to it. But when it comes to a fellow's personal property—"

"I see. As a sincere Socialist, you can grant my right to anything that does not happen to belong to you?" suggested Monk.

"Well, not exactly. You don't understand."

"No, I suppose I don't. Will you give me your bicycle?"

"Certainly not!"

"Then I can only consider you as a humbug!"

"Not at all. I could read you an extract from the hundred-and-fifty-seventh chapter of my book which would prove to you that—"

"Never mind; we can dispense with all that. You are a humbug! And, as a sincere anti-humbuggist, I feel that it is my duty to punish you—"

"As a what?"

"A sincere anti-humbuggist!" said Monk severely.

"Take hold of him, kids!"

"Now, look here—"

"Tie him to his bicycle, and—"

"Look out!" exclaimed Carboy. "Those 'ere Tom Merry, and those other two rotters are with him. 'Ware, Saints!"

The Terrible Three were strolling up the road from the direction of St. Jim's. They sighted the Grammarians at the same moment that Carboy spotted them. Skimpole waved his hand.

"Rescue!" he shouted.

"Shut up, aas!"

"Rescue, St. Jim's! Help!"

Such a call was never heard in vain by the Terrible Three. They broke into a run immediately, and dashed towards the Grammarian trio.

"Buck up, Grammar School!" shouted Frank Monk.

And at the cry two or three fellows in Grammar School cape came out of the trees beside the lane, and reached the spot just as the St. Jim's juniors came up. The odds were against the Terrible Three, but they could not leave a Saint in the hands of the enemy.

"Sock it to them!" shouted Tom Merry.

"What-ho!" said Manners and Lowther.

And the three rushed to the attack. So powerful was the charge of the three juniors that Monk, Lane, and Carboy were rolled over in the lane by it. But as they went down they clung to their assailants, and dragged them down also.

"Buck up, Grammar School!"

The other Grammarians piled upon the Terrible Three. Skimpole was dragged down, and a Grammarian sat upon his chest. Tom Merry, fighting desperately, was overcome by Lane and Carboy, and made a prisoner.

The odds against the Saints were too heavy. Dusty and dishevelled, with many signs of the fray about them, they were overcome, and the victorious Grammarians sat upon them hard to secure them.

"A regular bag, and no mistake!" chuckled Frank Monk. "This reminds me of the time when we captured those rotters and sent them home with their heads through a kite."

"That was a good wheeze," grinned Carboy.

"We made you sit up for it, though!" gasped Tom Merry.

"Yes, rather!" said Lowther. "We did you brown, and we'll do you brown again, you Grammar rotters! Yah!"

Frank Monk laughed.

"They had better walk that jigger back to their rotten old school!" he remarked. "We'll tie their hands to the handle-bars, and they can walk it between them."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You rotters!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We haven't any cord, though," Frank Monk remarked, feeling in his pockets. "Still, I suppose their neckties will answer the purpose."

"Let my necktie alone, you beast!"

"Can't; I want it. Their braces will do, too, if the neckties aren't sufficient. Fasten Merry and Lowther to the handle-bars, one on each side, and Manners and Skimpole to the saddle!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

One at a time the struggling Saints were fastened to the bicycle. It was soon done. The odds were too great for effective resistance. Tom Merry and Lowther were tied first, their wrists secured to the handle-bars with their own ties. Then Skimpole and Manners were fastened on either side of the saddle.

The Saints stood round the bicycle, red and savage. The Grammarians howled with laughter as they looked at them.

"There, I think that's all right!" said Frank Monk.

"Off you go, you beauties!"

"Sha'n't!"

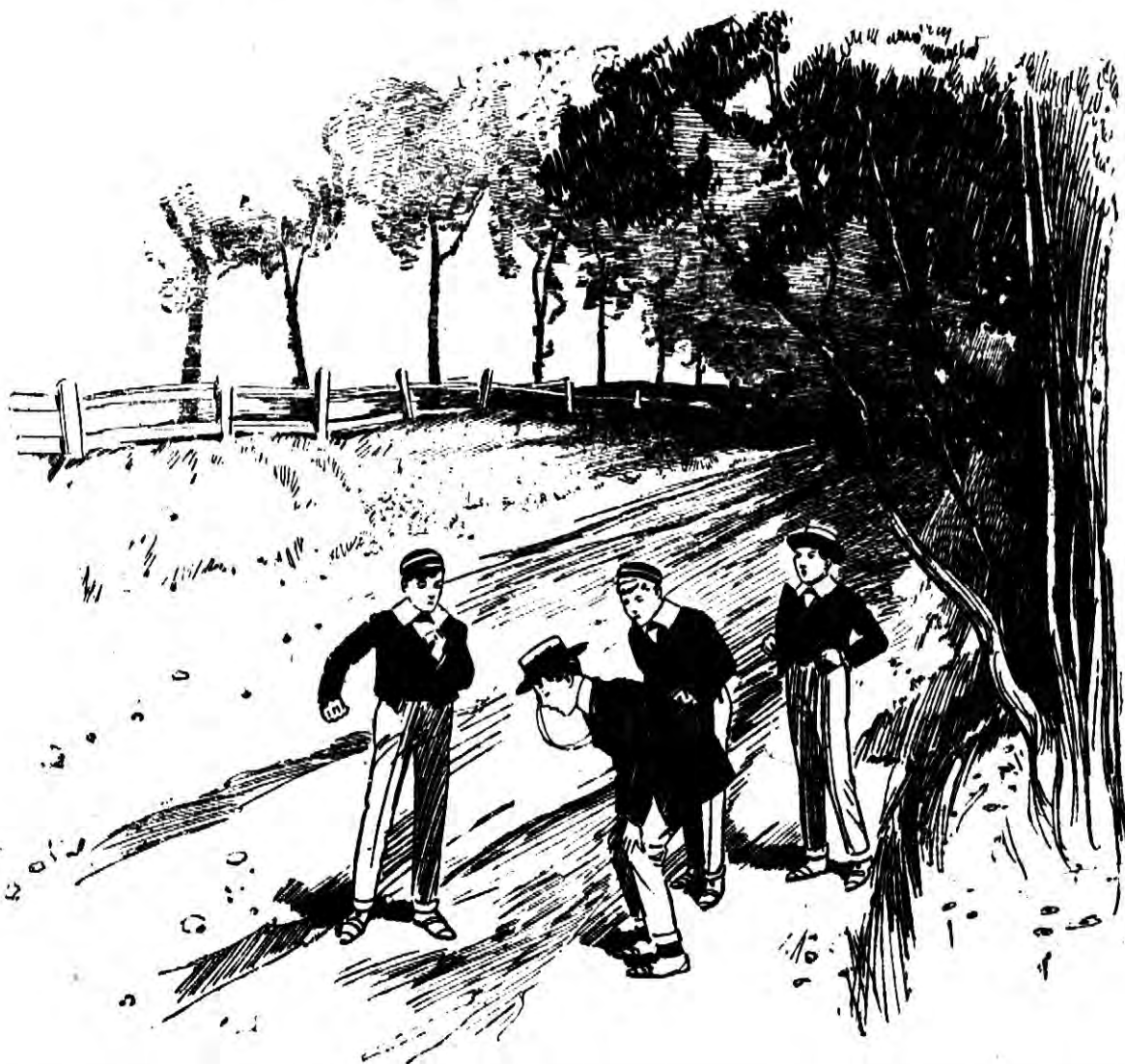
"Then stay there," said Frank Monk, laughing. "Good-bye!"

"Untie us, you rotters!"

"Rats! Au revoir!"

And the Grammarians, yelling with laughter, disappeared up the road. The Terrible Three looked at one another.

"Nice, isn't it?" said Lowther.



"What are you looking for, Gussy?" demanded Blake. "I'm looking for the twaces of the Gwammah eads," said D'Arcy. "I am plicking up their twaok, you know, and I have just lost their twaces!"

"Oh, very nice," said Manners—"very nice indeed! Tom Merry is a nice sort of a leader to lead us into this, I don't think!"

"It's all Skimpole's fault," said Tom Merry.

"Yes, you're right there. It all comes of allowing that dangerous lunatic out alone!"

"Really, Lowther—"

"Oh, don't talk to me, ass! Nice set of fools we shall look getting back to St. Jim's in this state! We haven't got over that kite affair yet. The fellows will chip us to death."

"Oh, blow the fellows!" said Tom Merry. "Come along!"

"Can't face the school in this state."

"We can't stay here all night."

"Well, think of some way out of it," growled Lowther.

"You call yourself a leader, Tom Merry, don't you?"

"I call you an ass, if that's got anything to do with it!"

"Blessed if I don't take Blake for leader in future!" said Manners. "He claims to be leader of the School House juniors, and he couldn't make a bigger muck of anything than this, I think."

"Oh, shut up, and come along!"

There was evidently nothing else to be done. The four juniors moved along the road, dragging the wobbling bicycle between them. They were not far from the gates of St. Jim's. It was getting near to calling-over, and many

fellows were returning to the school, so the Terrible Three and Skimpole soon had an audience.

A crowd of juniors belonging to both Houses gathered round them and marched in with them, and not a hand was raised to release them. The joke perhaps seemed to them to be too good a one to spoil.

The Terrible Three wobbled on across the quadrangle with crimson faces. Figgins & Co. met them en route, and roared with laughter. Blake & Co. were standing on the School House steps, and they simply shrieked.

"Bai Jove, I wegard this as wathah funnay!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Are you havin' a wippin' time, Tom Mewwy?"

"Cut us loose, ass!"

"I wefuse to be chawacterized as an ass!"

"Can't you lend us a hand?"

"Oh, certainly!" said Blake. "We're always willing to help you young fellows out of trouble, you know."

"Rats!"

Blake opened his pocket-knife.

"I suppose I needn't ask you if it was the Grammarians who tied you up like this?" he remarked. "I suppose we can take it for granted that whenever you come in tied up to a kite or a bicycle, you have been upholding the honour of St. Jim's in the way you are distinguished for!"

"Oh, cut the cackle, and get us loose before Railton comes out!"

**NEXT
THURSDAY:**

"BLAKE & CO.'S TRIUMPH."

**A Double-Length Tale of
Tom Merry's Schooldays.**

"Certainly. What I say is——"
 "Can't you untie that?" growled Monty Lowther. "That necktie cost me one and six, and I don't see what you want to slice it up with a beastly knife for!"
 "You'd better keep still, or I shall be slicing you next!"
 "Ow!"

"There, I told you so! Never mind; it's only a slight cut, and you look so red that very likely a little blood-letting will save you from apoplexy."

"You villain! Ow!"
 "There you are again! Now for you, Manners!"
 Manners was careful to keep quite still. Skimpole was last to be released.

"You needn't trouble about setting him loose," growled Lowther, rubbing his wrists. "He ought to be kept tied up, or chained, or something."

"It's all his fault we got into this mess," grunted Manners.

"Oh, really," said Skimpole, in a tone of remonstrance, "it was really your own fault, you know. You did not put up a very good fight——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake.

He cut Skimpole loose, and the bicycle reeled away. The amateur Socialist rubbed his wrists ruefully. The fellows who had tied those knots had not erred on the side of making them too loose, by any means.

"You'd better go in and get a wash," remarked Blake, surveying the dusty, red, and dishevelled chums of the Shell with a critical eye. "You'd be all the better for it. We'll go and give the Grammarians socks."

"Good!" said Digby. "You remember that after that kite affair it was we who put the Grammar cads in their place. We can do the same again."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Come on!" said Herries. "We can't have them saying that they've licked anybody belonging to this school without getting a set of thick ears for it. It's hard cheese that these fellows should give us so much work to do, but——"

"But as leaders of the House juniors, it's our duty," said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"
 "Oh, go and eat coke!" growled Tom Merry crossly, as he entered the House. And Monty Lowther and Manners followed him with grim faces.

Jack Blake laughed.
 "Come on, kids!" he said. "The Grammar rotters cannot be far away, and we may find them and avenge the honour of St. Jim's."

"Yaas, certainly, deah boy. We're goin' to avenge the beastly honah of St. Jim's, or know the reason why, you know. Wait a minute till I get a silk hat."

"Ass, are you going out looking for a fight in a silk hat?"

"No; I should look for it in the lane. But I want to wear a silk hat, you know. We may be goin' to have a wuff encounter, but that's no reason why we shouldn't keep up a respectable appearance, you know."

"Come as you are!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"Come on, ass!"

Blake linked his arm in D'Arcy's, and the swell of the School House had to go, willy-nilly. The four chums walked out of the gates. Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther went upstairs to get cleaned after that rough and dusty encounter. They were followed by the chuckles of the School House.

CHAPTER 5.

The Raid of Figgins & Co.

"COME on!" said Figgins.
 The Co. looked at him.

"Hallo!" said Kerr. "What's on now?"

"I'm afraid I can't come now," said Fatty Wynn. "I've promised Pratt to go with him to the tuckshop, and I couldn't possibly break a promise."

"I dare say Pratt will be just as pleased if you don't go!" growled Figgins.

"That's not the question. He's going to stand a feed."

"Come on!"

"And I'm hungry. I get awfully hungry in this June weather, you know. And I had a very light tea—only a few eggs and a couple of sausages with my bacon, and half a dozen tarts. And——"

"Come on!"

"But really, Figgy——"

"Come on, I tell you! I'll explain as we go!"

"Is it a raid?" asked Kerr, as he followed his leader out of the New House, and Fatty Wynn reluctantly brought up the rear.

"Yes. And there's grub in it, I fancy."

Fatty Wynn picked up his ears.

"What's that, Figgy?" he asked quickly.

"You know Blake had a big hamper to-day?"

"Well, yes, rather, as we changed the labels on it and sent it to Tom Merry instead," said Kerr, with a grin.

"Well, Blake will have got it back before this. You know what that hamper's most likely to contain?"

"A spread," said Fatty Wynn, with glistening eyes; "and a jolly big one, I should judge, from the size of the hamper."

"Exactly."

"But we can't get hold of it," said Kerr. "The hamper's too big for us to move, isn't it?"

"I don't know. There are three of us."

"But we couldn't get a thing that size out of the School House without being seen, and Blake will be in his study."

"Blake has just gone out."

"Why, it's close on locking-up!"

"I know it is, but Blake has just gone out, and Dig and Herries and Gussy have gone with him. That's why I thought of the raid."

"Good!"

"If we can't move the hamper we can raid the contents of it," said Figgins, with a grin. "It will make up for the times when the School House rotters have raided us. You remember the time they raided the fig pudding?"

"Ha, ha! Yes! And a nice time they had of it after eating the thing," said Fatty Wynn. "And a nice time we had, too, for that matter."

"It was a jolly good pudding!"

"Yes; if you had left the cooking to me. You can't cook for coffee, Figgy. There are some things you can do, but cooking isn't one of them. You can play footer, and you can bowl, but you can't make puddings."

"I tell you that fig pudding——"

"And I tell you——"

"Oh, blow the fig pudding!" said Kerr. "Never mind that now! The question is about raiding Blake's study, and the sooner we do it the better, if we're going to do it at all. They can't stay out long."

"That's true, Kerr."

"Come on, then," said Figgins. "Still, I admit it gets my back up when Fatty says I can't cook a pudding. That fig pudding has never really been forgotten——"

"Because it made us all ill!"

"Only because we shoved syrup of figs into it."

"You shoved it in, you mean!"

"Well, it was really your doing, you know."

"Why, I was against it all along. You must remember that, Figgy."

"I don't remember anything of the sort. I remember——"

"You'd better remember that it's close on locking-up time, and Blake won't be long," said Kerr.

"You're right. Come along!"

The June dusk was thickening in the old quadrangle of St. Jim's. The New House boys dodged into the School House. They hurried upstairs to the Fourth Form corridor, meeting no one on the way but Skimpole, whom they encountered just outside Study No. 6. Skimpole stopped and looked at them suspiciously.

"I say, what are you New House fellows doing in here?" he asked. "What little game are you up to now?"

Figgins could have wiped up the linoleum with Skimpole for appearing at that inopportune moment, but it was no time for such drastic measures. He assumed his blandest smile, with a rapid sign to the Co. to dissimulate.

"Hallo, Skimpole, is that you?"

"Yes," said Skimpole. "I asked you——"

"I hope you weren't hurt by those nasty, rough Grammarian fellows?" said Figgins, with great solicitude.

"Well, no," said Skimpole. "They are not really rough, you know, but they are lamentably ignorant and obtuse. They have practically no knowledge of the higher ethics, and they regard the fundamental principles of Socialism as matter for rude jests."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed Figgins, in amazement.

"I assure you that it is. I would willingly have spent a couple of hours in explaining to them——"

"You should have read them a chapter of your book on the subject," said Kerr, taking his cue from Figgins. "That would have done them good."

"Unfortunately, I did not have it with me. I think, however, that probably they would not have listened."

"Oh, I don't know! You know that the spell of eloquence will tame the most savage hearts," said Figgins. "There was that stuff you were preaching about the other day, when we were having the elections for the school parliament. What was it? I know it ended with 'ism,' and was something about something—I remember that distinctly!"

"If it was Determinism——"

"Yes, I dare say it was, or something of the sort. By the

way, have you a book you could lend me on that subject, Skimpole?"

"Yes, certainly. There's Fattedoffski's famous book 'Determinism: Being a Treatise to prove that Every Cause has an Effect, and that every Effect is the result of a Cause'—"

"Just the thing! Have you got it with you?" asked Figgins, who knew perfectly well that Skimpole hadn't.

"No; but I could get it for you if you like to wait."

"How long would it take you?"

"Only a few minutes."

"Well, if you don't mind taking the trouble—"

"My dear Figgins, a sincere Socialist does not mind how much trouble he gives to himself or others in spreading the glorious propaganda."

"In that case you may as well get the book," said Figgins. "If you'd like to bring any other volumes on the same subject, you might. Kerr and Wynn want them as much as I do."

This was perfectly true. Kerr and Wynn wanted those portentous volumes exactly as much as Figgins did—which was not at all.

"I'll bring you half a dozen of them," said the obliging Skimpole. "Just wait here a few minutes, and I'll be back."

"Thanks, awfully, old fellow!"

And the amateur Socialist disappeared.

"Come on!" said Figgins, dragging his two chums into Study No. 6, and closing the door. "We've got to get clear before that howling ass returns. Where's that hamper?"

He turned up the gas, which Blake had left turned low after being last in the study. The hamper was easy enough to discover then. It stood near the table, and took up nearly as much room. The lid was closed now, however. Blake had not yet received the Head's permission to unpack it, but he was aware that the hamper might very probably be raided by hungry juniors on the scent of a feed. He had consequently worked in a chain to fasten it, and had secured the chain with a padlock, so that it was impossible to open the hamper now. The key was in Blake's pocket, so the contents of the hamper were safe enough, unless it was carried off bodily.

Figgins glanced at the hamper, and gave a whistle as he saw the padlock. He put his fingers under the lid and gave it a wrench. But the hamper was of the strongest possible construction, and Figgins's wrench had no effect upon it.

"Rotten!" said Kerr. "There's no opening the giddy thing without tools, at any rate. I suppose the kids here have had a feed on what's inside, and then padlocked it to prevent the stuff being raided."

It was a natural supposition, and Figgins nodded assent. Fatty Wynn was eyeing the hamper hungrily. The padlock seemed to him simply cruel. Like the Peri at the gates of Paradise, Fatty Wynn gazed upon the lock on the hamper.

"Rather a beastly trick of Blake's," said Figgins. "It shows a rotten, suspicious nature to go about padlocking his things, as if he thought somebody wanted to pinch his grub!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What are you cackling at, Kerr?"

"Nothing. We can't get that hamper open, and Blake may be back any minute. Hush! There's somebody coming along the passage now."

Figgins turned the gas down instantly.

The New House raiders listened intently.

"The fellow's not coming from the stairs," whispered Figgins, "and there's only one of him. He's coming from the opposite direction."

"Then it's Skimpole!"

"Yes, coming back with his rotten boshy books!" chuckled Figgins. "Not a sound; let's watch the ass!"

The three juniors looked through a narrow slit as Figgins held the door slightly ajar. The passage was lighted, and they saw the amateur Socialist coming along. Skimpole was heavily laden. He had three huge volumes under either arm, and a bundle of pamphlets sticking out of his pocket.

He stopped, and looked up and down the passage, evidently surprised not to find Figgins & Co. there. The New House trio watched him breathlessly. Up and down the passage he looked, but there was, of course, no sign of Figgins & Co. Skimpole frowned.

"Dear me—that is rather rude of Figgins, and extremely inconsiderate," he murmured aloud. "Is it possible that he did not want the books, but was merely rotting? I am very sorry to lose such an opportunity of spreading the light of Socialism. I suppose I had better take the books back again."

Skimpole gave a last look round. It did not seem to occur to him that the New House trio might be in one of the studies. He frowned again, and turned back, and disappeared up the passage with his burden of Socialist lore.

And a low chuckle from Figgins & Co. followed him.

CHAPTER 6.

Hiding the Plunder.

Figgins did not move until the footsteps of the amateur Socialist had died away. Then he latched the door and turned up the gas.

"That ass is gone," he remarked, with a grin. "We've got rid of him very well. But the difficulty is that Blake may be back any minute, and we can't possibly get that padlock off without tools. It would be rough to have to give up the idea of a raid after we've got so far—"

"We can't give it up," said Fatty Wynn emphatically. "I've missed going to the tuckshop with Pratt to come here with you, Figgins. Something's got to be done, or we shan't get a feed at all. I'm hungry now."

"The beastly thing's too heavy to carry away," said Kerr, looking doubtfully at the great hamper. "We might lower it from the window if we had time, and get half a dozen fellows underneath to carry it away—"

Figgins's eyes glistened.

"There's no time to do that here," he exclaimed, "but if we could get the hamper out of the room into some other part of the house—"

"By Jove, yes! Suppose we got it along to the box-room at the end of the passage," exclaimed Kerr excitedly. "Blake wouldn't know what had become of it, and he wouldn't know where to look for it—"

"My hat! That's the idea!" said Fatty Wynn. "Back up, and let's get the hamper out of the study before those bounders come in!"

"Come on, then!"

There was no time to waste. Figgins & Co. seized the hamper and dragged it to the door. It was heavy, but they were strong, and they were in deadly earnest. The hamper was dragged along, and out of the door into the passage.

The passage was quite clear. There was a chance for the New House raiders to get the hamper to the box-room undetected, if they lost no time.

"Come on!" exclaimed Figgins.

And at a gasping run the juniors went along, dragging the hamper over the linoleum at a speed really remarkable considering the weight of it. Right up to the box-room door they dashed, and Figgins kicked it open, and they bundled the hamper inside. There was the sound of an opening door further up the passage.

"Quick!" gasped Figgins.

He seized the door and slung it shut. A footstep sounded in the corridor, and then the voice of Tom Merry was heard.

"What's all that row about?"

The New House trio scarcely breathed. The Terrible Three had finished cleaning up after their adventure with the Grammarians, and were coming down when the noise of the hamper being dragged along the passage had evidently caught their ears.

Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther came round the corner about three seconds after Figgins had closed the box-room door. They looked up and down the passage.

"What was all that row?" said Manners, looking puzzled.

"There was a fearful din in the corridor just now."

"Blessed if I know," said Lowther. "There's nobody here now."

"It sounded like something being dragged along," Tom Merry remarked. "Hallo, Gore; what was that row about?"

Gore of the Shell had just come upstairs. He grinned as he looked at the Terrible Three.

"I haven't heard any row," he replied. "I've heard something else, though."

"Have you? What do you mean?"

"I heard about four asses coming home to St. Jim's tied up round a bicycle," chuckled Gore. "Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry turned red. The Terrible Three had expected to get a torrent of chipping over the adventure with the Grammarians, and they were certain not to be disappointed.

"Oh, shut up!" growled Monty Lowther. "Stop that cackling, Gore. I don't see what you want to go off like a blessed alarm clock for."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Gore went on down the passage laughing. The Terrible Three, looking pink and uncomfortable, went downstairs. Figgins turned to his comrades with a grin in the darkness of the box-room.

"That was a narrow shave," he murmured. "But a miss is as good as a mile. It would have been all up if Tom Merry had spotted us then."

"Shut the door," said Kerr, "I'll light the gas."

"Don't turn it too high. It would be seen under the door."

"Right-ho!"

A glimmer of gas was sufficient to light the box-room. The New House trio looked about them. The room was pretty well filled with empty boxes and other lumber. Figgins crossed to the window and looked out into the dusky quad.

"Taggles is looking up," he remarked. "Blake doesn't seem to be in yet. He's been in for it, I expect."

"Never mind Blake now. How are we to get the hamper away?"

"We shall want a jolly strong rope and half a dozen fellows up here to help us sling it out of the window," said Figgins. "Then it will be no joke to get it into the New House. It will be a big job; and one thing's pretty certain—we can't do it while the School House is awake."

Kerr gave a whistle.

"I suppose you're right, Figgy, but—"

"Anybody coming out into the quad could see it slinging from the window," said Figgins decidedly. "It's no good thinking of it now. If it's to be done at all, it will have to be done after lights out."

"Well, it will be fun, anyway."

"Very funny if we get spotted being out of the House after lights out," Fatty Wynn remarked. "It would mean a fearful row."

"If you're getting funky, Fatty Wynn—"

"Oh, rats, Figgy, you know I'm game! It's a good idea, too. The School House rotters burgled our house on Kerr's birthday, and it will be tit for tat."

"That's the idea!"

"But Blake will search for the hamper when he misses it from his room," said Kerr. "They might look in here."

"H'm!" said Figgins thoughtfully. "I don't think that's likely, but it's quite possible, and if they look in here and find the hamper we shall be done in. We sha'n't know, and should have all the trouble of burgling the School House for nothing. That would be rotten."

"I should say so."

"We shall have to conceal it somehow, that's all. I dare say we can shove it out of sight under some of these empty boxes. Here's a dozen or more piled on top of one another at this end of the room. Help me get them down, and we'll shove in the hamper and pile them on it."

"Good!"

The New House Co. set to work at once. The empty boxes were not difficult to handle, and they soon had the space cleared. The hamper was dragged close to the wall, and the empty boxes stacked round and over it. The hamper from Wyoming was completely concealed from view.

Figgins chuckled.

"That's all right," he observed. "Now we've only got to get out of the house, without being seen if possible. If we're not spotted, Blake won't even suspect that it's a New House raid."

"Skimpole has seen us—"

"Oh, he's too busy thinking of reforming society to attach any importance to a trifle like that! He's forgot all about it."

"Very likely. Let's get out."

Figgins unfastened the catch of the box-room window.

"We shall have to get in by the window," he remarked. "It will be easy enough to get up by the ivy, and easy enough to get in at the window now it's unfastened. If they look in here they'll never think of looking at the window."

The three juniors quitted the box room. The passage was empty, but as they went down the broad staircase of the School House they could hardly fail to be seen. Figgins's hope of escaping undetected was soon dissolved. Mellish of the Fourth met them on the stairs and stared at them.

"Hallo, you New House rotters—"

It was a time for action, not for words. Figgins gave the astonished Mellish a push that made him sit down on the stairs in a hurry.

"Come on!" he cried.

The Co. dashed down three steps at a time. Mellish sat on the stair and yelled.

"New House rotters! Look out!"

"Sure and it's Figgins!" exclaimed Reilly of the Fourth, dashing into the way of the fleeing Co. with an Irishman's disregard for the odds. "Stop them!"

Three pairs of hands seized Reilly, and he went reeling against a study door, and Figgins & Co. dashed on, out into the quadrangle. The alarm had spread, and juniors came running out of the common-room.

"What's the trouble?" asked Tom Merry.

"Figgins & Co.—"

"Where?"

"They've gone!"

"You're too late," said Mellish. "Just what's to be expected of you, too! You're no good for anything but to be tied up to kites and bicycles by the Grammar cad!"

"Sure and ye're right!" exclaimed Reilly. "It's time Tom Merry resigned—"

"Oh, rats!" said Tom Merry; and he walked away.

Figgins & Co., expecting pursuit, ran across the quadrangle. But as they saw that the School House juniors only stared out into the dusk from the steps of the School House, they stopped.

"We're well out of that!" grinned Figgins. "Hallo! What's that row at the gate?"

There was a sound of knocking at the gates of St. Jim's, closed now for the night. A voice could be heard in the distance, apparently remonstrating with Taggles.

"It's those bounders come back!"

"Hallo! What are you doing out of your House at this hour?" exclaimed Monteith, the head prefect of the New House, coming by. "Go in at once!"

"We—"

"Go in at once, I tell you!"

There was no help for it. Figgins & Co. went into the New House under the eye of the prefect.

CHAPTER 7.

Avenge!

IT is time we followed the chums of Study No. 6. Fully determined to avenge the insult to the dignity of St. Jim's, and incidentally prove that they were far more worthy than the Terrible Three to carry on the glorious traditions of the School House, the four chums sallied out of the gates, in search of Frank Monk & Co. They guessed that the Grammarians were not far away, and they were right.

Frank Monk, Lane, and Carboy were strolling easily in the direction of the Grammar School in the gathering dusk of the June evening. They had time to get in before the gates of the Grammar School were closed, and they strolled along at an easy pace, chuckling over the adventure with Skimpole and the Terrible Three.

They were in no hurry, and it did not occur to them that Nemesis was on their track. The other Grammarians were gone on ahead, and Monk and his friends were alone when the pursuers spotted them.

Blake had, of course, guessed in what direction to look for the Grammar lads. At that hour they could only be going home. D'Arcy, who had of late distinguished himself as an amateur detective, wanted to look for footprints in the dust of the lane. But Blake had no time to humour D'Arcy.

"What are you poking about there for, Gussy?" he demanded, as he saw the swell of the School House examining the dusty ground, with his monocle screwed into his eye. "Have you lost something?"

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy, without looking up.

"What is it?"

"The twaces."

"The what?"

"The twaces of the Gwammah cads. I am pickin' up their twack, you know, and I have just lost their twaces."

"You shrieking ass!"

"I uttably wefuse to be chawactewised as a shwiokin' ass. I am lookin' for their twaces in the dust. Sherlock Holmes always looks for the twack of the cwiminals."

"I suppose there are about a hundred tracks in that dust, fathead—"

"I wefuse to be addwessed as a fathead."

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NEXT
THURSDAY:

"BLAKE & CO.'S TRIUMPH,"

A Double-Length Tale of
Tom Merry's Schooldays.

"And Sherlock Holmes couldn't have told one from another. Besides, it's getting dark."

"As soon as I have once found the twack, we can wun like anything."

"Rats! There's no need to look for tracks. We know the Grammar cads must have gone towards the Grammar School, ass, and there's only one road they can have taken, so come on."

"That is not the way Sherlock Holmes would weason it out."

"Come on!"

"I am sowwy to disagree with you, Blake, but I cannot come on until I have discovered the twacks of the Gwammah cads," said Arthur Augustus firmly. "How do we know that they have not left the woad and gone through the wood, for instance?"

"Because they would be late for calling over at the Grammar School if they went the long way round, duffer."

"I wufuse to be called a duffah. If you apply that extremely opprobrious expwession to me again, Blake, I shall be compelled to intewwupt the pwocceedings by administerin' to you a weally feashful thwashin'."

"Oh, come on!" said Digby. "Let Gussy look for the tracks if he likes, and we'll get on. Leave him there."

"Right-ho!" exclaimed Herries.

"Good!" said Blake. "Put your beef into it, too. We don't want to get back to St. Jim's after locking-up, if we can help it."

"I say, deah boys—"

But the dear boys were sprinting on through the June dusk. D'Arcy gazed after them for a moment, and then gazed at the indistinguishable tracks in the dust of the lane. Finally he decided to follow his comrades, and he, too, broke into a run, and the tracks were never looked for after that. The chums of Study No. 6 kept on at a rapid run, D'Arcy holding his eyeglass in one hand, and his cap on with the other.

It was Digby who first sighted the enemy. He caught Blake's arm and stopped him, pointing ahead at three dim figures that loomed up in the dusk of the trees beside the lane.

"There they are!"

Blake halted, breathing heavily.

"Good! Get on the grass here, kids, and they won't hear us, and we'll pounce on them suddenly."

"Good wheeze!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

There was a belt of grass under the trees beside the lane. The chums ran along on the grass and made no sound. The Grammarians did not look round; nothing was farther from their minds than pursuit. The St. Jim's juniors were loyal with them before they had a suspicion of danger.

Then a gasping breath from D'Arcy caught Frank Monk's quick ear, and he turned round and shouted to his companions.

"Look out!"

But the warning came too late. The four juniors from St. Jim's hurled themselves upon the Grammarians, and had them down in the road before they could make a movement to defend themselves.

"Got you, you rotters!" roared Blake, as he pinned Monk down with a knee on his chest. "I think this is our turn—eh?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"You—you—you—" gasped Monk. "Where did you spring from?"

"We have twacked you down, deah boys," said D'Arcy, as he sat upon Carboy's chest. "You may wegard yourselves as pwisonahs of war."

"Yes, we've got 'em!" said Blake, with great satisfaction. "Now, I fancy the proper caper is to roll them into the ditch."

"Here, hold on!" exclaimed Frank Monk, in alarm. "There's four feet of water in that ditch, you ass!"

"Oh, that's all right; we'll hold your heads above the water!" said Blake. "We're not going to drown you."

"You'll spoil our clothes, you duffer!"

"H'm! Well, if you like to confess yourselves licked, we'll forego the ducking," said Blake thoughtfully. "You are licked, out and out, you know, so you may as well own up."

"Rats!"

"What did you say?"

"Rats! R A T S, rats!"

"Well, of all the cheek! You'll go into the ditch now without the option of a fine. Roll 'em over, kids!"

"Right-ho!"

"Yaas, wathah! Woll the wottahs ovah, deah boys!"

Monk, Lane, and Carboy struggled desperately. The St. Jim's juniors were four to three, but it was a terrible tussle. D'Arcy dropped his eyeglass, and stopped to look for it.

For a minute the odds were even, and in that minute the Grammarians made a great effort and tore themselves loose. They staggered to their feet, and would have fled, but they had no time. Blake, Herries, and Digby were upon them again, and the fight raged furiously.

"Come on, Gussy!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

D'Arcy threw himself into the fight again. The three Grammarians were driven right to the edge of the ditch under a shower of blows. There they rallied, and dodged, and went sprinting down the lane. D'Arcy was rushing in pursuit, when Blake called him back.

"Hold on, Gussy!"

"Bottah wipe up the gwound with the boundahs while we are about it, deah boy."

"Rats! 'Nuff' as good as a feast," said Blake, tenderly caressing a nose swollen to something like double its usual size. "We've got their caps here as trophies, to show we've licked 'em."

There were three Grammar School caps lying in the dust. Monk, Lane, and Carboy had not had time to pick them up. Blake gathered them in with a grin.

"We'll take these home to St. Jim's," he said. "We can send 'em on to Monk by post to-morrow. Meanwhile, they'll prove that we licked the Grammar cads hollow, and if Tom Morry doesn't have to get off his perch over this job, you can use my head for a cricket-ball."

"Yaas, wathah! We've weally beaten the Gwammarians hollow, deah boys, and the Tewwible Thwee won't have a beasty leg to stand on, you know."

The four juniors were in high feather now. They had won a victory, and they had the trophies to show. They also had a varied assortment of black eyes, swollen noses, and thick ears; but what of that? They were only "de scars of honourable combat."

"Let's get back to St. Jim's," said Blake. "I'm afraid we shall be late for locking-up as it is. Come on!"

"Never mind; we've licked the Grammar cads."

"Yaas, wathah! We have given the Gwammah cads a feashful thwashin', deah boys, and they can't get out of that."

The chums of Study No. 6 lost no time in getting to the gates of St. Jim's. But the gates were locked. They were a good ten minutes late, and Taggles was always prompt in closing the gates to time.

There was nothing for it but to ring, and that Blake did. The form of Taggles, the porter, loomed up in the gloom.

"Hello, Taggles, old fellow!" said Blake affably. "Sorry to disturb you like this, you know. You closed the gates rather early, didn't you?"

Taggles gave the chums of the Fourth a stony glare through the bars of the gate.

"I closed the gates at the right time, according to horders," he said frigidly.

"You're going to let us in, aren't you, Taggy?"

"Yes, Master Blake, and report you to the 'Ead."

"Now, look here, Taggles, as an old sport—"

"Yaas, wathah, Taggles, deah boy! We appeal to you as an old sport, you know."

Taggles grinned.

"When you're on the right side of the gate, Master Blake, I'm an old hunk and an old rascal, but now I'm an old sport."

"Of course, Taggles, you don't mind any little jokes we make," said Blake, in a wheedling tone. "We all respect you very highly, Taggles."

"Yes, after locking-up."

"Don't be sarcastic, Taggles. It doesn't suit your style of beauty, you know; it really doesn't. Let us in like a good chap."

"So I will, and report you to the 'Ead."

Blake felt in his pocket. He had a half-crown there that was not worth more than its weight as pewter, being a spurious coin that had been passed on Blake in an unguarded moment. A half-crown was a serious loss to a junior, and Blake had kept the counterfeit coin, not with the idea of passing it in his turn, of course, but in the hope of meeting the person who had passed it upon him. He had confided to his chums his intention of making that person eat it. But it now occurred to Blake that he might make a good use of that spoof coin.

"I say, Taggles—"

The porter caught a glimmer of metal between Blake's finger and thumb. Taggles was always, as Blake tersely expressed it, "on the make," and the sight of a half-crown roused his cupidity at once.

"What 'ave you to say, Master Blake?"

"Would you like me to make you a present of this?"

"Which I always does my dooty," said Taggles, "and if any young gentleman felt inclined to make me a present of an 'arf-crown, I shouldn't have anything to say again it."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Well, Taggy, this is yours if you open the gate and say nothing about it."

"Weally, Blake, this amounts to bwibery and cowwup-tion, and I cannot approve of it," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"That's all right, Gussy; you can stay outside."

"I should wefuse to do anythin' of the sort. But—"

"Oh, ring off! Taggles, you know, of course, that I wouldn't dream of offering you a bribe; that is only D'Arcy's coarse way of putting it."

"Weally, Blake—"

"What I mean is, that I have so great a respect for your character that I wish to make you a little present, and here it is. If you care to let us in, I shall take that as a favour from one gentleman to another, quite apart from any consideration of the half-crown."

"Bai Jove, that altahs the case, of course. Undah the cires, I don't see how Taggles can have any objection. He can wegard the half-crown in the light of a pvesentation, and lots of people accept pvesentations."

Taggles grinned.

He held out a hand between the bars, and Blake placed the half-crown in it. Then the gates swung open, and the juniors passed in.

"Good-night, Taggles!"

"Good-night, Master Blake!"

"I say, Blake, you know, that's wathah expensive, a half-crown to get in for calling ovah," said Arthur Augustus.

Blake grinned.

"Oh, half-crowns like that are cheap enough," he said. "You can get 'em about a shilling a dozen."

"Bai Jove!"

"You see, it was a spoof one!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Digby.

"I should like to see Taggles's face when he discovers it!" grinned Blake. "It's his own look-out, of course, for descending to the base level of bribery."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But upon the whole," said Blake thoughtfully, "I shall give him a real half-crown to-morrow in the place of it. It's a good joke, but if I let him keep it it would amount to passing bad money."

"I am weally glad to hear you say so, Blake. It is bettah to lose half-a-crown than to have a stain on your beastly honah, you know."

"Exactly. Lend me half-a-crown, will you?"

"Eh?"

"I haven't one. Thank you; I'll return this to you some time if I remember it, and I'm in funds. Let's get indoors."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Oh, let's get in, kid!"

And the chums of Study No. 6, with the three Grammarian caps stuffed under their jackets, entered the School House.

CHAPTER 8.

A Study Row.

"HALLO, Merry! Got over it, old chap?"

"Feeling pretty fit!"

"Better look out for the Grammar kids."

Tom Merry turned crimson.

These remarks, and many more like them, greeted him when he made his first public appearance after the ridiculous return home.

The whole school was laughing over the joke, and his own House-fellows chipped the leader of the Terrible Three even more than the New House boys did.

"Oh, shut up!" said Tom crossly.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Gore. "He's getting waxy."

"I say, it's about time we had a new leader for the School House juniors," said Mellish. "Tom Merry is played out."

"Well, it does look like it," said Skimpole. "If you like to resign the leadership of the House into my hands for a time, Merry, I will do my best to—"

"Go and eat coke!"

"Well, there is no need to be rude about it," said Skimpole. "I could probably devise some method of putting the Grammarians in their place. As you know, I have taken up detective work lately, and, with my trained intellect, I could soon devise—"

"Rats!"

"Oh, very well, if you are going to take it like that—"

"When are you going to fly a kite again?" asked Mellish, with friendly interest. "I wish you'd tell us, Merry; we want to come along and see the fun."

Tom Merry put his hands in his pockets and walked away. He met Kildare, of the Sixth, in the quad. The captain of St. Jim's smiled.

"You're looking a bit better now, Merry. You seem to have had the worst of it with the Grammarian youngsters." "Ye-es," said Tom Merry. "Can't take the cake every time, you know."

Kildare laughed.

"No. It doesn't look like it."

Tom Merry reddened, and walked on. Wherever he appeared a torrent of chaff greeted him. Figgins & Co. at once greeted him with friendly remarks.

"It was reckless of you," said Kerr. "You see, it lowers the whole school for you to be licked like that by the Grammarians."

"That's how the case stands," said Fatty Wynn, with a nod. "The fact that those chaps are helpless duffers doesn't alter the case. It makes us all look asses."

"Nothing novel in that for you," said Tom Merry.

"My opinion is, that Tom Merry has lowered the colours of the school in the most outrageous way," said Fatty Wynn. "The least he can do, in my opinion, is to stand a feed to make up for it."

"Oh, go and eat cokernuts!" grunted Tom Merry; and he walked away.

"He's getting waxy," grinned Fatty Wynn. "But I say, you chaps, I really think that's a good idea about the feed."

"Hallo! Here come those kids from No. 6. Blake is looking mighty pleased with himself," said Figgins.

"Hallo, Blake, what's the news?"

"Oh, we've just licked the Grammarians, that's all!" said Blake carelessly. "We thought they ought to be taken down a peg or two, after the way they treated Tom Merry. You know, somebody must uphold the honour of St. Jim's."

"Ha, ha, ha! Tell us what's happened!"

Tom Merry had gone up to his study. He had had enough of chipping for a time, and he thought he would do some work. But he had scarcely got out his books when the door flew open, and Manners and Lowther came in.

"Have you heard the latest?" asked Monty Lowther.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"No. What is it?"

"Study No. 6 have had a row with the Grammarians in Rylcombe, and licked them hollow."

"Jolly glad to hear it!"

"That's all very well," said Manners. "I'm glad the enemy are licked, as far as that goes. But what about us?"

"That's—," said Lowther rather aggressively. "What price the Terrible Three?"

Tom Merry grinned.

"Pretty cheap, I should say, Monty."

"Oh, don't be funny!" said Lowther. "We've had a fearful come-down. The whole school is cackling over it."

"I know they are; I've heard 'em cackle."

"Now Blake and his gang have downed the Grammar rotters—"

"And what I want to know is," said Manners. "Where do we come in? The fellows will all be saying that Blake ought to be junior captain."

"Oh, one swallow doesn't make a summer, you know."

"Perhaps not; but we've had a come-down—"

Besides, Blake has always claimed to be leader of the House juniors, as far as that goes," said Tom Merry.

"This doesn't make any difference."

"Yes, it does; we're nowhere, now, and unless we get one in at the Grammar School jolly soon, Blake will be top dog in the School House, and keep there."

"Oh, we shall get our own back pretty soon!"

"How are we going to do it?"

"That will want thinking out."

There was a tap at the door, and it opened, and the chums of Study No. 6 walked in. They were looking very pleased with themselves.

"Hallo!" said Tom Merry.

"We want to speak to you," said Blake. "We've been thinking—"

"Yass, wathah!"

"And our idea is that as we've licked the Grammarians hollow, and you chaps haven't been able to do anything of the sort—"

"You ought to take a back seat—"

"And shut up—"

"And admit that we are the top dogs, deah boys."

"Right-ho! That's how it stands."

"What have you got to say, Tom Merry?"

"Nothing in particular," yawned Tom Merry, "excepting that I've got some work to do, so I'd be glad if you kids could go and do your chattering in your own study."

The chums of No. 6 glared.

"And take your faces away with you," said Monty Lowther plaintively. "They worry us."

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Look here!" said Blake. "The Grammarians have

licked you, and we've licked the Grammarians—ergo—that's Latin—"

"Ergo—therefore, deah boys, we weally considah—"

"Right-ho! That's how it stands—"

"You ought to be willing to take a back seat. My word! Why—"

"Now, Tom Merry—"

Tom Merry pointed to the door.

"Outside, youngsters!"

"Youngsters!" roared Blake. "I'll youngsters you, you boulder! The Grammarians licked you, and we've licked the Grammarians, ergo—"

"Travel!"

"You ought to take a back seat, and acknowledge us leaders of the House juniors."

"Bunk!"

"You won't, then?"

"Buzz off!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, those wude wemarks are no argument. You must admit that you have made a feahful ass of yourself!"

"Do you kids prefer the door or the window as a mode of exit?" asked Tom Merry politely.

"Now, just look here, Tom Merry—"

"Oh, kick them out!" said Manners. "These youngsters in the Fourth Form want teaching a lesson. As their elders, we ought to do it."

"Elders!" shouted Blake. "Elders by about three weeks, I suppose—"

"Two months and seven days," said Tom Merry severely. "I'm really surprised at you, Blake, checking older fellows than yourself in this way."

"Are you going to take a back seat—"

"I'm very comly where I am, thank you."

"I mean—"

"Never mind what you mean. Outside!"

"Once for all—"

"We can't have children making a noise in this study," said Lowther. "I think we had better turn these youngsters out, Tom."

"Yes, I suppose we shall have to," said Tom Merry, rising. "Now, run along, little boys—"

It was too much. With one accord the four Fourth-Formers hurled themselves upon the Terrible Three. In a moment the study was the scene of a terrific struggle. The Terrible Three were only three against four, but they were the best fighting-men in the Shell. And as Arthur Augustus stopped suddenly to refasten his collar, which had burst from its stud, the odds were levelled.

The din was terrific. The table went with a crash into the fire-grate, and there was a smash of books and crockery on the floor, and a crash of fender and fireirons. The juniors forgot everything in their excitement. Blake and Tom Merry were rolling on the floor in the midst of books and papers. Digby and Monty Lowther were close to the window, fighting like wild-cats. Manners had Herries's head in chancery, and was punching away like a steam-hammer. Arthur Augustus was making frantic efforts to adjust his collar.

"Help!" gasped Herries. "Guasy! Come on; he's lusting my nose!"

"Wait a minute, deah boy; my collah's come unfastened."

"You—you young villain! Rescue—"

"I sha'n't be a second, Hewwies."

"Ow! Come—ow—"

"What is all this noise?"

It was a harsh, severe voice at the door. Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell, looked into the room over his glasses, a frown upon his brow.

The struggle in the study ceased as if by magic. Study rows were common enough at St. Jim's, especially in the lower Forms, but they were generally not quite so fearfully noisy as on the present occasion. Mr. Linton had been passing along the corridor, and the din had made him open the door and look in.

"Boys!"

Manners released Herries, and the latter stood rubbing his nose ruefully. Tom Merry and Blake scrambled up. Lowther and Digby separated. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was the only one who seemed at all cool. He went on fastening his collar.

"How dare you make such a noise in your study?" said Mr. Linton. "I have had complaints about the noise here before, Merry, from Knox, whose study is below."

"We—we are sorry, sir—"

Mr. Linton smiled grimly.

"Sorry that I have caught you, I suppose you mean. I do not like to be harsh with juniors, and I can make allowance for exuberance of spirits, but it is necessary to draw a line. You will all take your books into the Shell class-room,

and remain there for an hour, and write out Latin exercises."

And the master of the Shell wagged his head warningly at the dusty juniors, and strode away. The late combatants looked at one another.

"Rotten!" said Blake. "All your fault, Tom Merry."

"My fault! How do you make that out?"

"If you had taken a back seat when I told you—"

"If you kids hadn't come bothering in your elders' study—"

"If you asses hadn't let the Grammarians tie you up—"

"Yaas, wathah! I wegard the Tewwible Thwee as bein' wholly to blame for these unfortunate circa. I think Tom Mewwy should apologise."

"I say, are we going to the class-room?" said Manners.

"Yes, rather!" said Tom Merry. "Linton isn't to be trifled with. He'll look into the Shell room to see if we're there."

Blake grunted.

"Right-ho! He's just that sort of rotter. I suppose we had better go."

And with glum countenances the seven juniors made their way to the class-room, and proceeded to write out Latin exercises with crawling pens.

CHAPTER 9.

Gone!

"**R**OTTEN!" growled Blake.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy looked up from his exercise, and screwed his monocle into his eye.

"Yaas, it is wathah wotten!" he remarked. "We have taken all the twouble to inflict a severe defeat upon the Gwammah wottahs, and have bwrought home twophies of our victowy, and now these Shell boundahs won't admit that we are the top dogs in the School House. I wegard it as mere obstinacy."

"My word!" said Digby. "Of all the obstinate asses—"

"And to get us detained in this beastly old class-room for an hour," said Herries, "all because they couldn't see reason when we explained to them—"

Blake grunted.

"I'm not thinking of that."

"Then what are you thinkin' of, deah boy?"

"That hamper in our study."

"Yaas, bai Jove, I had almost forgotten that, you know! We haven't had time to look at it since we came in."

"Too busy crowing over your giddy victory," remarked Lowther.

"I refuse to admit that I have cowed," said D'Arcy. "We came to your study to explain to you that we had licked the Gwammarians and avenged the honah of the coll, and then you cut up wuff."

"Cheeky young asses!"

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Oh, don't rag now!" said Blake. "We shall have Linton looking in. Besides, nothing alters the fact that we have licked the Grammarians, after the Grammarians licked Tom Merry, and therefore we are top dogs in the School House."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I'm thinking about that giddy hamper, though—"

"Haven't you looked into it yet?" asked Tom Merry, glancing up from his desk.

"No. We had to get the Head's permission, as you know, and he wanted to consult with Mr. Railton first. I was going to Mr. Railton's study to ask him, only—"

"Only it was more important to do some bragging first," remarked Monty Lowther.

"If you're looking for a thick ear, Lowther—"

"Shut up!" said Tom Merry. "Linton may come along any moment."

"Let that silly cuckoo keep quiet, then. We just stopped to speak to Figgins & Co. to tell them about it, and we told some of the fellows—"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Besides, why shouldn't we crow if we want to?" said Digby. "We've licked the Grammar cads, after the Grammar cads licked you three, and we've got their giddy caps to show—"

"When will that confounded hour be up!" growled Blake, looking at the clock. "What is bothering me is, that some fellow may go along to our study and look into the hamper on his own. Figgins & Co. might."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Figgins & Co. have been in the house since you went out, as a matter of fact," he remarked.

Blake looked alarmed.

"What were they doing here, Merry?"

"I don't know. I heard Reilly shout that they were here, but they were gone by the time I came up."

The chums of Study No. 6 looked at one another uneasily. The visit of Figgins & Co. to the School House might mean nothing—but it might mean mischief. The mysterious hamper was still yet unpacked. Blake & Co. were waiting for permission, but if Figgins chanced upon it, he would know nothing about that. If he had half a chance he was as likely to raid it as not.

The master of the Shell looked in the class-room. The seven juniors were working away industriously.

Mr. Linton coughed, and they looked up.

"You may go now, my boys," said the Shell master, glancing at the clock. "I hope this lesson will keep you from creating such disturbances in the study again."

"I hope so, sir," said Tom Merry meekly.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"You may go."

And the juniors gladly went. Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy hurried out first.

"I'll cut along to Mr. Railton's room, and ask him about the hamper," said Blake. "I'll join you in the study. You can go on up."

"Right-ho!" said Herries.

Blake tapped at the door of Mr. Railton's room, and the housemaster's voice bade him enter. Blake went in. Mr. Railton glanced curiously at his cut lip and battered nose, very visible signs of his encounter with the Grammarians, but he made no remark.

"If you please, sir, can I know about the hamper now?" asked Blake.

The housemaster smiled.

"Yes, certainly, Blake. I expected to see you before this."

Blake coloured.

"I was out until locking-up, sir."

"H'm! You seem to have met with some disaster."

"I—I knocked my nose against something, sir," stammered Blake. He did not think it necessary to explain that it was Frank Monk's fist he had knocked it against.

Mr. Railton smiled again.

"Well, about the hamper," he said. "The Head has shown me your uncle's letter, and upon the whole he has decided that the hamper may be unpacked, Blake, and that you may make use of the contents."

"Yes, sir," said Blake, wondering what the contents of the mysterious hamper might be. "I am very glad of that, sir."

"The Head trusts—and I trust—that you will be discreet, that is all, Blake," said Mr. Railton, in a slightly emphatic tone.

"Certainly, sir."

"Your uncle's idea is really good, but if carried to excess the matter might become generally troublesome. The Head is willing to leave it to your good sense."

"Thank you, sir."

And Blake quitted the study, in a puzzled and amazed frame of mind. What the hamper could possibly contain was a staggering mystery. The junior hurried up the stairs, and overtook his chums as they reached the door of the study.

"Is it all right?" asked Digby, looking round.

"Right as rain."

"We can open the hamper?"

"Yes. We can unpack it, and use the contents, and the Head trusts to our discretion. What on earth the hamper can hold beats me. It can't be grub."

"Bai Jove, it's a beastly mystery, and no mistake."

"We'll jolly soon solve it now," said Herries. "It won't take a minute to get the hamper open now that we've got permission."

"Right-ho!"

The juniors hurried into the study. Blake turned up the gas, and the next moment he let out a terrific yell.

"Where's the hamper?"

"Bai Jove!"

"My word!"

The space where the hamper had stood was empty. The hamper was gone! Blake glared at the spot as if he could scarcely believe his eyes.

"Gone!"

"Gone, bai Jove!"

There was no doubt about it. The hamper was gone, and the mystery of its contents remained still unsolved!

CHAPTER 10.

The Hamper Hunters.

BLAKE stared at the place where the hamper once had been, for several moments in blank silence. D'Arcy screwed his monocle into his eye, and stared again, as if he hoped by the assistance of the glass to discover some sign of the missing hamper. But sign there was none. The hamper was gone. There was no place in the study where a so bulky an article could be concealed. It was evidently not in the room.

"My only hat!" said Blake, at last. "It's been raided!"

"Yes, while we were out on the track of the Grammarians!" growled Herries.

"Or else while we were in the class-room——"

"Oh, no! Tom Merry saw Figgins—or somebody saw him—while we were out——"

"But look here, Figgins & Co. couldn't get that hamper away. Taggles could hardly carry it upstairs. Figgins & Co. couldn't have got it downstairs without alarming the whole House!" exclaimed Digby.

Blake wrinkled his brow in thought.

"Something in that, Dig."

"It wasn't Figgins & Co., then. It must have been some School House rotter."

"Tom Merry!" exclaimed Blake, with conviction. "That's why he mentioned that Figgins had been here, just to throw us off the scent."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Come on!" exclaimed Blake, turning to the door. "We're going to have that giddy hamper back, or know the reason why."

"But I say, deah boy——"

"Come on!"

"But weally, Blake, the hampah was not in Tom Mewwy's study when we went there, and he has been undah our eye evah since."

"Oh, they wouldn't put it into their study, of course! They've stowed it away somewhere till they can get the padlock off."

"That's the wheeze!"

"Yaas; I nevah thought of that. But if we go and wov in Tom Mewwy's study again, Mr. Linton will be down upon us like anythin'."

"I don't care. I'm going to have that hamper back."

"Yaas, wathah! But——"

"Oh, come along, and don't jaw! They may be getting the padlock off at this very moment, and then we shall be too late."

"Quite twee. Buck up, deah boys!"

The chums of Study No. 6 ran swiftly along the passage to Tom Merry's study. The Terrible Three had just returned there, after being released from detention. They stared at the four excited chums as they burst into the room.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Are you looking for more trouble, Blake?"

"I'm looking for my hamper."

"Your what?"

"My hamper."

"I thought it was in your study."

"So it was, till you rotters shifted it. Where is it?"

Tom Merry looked surprised.

"I don't know anything about it, Blake. Is it gone?"

"Yes."

"Well, we haven't looked into your study even. Honour bright!"

Tom Merry's word was always to be relied upon. Jack Blake knew that, and he calmed down a little.

"Well, if you say so, Merry——"

"I do. I don't know anything about it, and Manners and Lowther don't either."

"Not a word!" said Manners.

"Not a syllable!" said Lowther.

"We accept your assurance on that point, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "We would not dream of doubtin' a gentleman's word. But the important question is, what has become of the beastly hampah?"

"That's it," said Blake.

"Figgins & Co. were here."

"But they couldn't possibly get that hamper out of the house," said Blake. "It was so heavy that Taggles could hardly carry it upstairs."

"That's so. I don't see how Figgins could have handled it," assented Tom Merry thoughtfully. "If it wasn't Figgins it was somebody in the School House."

"I've got it!" exclaimed Lowther.

Blake glared at him.

"You've got my hamper?"

"No," said Lowther, laughing. "I haven't got y—"

ANSWERS



"Baf Jove!" said D'Arcy, surveying the flask. "Lovely Liniment for Little Limbs!"

hamper, but I believe I know who has. It's Skimpole, of course."

"Skimpole!"

"Look at it yourself. As a Socialist, he would think nothing of confiscating the hamper and distributing the contents among all who wanted some."

"My only hat!" yelled Blake. "I remember now that he suggested something of the sort to me when the hamper first came."

"Then there's no doubt about it," grinned Lowther. "You'd better collar it before he has time to nationalise it."

"Come on!" exclaimed Blake excitedly.

And the four hamper-hunters rushed out of Tom Merry's study, and into the next one, which was tenanted by Gore and Skimpole. Gore and Skimpole were both there, as it happened, and a hot argument was in progress. Gore was objecting to some pies belonging to him being handed to a tramp at the gates of St. Jim's. It had happened before, and now it had happened again, and Gore had had enough of it. The argument was growing very heated when the chums of Study No. 6 burst in.

Blake & Co. did not stand upon ceremony. They rushed straight at Skimpole, and bumped him down on the hearth-rug.

"Where's my hamper?" roared Blake.

Skimpole gasped.

"Eh—what?"

"Where's my hamper?"

"Your hamper! Really, Blake, I do not understand you. Is not your hamper in your study? If it is not, I really cannot enlighten you as to its whereabouts, since I am quite ignorant upon the point."

Blake bumped his head upon the rug.

"Where's my hamper?"

"Really, I—I— Help, Gore!"

Gore roared with laughter.

"Not much!" he said. "If you've been boning Blake's grub as well as mine, serve him jolly well right, and serve you right if you get a licking!"

"Yaas, wathah! Unless Skimpole immediately informs us what he has done with the hamper, we shall certainly administrah a feahful thwashin'!"

"Where's my hamper?"

"Really, Blake—"

"You horrid bandit, what have you done with my hamper?"

"I—I swear I haven't touched it, Blake!" gasped Skimpole. "After you refused so rudely to allow the contents to be distributed among the poor and needy of Rylcombe, I gave up the idea entirely."

"The hamper's gone!"

"I do not know anything about it. I assure you of that, Blake. If it had occurred to me, I might, in the interests of the toiling millions, have taken away your hamper and distributed the contents; but I did not. I really do not know what has become of your hamper, Blake."

"Now, look here, Skimpole—"

"I do not know what has become of your hamper. It is impossible for a sincere Socialist to prevaricate. If I had taken your hamper I should tell you so at once."

"Well, there's something in that," growled Blake, getting off Skimpole's chest. "I made sure that you had had it."

"I really have not had it."

"Then who has?" demanded Blake.

"I really do not know. Perhaps it is a judgment upon you for not devoting that hamper to the cause of Socialism."

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Gore.

"Have you taken the hamper, Gore?" demanded Blake,

turning upon the cad of the Shell so suddenly that he jumped.

"No, of course not!"

"Well, somebody's had it," growled Blake. "I'm going to have that hamper back, if I have to slog everybody in the School House. Come on, chaps! I suppose this tame lunatic is telling the truth."

"I assure you I am incapable of speaking anything but the truth, Blake. A sincere Socialist is bound to the cause of truth by his principles. If you have a quarter of an hour to spare, I will read you an extract on that subject from the hundred-and-fifty-fourth chapter of my book."

The door slammed behind the chums of Study No. 5. In the passage they paused to consider their next step.

"It's getting towards bedtime," grunted Blake. "We shall have to go to bed soon, and we have got to find the hamper before then. Of course, it's a jape of one of the fellows, and we've got to keep the thing to ourselves, and keep it dark. But we're going to have that hamper back, or bust something."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"It's some School House boulder that had it, and it wasn't Tom Merry or Skimpole. By Jove, I think I can see light!"

"What's the idea?" asked Digby.

"You remember Tom Merry said he hadn't actually seen Figgins in the House. He heard Reilly say that Figgins was here. Suppose it was Reilly raided the hamper, and said that just to raise a false scent."

"Bai Jove, I think that's extremely prob! Weilly has nevah weally tweated me with wopah respect."

"It's likely enough," said Digby. "but—"

"It's pretty certain," said Blake, with conviction. "Reilly has been up against us ever since we started the St. Jim's Junior Parliament. He wants Home Rule for Ireland, and I'm not going to let him have it. Reilly is the boulder!"

"Yaas, wathah! He is quite capable of this piece of feaful cheek. He busted in a silk hat of mine once with a cwicket-bat, and a fellow who would do that would do anythin'."

"Come along, and we'll see."

And the hamper-hunters hurried off to Reilly's study. Reilly was member for Belfast in the St. Jim's Junior Parliament, and, as it happened, he was entertaining some of his constituents to a toffee feed in the study.

Blake kicked open the door, and the chums of Study No. 6 marched in with warlike looks, to find five or six Irish juniors ready to receive them. Reilly rose to his feet.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed. "Do they all come into a room without knocking in the slum you were brought up in, Blake?"

"Where's my hamper?"

"Eh?"

"Where's my hamper?"

"Your what?"

"Hamper."

"Off your rooker!" asked Reilly pleasantly.

"My hamper's gone out of my study!"

"Has it? Then you'd better go and look for it. We're discussing some important political questions here, and we can't have you kids interrupting us."

"Where's my hamper?"

"Is that a conundrum?"

"Where's my hamper?" roared Blake. "You've had it, and I'm not going out of this study till you produce it!"

"Sure, and I haven't even seen the hamper!" grinned Reilly. "But as for going out of the study, I fancy there are enough of us here to shift you."

"Weally, Weilly—"

"Faith, Guasy, cheese it!"

"I wefuse to cheese it! I was about to wemark—"

Reilly pointed to the door.

"Outside!"

"Look here," said Blake, "do you give me your word as a member of St. Jim's Parliament that you haven't had the hamper?"

"I give you my word as member for Belfast."

"The honourable membah's word must be taken by any other honourable membah," said D'Arcy. "I am quite satisfied."

"Well, I suppose he's telling the truth," said Blake. "But where's the hamper?"

"Yaas, bai Jove, that's the beastly question!"

"Sure, and I don't know," said Reilly. "But there's one thing I do know, and that is that ye're interruptin' a political meetin'."

"Oh, rats!"

"Sure, and if ye—"

"Oh, come on!" said Blake. "We'd clean up the study

with these chaps, only there isn't time. We've got to find the hamper before we go to bed."

"Yaas, wathah!"

The chums of the Fourth quitted the study. They made their way slowly back to their own quarters in thoughtful silence. Where was the hamper? To the mystery of its contents was now added the mystery of its whereabouts.

"Blessed if I know where to look next," said Blake, as they went into Study No. 6. "If Tom Merry and Skimpole and Reilly haven't had it, I don't know what to think."

"Some of the other fellows may have raided it."

"Yes, but which? We can't go round to a hundred chaps and ask them in turn if they have raided our hamper. Mellish might have done it, but he would lie if we asked him, so that would be no good. And where can it be? It's too big to be put out of sight in any of the studies."

"That's so."

"Yaas, wathah! Whoevah has waided that hampah has hidden it away in some cornah, till he gets a chance to open it," said Arthur Augustus, with a nod.

"That's it. The padlock wouldn't be got off very easily," said Blake. "My idea is that the raider has shoved it away somewhere, and very likely means to unpack it after lights-out to-night."

"Very likely."

"There are plenty of recesses in this rambling old place where it could be shoved," Blake remarked thoughtfully. "We could easily spot it if it were in one of the studies, but if it's shoved away into some corner, we might as well look for a needle in a haystack."

"Quite wight."

"We'll have a look round till bedtime," said Blake. "But I don't suppose we shall see it. If we don't, I've got an idea."

"What's the ideah, chappy?"

"We won't go to sleep to-night," said Blake. "It's pretty certain that somebody in either the Fourth or the Shell has taken it. The kids in the Third would never dare, and, of course, it wasn't a senior."

"Yaas, wathah! The guilty party is in the Fourth Form or the Shell, but there are quite a numbah of School House fellows in the Fourth Form and the Shell, deah boy."

"But they have only two dormitories," said Blake. "We'll all remain awake to-night, and two of us can watch in our dormitory for anybody who stirs, while the other two get out into the corridor and keep an eye on the Shell dormitory."

"Good wheeze!"

"Then if anybody in either Form gets up to look for the hamper, we shall only have to follow the rotter and spot him, and recover the hamper."

"Good!"

"Bai Jove, I am wathah cwious to look into that hampah!" D'Arcy remarked. "The mystewy is weally quite fascinatin'."

"I could ask Mr. Railton what was in it," Blake remarked. "He must know, as he has read my uncle's letter to the Head. But he would want to know immediately why I didn't look for myself, and then it would be all out."

"We can't give the rotter away, and bring the masters into it," said Herries, with a decided shake of the head. "But when we find the giddy raider, we'll give him beans."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Beans isn't the word for it," said Blake. "I'm burning with curiosity to know what's in the hamper."

"We shall have to contain our cwiosity until the hampah is discovered, deah boys. Hallo, there is Skimpole! Pway don't come in, deah boy; we are wathah wowed, and we can't be bothahed with any of your bosh just now."

But Skimpole came into the study all the same.

CHAPTER 11.

On the Watch.

BLAKE'S right hand rose to point to the door. "Outside!" he said, with Spartan brevity.

"Really, Blake, I have come to do you a service," said Skimpole. "You told me that you had lost a hamper—"

"Yes; and we haven't found it, so—"

"Oh, if you don't want to find it—"

"Do you mean to say that you know anything about it?" said Blake, changing his tone somewhat. "In that case, of course—"

"I have no doubt that I can give you some information on the subject."

"Go ahead, then."

"I do not know anything about the hamper—"

"Then what are you driving at, ass?"

"What I mean is, that with my splendid ability as an amateur detective, I may be able to pick up a clue which will lead to the recovery of the missing hamper—I mean the missing hamper," explained Skimpole.

Blake gave an expressive grunt.

"Skimpole, I regard you as an ass!" said D'Arcy.

"I have not the slightest doubt that I can find a clue," said Skimpole, taking out a bulky notebook. "If you will give me the details—"

"Oh, travel along!"

"If you decline my services—"

"Well, we do," said Blake. "We've no time to bother."

"I am willing to take up the case without fee or reward," said Skimpole. "Simply out of regard for you, and to show you that you are mistaken in your estimate of my ability. I understand that you were sent to the class-room, and detained there for an hour by Mr. Linton?"

"Nearly an hour."

"H'm! That looks suspicious."

Blake stared at him.

"What looks suspicious?"

"The fact that Mr. Linton sent you to the class-room. It is an unusual hour in the evening for juniors to be detained in a class-room."

"He found us fighting with the Terrible Three in their study, and kicking up a fearful row," explained Digby.

"That is all very well; but still, it was an unusual proceeding. I am compelled to ask myself, as a detective, whether Mr. Linton may not have had some secret motive for this proceeding," said Skimpole, jotting down notes in his book. "I regard him somewhat in the light of an old offender."

"A what?" yelled Blake.

"An old offender," said Skimpole. "You may remember that a few days ago he picked up my notebook in the passage, and refused to restore it to me until he had shown it to the Head."

"What about that?"

"His pretext was that the Socialistic doctrines in my book were not suitable matter for a junior to be thinking about," said Skimpole. "That, of course, was nonsense. A brain like mine is capable of dealing with any matter. You do not often see a brain like mine."

"I've never seen yours yet, and I'm not going to take your word for it that you've got one, either," said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! If Skimpole possessed a brain, there would be some indication of it in his conduct, and I have nevah noticed anythin' of the sort."

"Pray allow me to go on," said Skimpole. "Mr. Linton's pretext was absurd in my opinion, and was evidently meant to disguise the fact that he wanted to remain in possession of my notebook for a time, so that he could plagiarise from it, and use up my valuable ideas."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You may laugh as much as you like, Blake, but that book will make me famous when it is published, and St. Jim's will go down to posterity as the school where Herbert Skimpole was educated."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I therefore regard Mr. Linton somewhat in the light of an old offender," said Skimpole. "Suspicion rests upon him."

"My only hat!"

"I shall pursue the case on that clue," said Skimpole. "If I find Mr. Linton in possession of your hamper, you will admit, I suppose, that I am right?"

"Yaas, wathah! But if Mr. Linton finds you on his twack—"

"You will get a record licking," said Blake, "and serve you right! Of all the unutterable asses, you are about the unutterablest. D'Arcy is a genius to you."

"Oh, weally, Blake—"

"You will see," said Skimpole, with a wise shake of the head; and he shut up his pocket-book with a snap, and quitted the study.

Half-past nine rang out from the clock-tower. Blake sniffed.

"Bed-time!" he exclaimed. "Come along. That ass has wasted our time, and we sha'n't be able to look round for the hamper."

Half-past nine was bed-time at St. Jim's for the Fourth Form and the Shell. The juniors went upstairs to their dormitories. Tom Merry spoke to Blake as he passed him in the upper corridor.

"Found that hamper yet?"

Blake shook his head.

"That's rough. It must have been Figgins."

"We shall see," was Blake's diplomatic reply.

And the School House juniors went to bed. There was a long interval of chatter in the Fourth Form dormitory before the boys went to sleep. The adventure with the Grammarians had caused a great deal of excitement, and

Blake's triumph over the rival school led many of his Form-fellows to back him up in his ambition to be the recognised leader of the House juniors. The chums of Study No. 6 were called upon to relate their adventure over again, which they did willingly enough. At last the buzz of talk died away, and when ten rang out from the tower, most of the Fourth Form were in the arms of Morpheus.

Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy remained resolutely awake. Blake's idea of keeping watch that night had seemed an excellent one when he proposed it in the study. As the desire for sleep grew upon them, it seemed less and less excellent; but they would not give in.

The quarter-past ten rang out, and only the quartette were awake now in the long shadowy dormitory.

And by this time, Herries, the sleepest of the three, had decided in his own mind that Blake's idea, so far from being excellent, was absolutely rotten, and not worth carrying out. And Herries went to sleep.

Digby was arguing the matter out in his own mind, and the matter was growing dimmer every moment; and then Dig dropped off too. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy sat up in bed to keep himself awake, and fell fast asleep with his head against the bedpost. But Jack Blake was made of sterner stuff.

As soon as he found his ideas growing confused, he knew that he was in danger of falling asleep, and he threw off the bedclothes, and sat on the side of his bed, and dabbed his face every now and then with his sponge. This effectually kept him awake, and he was quite wide awake when half-past ten rang out.

It was time now to be on the watch. The upper Forms were in bed, too, by this time, excepting some of the Sixth. Now was the time that the raider would be abroad, if Blake's theory on the subject was the correct one.

Blake rose, and slipped on his trousers, and a pair of rubber shoes he had placed in readiness. Then he crossed to D'Arcy and shook him.

"Yaas, wathah!" murmured D'Arcy dazedly.

Blake grinned, and shook him again.

"I wefuse," murmured the drowsy swell of the School House. "I wish it to be distinctly understood, deah boys, that I uttaly wefuse to do anythin' of the sort."

Blake shook him again.

"Hullo! What's the mattah?" asked D'Arcy, waking up.

"Quitt, you ass!"

"I wefuse to be called an ass!"

"Quiet! It's time to be on the watch," whispered Blake.

"Do you understand?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Quiet, you ass!"

Blake shook up Herries and Digby, at the same time whispering caution to them. In a few minutes the four juniors were partly dressed. There was no sound from any of the other beds. If the raider belonged to the Fourth, he was evidently not yet prepared to go out and unpack the hidden hamper.

"I'll go and watch the Shell dormitory," whispered Blake. "Gussy can come with me. You chaps can stay here and keep watch."

"Bai Jove, they'll go to sleep if they do! Powwaps I had better stay here, Blake."

"H'm! Better come out into the passage, all of you, and keep watch outside the door," said Blake. "You're not likely to go to sleep on the linoleum."

"Right-ho!" said Herries.

"Don't shout, fathhead! Come on!"

"I wasn't shouting!"

"Oh, don't argue at this time of night! Come on!"

The chums of the Fourth quietly left the dormitory. So far as they could ascertain, they were the only wakeful ones there. They went out into the passage and silently closed the door behind them.

"Dig, you and Herries stop here, while I go along to the door of the Shell-room," said Blake. "If we're careful, nobody can get out without our knowing it."

"Right you are!"

"Mind you don't go to sleep!"

"That's all right."

"I don't know," said Blake doubtfully. "You are a pair of heavy-headed owls at this time of night. Blessed if I can trust you!"

Digby chuckled.

"Then you'd better stop here and watch us while we watch the door, old chap."

"Look here, I shall come back every now and then to see if you're asleep, and if you are I shall stick this pin into you."

"You're more likely to fall asleep yourself, in my opinion."

"Oh, bosh!"

"Come on, Blake! I am waitin' for you, deah boy!"

"Here I am!"

Blake and D'Arcy went along the passage. They took up their position outside the door of the Shell dormitory, in which Tom Merry and his Form-fellows were sleeping the sleep of the just.

Arthur Augustus sat down on a seat in an alcove in the passage, and was soon nodding off. Blake shook him, and he started.

"Anythin' the mattah, Blake?"

"No," grunted Blake; "only you were going off to sleep, ass."

"Was I weally? I am afwaid I am wathah sleepy. Nevah mind, I will talk, and that will keep me awake."

"Oh, don't! I'd rather you wait to sleep. I don't want to know anything about fancy waistcoats, or the latest thing in silk hats."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Oh, you can snooze if you like! I shall remain awake," said Blake good-naturedly. "Might as well have left you in bed, though."

"I ~~wesuse~~ to go to sleep," said Arthur Augustus—"I distinctly refuse to do anythin' of the sort. I am here to share your watch, deah boy, and I should wegard it as beneath my dig, to yield to this tired feelin' I am expewienclin' at the pwesent moment."

His head fell forward on his breast.

"I am certainly wathah sleepy," D'Arcy went on, in a drowsy tone. "But it would be in ~~in~~ a dig, for me to sleep on the watch, you know. I must distinctly refuse to do anythin' of the sort. I shall wemain awake, and watch with you, deah boy."

Blake grinned. D'Arcy's voice was growing fainter and sleeper with each word.

"Yaas, wathah! I distinctly—refuse—to—go—to—sleep." And with the last word D'Arcy dropped into a profound slumber.

Silence reigned in the passage, save for the steady breathing of the swell of the School House. Blake stretched himself, yawned, and exerted all his power to keep himself awake. Eleven rang out from the tower. Then he tiptoed along the passage to the spot where he had left Herries and Digby.

Herries was sitting with his back against the wall, fast asleep. Digby blinked drowsily at Blake.

"Awake!"

"Yes."

"Keep it up!"

And Blake returned to his post. D'Arcy was still sleeping soundly. Blake thought of his comfortable bed, and listened for the clock to strike again. The half-hour chimed out.

Half-past eleven!

Blake went quietly along to the door of the Fourth Form dormitory, and peered at the two dim figures in the shadows there.

"Are you awake, Dig?"

A snore was the only response. Blake grinned, and stooped to wake the sleeper. Then he paused. A faint sound came through the silence of the night, and Blake started and listened.

CHAPTER 12. Caught in the Act.

"ARE you Feady, you chaps?"

"Quite ready, Figgins."

"Got the ropes all right?"

"Yes; here they are!"

"Don't make a row, then!"

"I'm not making a row," said Pratt. "Don't make a row yourself, Figgy!"

"Shut up and come on!"

"We're coming!"

The whispers sounded faintly in the gloom of the New House. Figgins & Co. were on the warpath. Besides the Co. six other fellows belonging to the Fourth Form and the Shell were up and doing. They were Pratt, Mason, and Newton of the Fourth, and French, Jimson, and Davis of the Shell. Figgins had picked them out for the night's expedition, and they were prepared for the midnight raid. Jimson carried a big coil of rope over his arm, and Pratt a dark-lantern. Kerr had another coil of rope, and Fatty Wynn had something in his hand, which, upon close examination, would have turned out to be a packet of sandwiches. There was no telling how long the raiders might be over the raid, and Fatty Wynn knew that he might get hungry.

Figgins led the way down to the hall of the New House, and one by one the raiders passed through the window into the dim quadrangle. There was a glimmer of moon through the clouds, just enough to show the New House juniors their way.

Straight towards the School House Figgins led the way, and the raiders followed him, and they halted under the

window of the box-room where the Co. had hidden the mysterious hamper.

That box-room was on the third storey, but masses of clinging ivy on the ancient wall rendered an ascent practicable to a skilful and cool-headed climber, and Figgins had nerve enough for anything.

He looked up at the thick ivy, glimmering in the moon, and then laid hold of it. Up he went, the other fellows watching him from below.

"Careful, Figgy!" said Kerr anxiously. "I'll go up first, if you like."

Figgins replied only with a grunt.

Up he went, and in a short time he was on a level with the narrow sill of the box-room window.

As he had, while in the box-room, taken the precaution of unfastening the window on the inside, his entrance was not difficult. He pushed up the sash and disappeared into the darkness within.

"Done it!" murmured Kerr.

Pratt sniffed.

"Yes; and he's gone up without the rope."

"By Jove, so he has!" said French.

"Ass!" said Kerr laconically.

"That's all very well," said Pratt. "But how are you going to lower the hamper down without a rope? That's what I want to know!"

"You'll see."

"That's all very well—"

Figgins's head was projected from the window above. His hand appeared, and he unwound and let out a ball of twine. Kerr took the end of it as it came within reach, and fastened it to the end of the coil of rope.

He gave a jerk on the twine as a signal to Figgins to pull, and the chief of the New House juniors drew in the twine, and the rope after it. Kerr grinned triumphantly at Pratt.

"That's better than trying to climb with a big coil of rope over your arm—eh?"

"Oh, I could have done it!" said Pratt.

Kerr made no reply. It was no time for argument, or for punching obstinate heads. The twine was soon pulled in above, and Figgins took the end of the rope. The rope was knotted in places to render ascent easy. Kerr felt it, and found that it was taut. Figgins had fastened the end in the box-room, and now he waved his hand from the window.

"Good!" murmured Kerr.

And the Scottish partner in the Co. climbed the rope. It was not a difficult task, the knots offering support for the hands. Kerr disappeared into the window of the box-room.

Fatty Wynn took hold of the rope. Pratt nudged him. "Better let me go, Fatty. You'll never get that weight up."

"Oh, go and eat coko!" said Fatty.

"Shall I mind your packet for you?" asked Jimson.

"Thank you, you might!"

Fatty Wynn handed over the packet, and then began to climb. Jimson grinned and unwrapped the paper round the sandwiches.

"Anybody peckish?" he asked.

"Yes, rather!" grinned Davis.

"Here you are, then. Take some."

With low chuckles the New House juniors devoured the sandwiches. Fatty Wynn, all unconscious of their little joke, climbed the rope slowly but steadily, and arrived at the box-room window. It was possible that a slimmer climber would have been better for the task, but Figgins wasn't going to have one of the Co. left out of it. Figgy's long arm came out of the box-room window and grasped Fatty, and helped him into the room.

"Good!" said Figgins. "Here we are!"

"Yes," gasped Fatty, "that was quite a climb. My hat, what's that?"

He stumbled against a box as he stepped down from the window, and reeled, and sat down with a bump. Figgins grinned.

"You ass, what are you making all that row for?"

"How could I help it?" remonstrated Fatty Wynn. "You don't think I bumped down like that on purpose, do you, Figgy?"

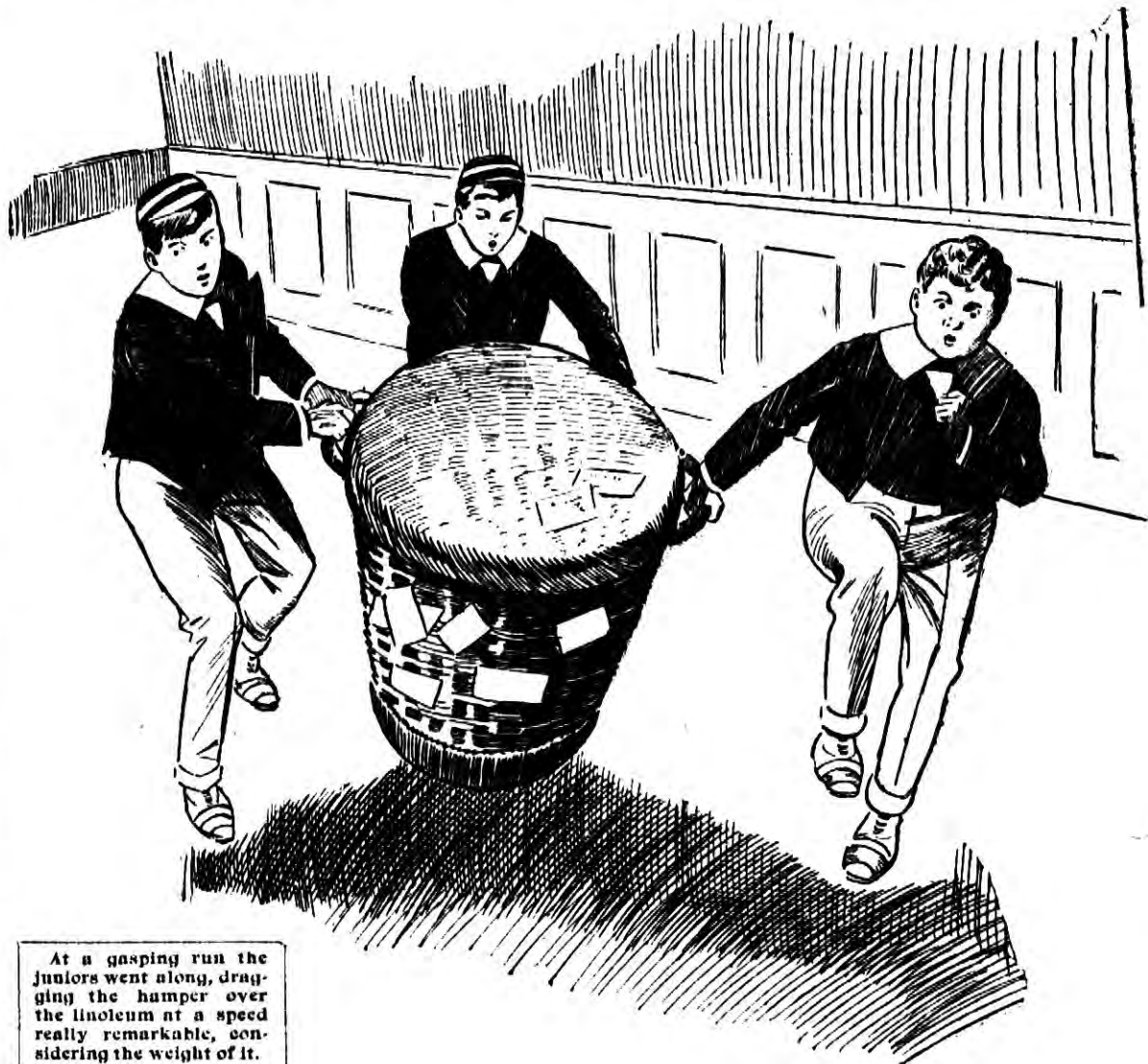
"Well, you ought to have more sense. You might wake the house, plumping down a ten weight like that."

"I only weigh eleven stone."

"Oh, blow your weight! Let's get that giddy hamper out!"

"Come on!" said Kerr.

The mysterious hamper was well hidden under the boxes Figgins & Co. had piled upon it early in the evening. Moving cautiously in the dimness of the box-room, the New House juniors began to remove the boxes. But the gloom of the box-room was too much for them. A box slipped from Kerr's grasp, and crashed against another. Figgins muttered something under his breath.



At a gasping run the juniors went along, dragging the hamper over the linoleum at a speed really remarkable, considering the weight of it.

"Couldn't help it!" muttered Kerr apologetically. "I can't see in the dark."

"Better have the lantern, I suppose."

"Well, I don't see that it would do any harm. The whole House is asleep at this hour; and, anyway, nobody ever passes the door of this room at night."

"True!"

There was a scratch of a match, and Figgins lighted the lantern. The rays glimmered out, and revealed the breathless Co. and the pile of boxes. The work was much easier in the light, and the New House juniors set to it with a will.

The empty boxes were removed, and the mysterious hamper came into sight again. Figgins & Co. dragged it to the window.

"By Jove, it's heavy!" said Figgins, gasping from his exertions. "We shall have to be jolly careful in getting it out of the window."

"Think the three of us can manage it?"

"Better have French and Pratt up," said Fatty Wynn. "We want the other coil of rope, too. It would be rotten if we let the thing drop into the quad."

Kerr chuckled.

"It would be rough on those kids underneath if it dropped on them."

"We can manage it," said Figgins; "we've only got to let it out slowly, that's all. I'll take a turn of the rope round the bar of the grate here, to keep it from buzzing out too suddenly."

"Yes, that's all right."

The second rope was pulled up into the box-room, and then both were fastened to the hamper—one at each end. The juniors below had finished the sandwiches, and they were waiting anxiously. Figgins waved his hand from the window as a warning to them to be ready.

"Now, then, kids!"

The Co. laid hold of the hamper. There was ample room for it to pass through the window. One effort, and it would be on the sill and the rest would be easy—merely a matter of paying out the ropes.

"Go it—hold on!"

Figgins suddenly let go the hamper and straightened up. "Look out!"

CHAPTER 13.

The Return of the Raiders.

BLAKE stood in the darkness of the passage above, listening. He could hear nothing but the more or less musical snores of Digby and Herries, asleep at his feet. Whatever was the sound he had heard below in the silence of the night, it had died away. But Blake was on the alert now. He stooped and shook Digby by the shoulder. The junior awoke.

"Hallo!"

"Wake up!" said Blake. "Wake up, fathead!"

Digby shook himself and came out of the land of dreams. He rose rather unsteadily and rubbed his eyes.

"I believe I've been asleep," he remarked.

"Yes, I believe you have," said Blake sarcastically. "I believe Herries has, too; and Gussy. Nice sort of chaps you are to keep watch!"

"Well, there doesn't seem to be anything to watch for, does there?" said Digby. "I suppose you haven't seen anything or anybody?"

"I've heard something."

"What was it?" asked Digby, alert at once.

Blake was shaking Herries. Herries was slower to awake, but he was brought to a consciousness of his surroundings at last.

"Wharrer marrer?" he murmured.

"There's something up," whispered Blake. "I shouldn't wonder if it was Figgins raided the hamper, after all. I just heard a row on the next floor down, and I believe it came from the box-room."

"The box-room!" muttered Digby.

"Yes. It flashed into my mind at once——"

"What did—the box-room?"

"As! It flashed into my mind at once, when I heard it, that Figgins might have shoved the hamper there. He couldn't get it out of the School House while the House was awake. He may have put it there to take it away later."

"He didn't know we shouldn't look there!"

"Well, he may have hidden it—there was room enough there to hide a dozen—and he had to risk it, anyway."

"Well, it's quite possible. But are you sure you heard something?" asked Digby, straining his ears without detecting a sound in the stillness of the night.

"Quite certain."

"Then let's go and look," said Herries. "If the bounders are there, we want to catch them before they walk the hamper off!"

"Yes, rather!" said Digby.

"Wait a minute; I'll call Gussy."

"Is he asleep?"

"Yes, as sound as you were!" grinned Blake; and he tiptoed along the passage and shook the slumbering swell of St. Jim's by the shoulder.

D'Arcy started out of the land of dreams.

"Pink stripes, I think," he murmured; "and blue spots, with yellow flowers, dear boy. Not double-breasted—oh, no!—the single-breasted waistcoat is more fashionable now. As for the pockets——"

Blake grinned. D'Arcy was evidently dreaming that he was negotiating with his tailor about a new fancy waistcoat. Blake shook him again and he came to himself.

"Bai Jove, I've dropped off, I do believe!" said D'Arcy, rubbing his eyes. "Where's my beastly eyeglass?"

"Come on, Gussy!"

"Wight you are, dear boy!"

Arthur Augustus did not know what was wanted, but he was too sleepy to inquire, and he followed Blake with unusual docility. They joined Digby and Herries, and the quartette descended the stairs and passed quietly along the passage to the box-room. Blake gave a start and gripped Digby's arm as the light gleaming under the door caught his eye.

"Look there!"

"Bai Jove, it's burglars!" murmured D'Arcy.

Blake chuckled.

"New House burglars, I expect," he remarked. "Anyway, whoever they are, we are going to collar them!"

They crept quietly to the door; there they paused for a moment to listen. From within came faintly the sound of a voice—the voice of the chief of the New House juniors.

"Now, then, kids!"

"Figgins!" chuckled Blake. "What do you think now, my pippins?"

"You're right, Blake!"

"Always am, my dear chap!"

"Oh, don't crow! Let's collar these rotters!"

"Come on, then."

Blake opened the door as quietly as he could. But there was a sound, and it was that which alarmed Figgins. It was then that Figgy shouted, "Look out!" and the School House juniors rushed to the attack.

Blake and his chums saw the state of affairs at a glance—the lantern gleaming on the floor, the hamper in the window with the ropes tied to it, and the New House Co. in the very act of lifting it to the window-sill.

They were evidently none too soon upon the scene. Right at the New House juniors they rushed. Figgins faced Blake gallantly, and they went at it hammer and tongs; but the Co., taken more by surprise, were bowled over in a moment, and Digby and Herries sat on them on the floor.

Figgins and Blake struggled desperately, with no sound but gasping breaths; but Arthur Augustus came to Blake's aid, and Figgins was tripped up and plumped on the floor, and Blake sat astride of his chest.

"Shut the door, Gussy!" said Blake.

Arthur Augustus shut the door. Figgins wriggled under the weight of Jack Blake, but it was useless; there was no escape for him.

"Now look out of the window, Gussy, and see if there are any more of them."

"Certainly, dear boy!"

D'Arcy looked out of the window. The group of juniors below, waiting for the hamper to be lowered to them, were dimly visible in the moonlight.

"Yaas, wathah, Blake! There are half a dozen of the wottahs, waitin' to cawwy our hampah across to the New House, I suppose!"

"They'll have to wait a long time!" grinned Blake.

"I'm afraid the game's up, Figgy. Keep at the window, Gussy, and if anybody tries to climb up, knock him down."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"You—you rotten rotters!" gasped Figgins. "How did you know? Have you been waiting for us, you beasts?"

"Oh, you couldn't expect to pull the wool over our eyes!" said Blake loftily. "We're up to all your little games, you know!"

"Get off my chest!"

"Rats! It's rather bony, considered as a seat, but it's the safest place, at present. Gussy, are any of them climbing up?"

"No, dear boy. They don't seem to have heard anything."

"Of course, they wouldn't!" chuckled Blake. "They won't know anything's gone wrong till they get back their giddy leaders, returned with thanks! Untie that rope off the hamper, Gussy, and bring it here and tie it round Figgins."

"Bai Jove, what are you goin' to do with the wottah, dear boy?"

"I think it's a good idea to send him down to those chaps out there," chuckled Blake. "It seems rotten that they should have to wait for nothing. We can't have this rubbish lying about here, either."

"I'll give you rubbish!" gasped Figgins.

"Tie his wrists first—I'll hold 'em—you can use his belt for that. Then fasten the rope under his arms."

"Yaas, wathah! I wogard the idea as wathah funnay!"

Figgins was soon secured. Then Blake left D'Arcy sitting on him while he secured the remaining two of the Co. in the same way. The New House juniors resisted, but in vain. They were soon bound, and then the School House quartette were free to deal with them as they chose. Blake grasped Figgins by the shoulders.

"Take his feet, some of you—or take one each, as they're so jolly big—then sling him out of the window!"



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NEXT
THURSDAY:

"BLAKE & CO.'S TRIUMPH."

A Double-Length Tale of
Tom Merry's Schooldays.

D'Arcy and Digby stooped to pick up Figgins. D'Arcy staggered back with an exclamation.

"Why don't you get hold of him, Gussy?"

"The howwid wottah has thwust his hoof against my twousahs, and I am certain that he has soiled them."

"Never mind your trousers now, ass! Take hold of him, I tell you!"

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort. He has wubbed his howwid hoof on my twousahs, and I feel certain—"

"Take hold of the beast, Herries!"

"Right-ho!"

"I don't see why Hewwies couldn't have taken hold of him in the first place, and saved my twousahs fwom bein'—"

"Now, then, all together!"

Figgins was slung upon the window-sill. He said not a word. The affair had gone against him, and Figgins was not the fellow to complain.

The New House juniors, staring impatiently up at the box-room window, saw a strange object roll off the sill, and descend swinging at the end of a rope.

"My hat," said French, "that's not the hamper!"

"Hampers don't have legs that length!" said Pratt.

"That's Figgins!"

"What on earth are Kerr and Wynn lowering Figgins down like that for?"

"My only hat!"

The strange object swung lower. It was certainly Figgins. He was swinging wildly at the end of the rope, and bumping on the ivy. He bumped on the ground, finally, at the feet of the astonished juniors.

Blake looked out of the window. The moonlight glimmered on his face for a moment, and the New House juniors understood.

"Jack Blake!"

They released Figgins. A second object came floating down from the box-room window. It was Kerr, on the end of the second rope. He was landed beside Figgins. Then a plump figure appeared on the window-sill.

"I say," called out Blake cautiously, "let us have one of those ropes up again, or we shall have to drop this prize porpoise on your nappers."

Kerr cast loose a rope, and Blake pulled it in. Then Fatty Wynn swung down at the end of it. He landed, gasping, on the ground.

"Well, of all the howling asses—" began Pratt. "Ow! What's that?"

"That" was the ropes from above, which clumped round his shoulders as Blake threw them down from the box-room window. Pratt gave a yelp.

Blake waved his hand from the window.

"Rubbish returned with thanks!" he called out softly. "Good-night!"

The window closed. The New House juniors looked at one another, and looked at Figgins & Co. The Co. were strangely silent.

"Well," said French, in measured accents—"well, if this is what you call a raid, Figgins, all I have to say is—Ow-wow!"

French had not meant to say "Ow-wow!" He said that suddenly because Figgins's fist had clumped upon his nose, and he sat down in the quad, with a suddenness that jarred all the bones in his body.

"Anybody else got anything to say?" said Figgins casually.

Nobody had. The New House party returned in silence to their House. They re-entered the New House, and in the upper passage Fatty Wynn tapped Pratt on the arm.

"Give me my sandwiches."

"Haven't got them," said Pratt, with a chuckle.

"You—you haven't left them out there?"

"Oh, no!"

"Then where are they?"

Pratt tapped himself just below the chest.

"You—you beast!" said Fatty Wynn. "I'm fearfully hungry. You—you absolute rotter!" And he went disconsolately to bed.

"Well, it has been a frost," said Figgins, as he got into bed. "But it was a risky business, anyway, and we nearly brought it off. But, by Jove, I'd like to know what really is in that hamper!"

CHAPTER 14.

At Last!

"**B**AI Jove, deah boys, we have fwustwated their knavish twicks, and no mistake!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as Blake closed the box-room window. "It's extremely fortunate that I happened to be on the watch to-night."

"Yes, you were a fat lot of good!" grunted Blake. "You'd be sleeping in the passage now if I hadn't wakened you."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Well, let's see what's in the hamper, anyway," said Digby, "now that we've got it back."

"Unlock the padlock, Blake," exclaimed Herries; "you've got the key."

"Right-ho!"

Blake felt in his pockets for the key. He felt in one pocket, and then in the other, but both were drawn blank, and Blake looked blank, too.

"Well, why don't you unlock it, deah boy?"

"I can't find the key."

"You had it."

"I know I had it, but I haven't it now."

"Pewwaps it's in one of your othah pockets."

No, I distinctly remember putting it in my trousers pocket."

"Are you wearin' the same twousahs now?"

"Yes, ass. I don't keep a trunkful of trousers and change 'em every five minutes, as you do," grunted Blake.

"Weally, Blake—"

"I suppose the key fell out of my pocket when we were scrapping with the Grammarians in the lane," said Blake. "It's gone."

"Then we can't unfasten the padlock," said Herries.

"Unless you can do it with your teeth," said Blake sarcastically.

"I think you're an ass."

"Well, I don't think you're one; I know you are. We can't open the beastly thing to-night, that's all. Let's get it back to the study and lock it up there, for safety, and then get back to bed."

"I want to know what's in the hamper."

"So do I, but it can't be bid," said Blake impatiently. "Let's get it away, and don't make a row. And don't talk; you make me tired."

The hamper was dragged out of the box-room, and the lantern extinguished. As quietly as they could the chums dragged it back to Study No. 6, and locked it up there. Then they returned to the Fourth Form dormitory. Curious as they were concerning the contents of the hamper—and their curiosity had now reached burning point—they were sleepy, too, and they were soon in the land of dreams.

But all things, they say, come to him who waits; and the opening of the mysterious hamper came at last. In the morning a coke-hammer solved the difficulty of the padlock, and the lid of the mysterious hamper was raised once more.

With bated breath the chums of Study No. 6 gathered round it. Blake had locked the study door to prevent interruptions or espial. The lid was raised, and the mysterious contents heaved forth and unpacked.

And then exclamations burst from the juniors of amazement and delight, for the present from Blake's American uncle was one that was calculated to delight the heart of a lad with a love of adventure in his heart.

It was a complete outfit of Redskin apparel—wampum and coloured serapes, mocassins and feathers for head-dress, tomahawks and bows and arrows, and spears in sections for packing. And there was a letter inside the wrapping. Blake glanced over it with dancing eyes.

"My hat!" he exclaimed. "I remember now my uncle speaking of something of this sort when he was in England. The idea, you know, is to get up as Red Indians, and camp in the woods, and learn to rough it and look out for yourself. That's why we had to have the Head's permission to unpack these things. And the Head's given his permission, and so there won't be any difficulty about that."

"Bai Jove, it's a weally wippin' ideah, deah boys! Do you know, I wathah fancy myself as a Wodskin chief."

"Ripping!" exclaimed Digby. "By Jove, this will give us a log-up over those bounders in the Shell! We'll keep it dark."

"Yes, rather," said Blake; "for the present, at least. They can go on guessing what was in the mysterious hamper. We'll try the camping-out idea next half-holiday, and we may get the Head's permission to make a week of it. That would be ripping, if you like."

"Yaas, wathah!"

And the chums of Study No. 6 kept the secret. A shower of questions descended upon them as soon as they came out of the study, but no answers were forthcoming. And curiosity in the School House became absolutely burning on the subject of the contents of the mysterious hamper.

THE END.

(A splendid double-length tale of Tom Merry & Co. next week, entitled "Blake & Co.'s Triumph." Please order your "GEM" in advance. Price 1d.)

NEXT
THURSDAY:

"BLAKE & CO.'S TRIUMPH."

A Double-Length Tale of
Tom Merry's Schooldays.

SPLENDID NEW TALE OF CIRCUS LIFE.



READ THIS FIRST.

Joe throws up office work, and while tramping along a country lane meets Jim, who is running away from Muerte, a bullying circus proprietor. Joe and Jim chum up and call on Muerte's rival, Ruabino. Explaining that he has bolted from Muerte's circus, Jim asks for an engagement.

(Now go on with the story.)

The Rival Showmen.

"Well," said Ruabino, "what do you want a week?"
 "Fifty pounds."
 "Well, it's lucky you don't want much. Suppose I engage you now at seven-and-six a week and food?"
 "Done, on a condition."
 "Pooh! Name your condition."
 "You must engage my chum here as well, and at the same screw."
 "Be hanged! I'm going to do nothing of the sort."
 "Then you are not going to engage me, because we are going to stick together, come what may."
 "I tell you I can't afford it. I haven't got the money."
 "You will have after we start performing."
 "What can he do—turn somersaults?"
 "About as well as you did going down those steps. But he can ride."
 "That's no good! What!"
 "Nothing."
 "I tell you it's no good. I can ride—at least, I used to be able to when I was younger and thinner. He has never been in a circus before, I suppose?"
 "No."
 "Then he's not coming into mine, unless he pays sixpence."
 "Yes, he is."
 "I tell you he isn't!"
 "But that's because you don't know. Look here, be reasonable, Rubby! Pay him five shillings for the start."
 "No; I will do nothing of the sort. Do you think I am going to pay a boy five shillings and give him his food, and train him, so that he may take a berth with my rival?"
 "Joe isn't like that."
 "Yes he is. You are all like it, and I don't know that I blame you for it. Why, even you have bolted from Muerte, and come to me!"
 "So would you have bolted if the brute had lashed you like he has me. Now, look here! Muerte declares that I am apprenticed to him; I believe it is a lie, but that doesn't matter. I wasn't a party to it, and won't be bound by it. Well, you know that I shall draw people to your place, and, mind you, Muerte will be here to-night, or to-morrow at latest, to queer your pitch."
 "The villain! Of course, you will be a draw; I wouldn't have engaged you otherwise."
 "Well, if it hadn't been for Joe I shouldn't be here to-night. Muerte was chasing me, and Joe caught him by the leg, sent him down, then sat on his head while I whooped him."
 "Ha, ha, ha! Well done, Joe! If it ruins me I'll take you on. Five bob a week. Can you keep accounts?"
 "Yes, but I like circus work better."
 "Pooh! That's because you have never tried it. I hate

accounts, but I hate circus work worse. No matter, you are engaged. I'll make use of you somehow, if it's only to fire you out of a cannon. The lad who could sit on Muerte's head must be of some service to me. Ha, ha, ha! I would have given a sovereign to have seen it."

"Suppose you give the sovereign to Joe, and let him tell you all about it."

"And suppose I don't, my beauty. I tell you what it is, Jim, about the only man who could beat you for cool impertinence is Muerte."

"He often used to do so, for I promise you I used to cheek the beast pretty freely. Of course, he will come here and bully you, Rubby."

"Yes; there is not a doubt about that, when he knows you have come to me."

"Well, he will guess that already. He knows that Leo and I have met on several occasions, and that Leo is employed by you; and putting two and two together, he is pretty well bound to come to a correct conclusion."

"Well, he can come here as soon as he likes," observed the little showman. "I am always remarkably polite to him, and—Talk of—ahem!"

The door of the caravan was flung open most unceremoniously, and Muerte entered. His face was as white as it could turn with suppressed passion, and his black eyes were gleaming, while he stroked his long moustache to give the impression that he was at his ease, and he made a great effort to prevent his voice from quivering.

"Mr. Ruabino," he cried, "I can only assume that you do not know what has happened."

"Dear boy, sit down!" exclaimed Rubby. "Nice night, isn't it? Wet, but that is good for the flowers and the dear little dabschicks. Funny little fellows they are. Bless you, I could watch them dive for—"

"I have come to speak to you."

"Glad to hear it, dear boy. Always pleased to listen to a man of your consummate erudition. What is it, you gay dog? Going to get married, and want me to act as your best man?"

"I have not come here to talk like a fool."

"Well, well! Whatever I may have thought concerning your customary mode of speech, I certainly never told you that you were in the habit of talking like a fool. Still, if you can talk otherwise, I shall be all the more pleased to listen to you. Have a cigar, dear boy?"

"I don't need your cigars."

"Well, perhaps you are better without them. I know you Spaniards are a hotheaded race, and as my cigars are good ones and strong, they might upset the equilibrium of your brain. Speak on, my dear fellow. Make yourself quite at home. Perhaps you would kindly shut the door, because it is rather draughty, and because it is considered a matter of ordinary politeness in such society as mine; but then, of course, you are not accustomed to mix in such society."

"I am thankful that such is the case."

"Well, well, no doubt you would feel uncomfortable and out of place. You would scarcely believe it, but when I performed before the King I felt a little uncomfortable just at first. No doubt you would feel the same in my presence; but there is no cause for it, my dear fellow. To my mind a Spanish gipsy is as good as any other Spaniard. As we may say there is much of a muchness about the poor creatures, and I always feel pity for them when I meet them. Now,

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Muerte, of course it was annoying when my equestrian, Joe, sat on your head while my acrobat, Jim, flogged you, but boys will be boys, you know."

Muerte was nearly mad with rage now. He showed his teeth, and his words came with a hissing sound.

"I have to inform you that that young fiend is my apprentice, and that—"

"Don't mention it, dear boy. I am always ready to oblige. I will cancel his indentures."

"Dog! You insolent, fat pig! You calm-faced ragamuffin, I'll strangle the breath from your bloated body if you talk to me like this!"

"Poor dear fellow. Is it only lately that he has taken to it like this, Jim? I fear it is a case of incipient d.t.s. Let me feel your pulse, Muerte."

"Hound! I'll let you feel my fist if I have any more of your insults."

"I fear Joe will have to sit on the poor creature's head while I flog him this time," observed Rubby, calmly lighting his cigar. "That's the worst of these poor gipsy fellows—the only way to appeal to their feelings is by corporal punishment. For my part, I would not allow the aliens in a respectable country like England. They are worse than the smoke nuisance. Mind, my poor dear fellow, I am not blaming you. You can't help your nature. My clown is just the same. A dreadful tempered fellow; but I always take it out of him in the ring. Ha, ha, ha! Many a cut I have caught him—by accident!"

"You dirty reptile! That boy is coming with me to-night, and I will put you in prison for daring to take him away. I will ruin you! I'll open my circus next to yours wherever you go. I'll live to see you in the workhouse."

"Poor dear man!" exclaimed Rubby, enjoying his cigar. "He seems far from calm. It's our duty to soothe him. I detest using the whip unless absolutely compelled. Humour them—humour them is my invariable advice. In your case, Muerte, you are a little—well, we will call it excited, and I fear you will wake up with a shocking headache; still, you will be calmer in the morning. Been travelling to-day, my dear fellow? I fear you have been meeting too many friends on the road. Have a cup of strong tea? It will do you all the good in the world!"

"Do you dare to insinuate that I am drunk, fellow?" howled Muerte.

"Well, well! I trust it is nothing more serious. I never had much of an opinion concerning your intellect, but I always considered you more of an idiot than a raving maniac. Of course, a man with an extremely feeble mind like yours should abstain from all intoxicants. It only excites the brain, and in a case where the brain is actually diseased—why, it might prove serious. You had better go home and get to sleep, and perhaps you will be better in the morning. I think it would be advisable to let someone watch by your bedside in case the delirium should come on in the night. Good-night, my poor creature! I trust you will be better in the morning. Now, Joe, I have got a horse that no living man can ride—the poor fellows who tried to do it are dead. You shall see what you can make of him."

"I shall not leave this place till that boy returns with me," cried Muerte.

"I want to arrange about our performance to-morrow," observed Rubby, opening a drawer and taking out three halfpence, which he carefully placed in his waistcoat-pocket. "Let me see. I don't like placing temptation in the way of a poor man—especially a Spaniard. Just open that drawer there, Joe, and see if there is any money in it."

"Only a postage stamp."

"Hand it to me. We won't leave it as we are going out. Sit down, my dear boy. You might be washing up our tea-things. Don't cut those scraps of fish, because there are bones amongst them, and they might choke you. You appear rather choky already."

Then Rubby left the caravan, followed by the grinning lads, and although Muerte looked very much as though he intended to kick them down the steps, he controlled his fierce passions sufficiently not to do so. They were three to one, and although the lads were young, and Rubby was—to put it politely—stout, he had once been a boxer, and he was still possessed of considerable strength. Muerte hesitated for a moment, and then he followed them into the circus, determined to have the matter out.

"Why, here's that Spanish gipsy again!" exclaimed Rubby. "What a nuisance the creature is! Here, my good man, is a halfpenny for you. Go and buy yourself a bun!"

"You insolent dog, I could buy you and your miserable little circus up!"

"I should want cash down," observed Rubby. "I would not trust you with twopence. You never can trust a Spaniard, especially if the brute happens to be a gipsy. But you would never be able to raise the money, dear boy. You might be able to raise a glass of beer to your lips, if some-

one else paid for it, but you would certainly never be able to raise money to pay for this magnificent circus."

"Jim is my apprentice, and you are rendering yourself amenable to the law by trying to take him away from me."

"Show me his indentures, dear boy. I can't take your word. It would be ridiculous for me to do so, knowing what a fearful liar you are. Hi, Leo! That imp is always missing when he is wanted. Leo! Leo! I believe the boy pretends to be deaf. Leo! Leo!"

"I say, Rubby, aren't you frightened of doing some damage when you howl like that?" inquired a well-built lad with a jovial, honest face, stepping into the circus.

"Oh, you are here, are you, you beauty!" exclaimed Rubby. "Well, there's Jim. He tells me you know him. That other chap is Joe, and as one won't come without the other, I have had to engage them both. That brute there is Muerte. He is the greatest scoundrel unhung, only don't tell him so, because he has got a nasty temper."

"Why, he can hear every word you are saying!" whispered Leo.

"No matter!" exclaimed Rubby calmly. "He's too stupid to understand my meaning. Now, look here, Leo! Joe says he is a good rider, and it occurred to me that he must be if he can stick on Buster. Just go and fetch him."

"I would much rather you let Muerte do that," said Leo.

"Funny that people don't like Buster," observed Rubby. "I can't send Muerte, because he is not in my employment yet. I don't see how I can engage the fellow, because he is really not worth his salt. The only redeeming feature about him is that, being a Spaniard, he would be able to live on onions and paraffin oil. Go and get the horse. Never mind about the saddle."

"It wouldn't be much use," said Leo. "Buster always smashes his girths for a start. He will hurt you, Joe."

"Can't help that," observed Joe. "I have got to be of some use in the circus, so I may as well start on Buster."

"You are a lot more likely to start off him," declared Leo. "I don't want to frighten you, but—"

"You won't do that. Buster may, all the same, I'm going to try to ride him," said Joe.

"Well, come and see me bridle him," laughed Leo. "You will get an idea of his nature then."

Both Joe and Jim followed, and Rubby thought he had better be the same, because he was fat, while Muerte was muscular, and very angry.

Buster was kept in a sort of loose-box by himself, as no other horse could possibly have lived with him. He stood about sixteen hands, and, like most bad-tempered people, was extremely thin, but he seemed to be all thews and sinews.

He made a snap at Leo as that worthy tried to unfasten the halter by leaning over the side of the loose-box. It was made fast to a ring high up, because of Buster's picauntries when anyone tried to bridle him.

With some little difficulty, and a considerable amount of risk, Leo got the halter unfastened, then he wrenched the recalcitrant horse to the bars of the loose-box, and pulled Buster's head over them, after which he made the halter fast, and the bad-tempered brute was in much the same position as an ox that is about to be slaughtered.

Now Leo got the bridle, which was about strong enough to have held a raging lion, and lifting his knee he placed it in a tempting position for Buster to bite at, which he immediately tried to do, but he discovered that the cross-bar just prevented him, and he also found the bit between his bristling teeth, while he was securely bridled before he quite realised what had happened.

"There you are Rubby," observed Leo. "Lead him into the circus."

"What?"

"Lead him into the circus."

"Would you like to do so, Muerte?" inquired Rubby. "Apparently the man would not. Well, I am the master of this circus, Leo, and I am surprised at your expecting me to do your duty. Lead the horse in at once, boy. Are you afraid of an ordinary four-footed horse?"

"Are you?"

"Oh, my lad! Don't you know better than to put such a question as that to your employer? Fear, indeed! Fear is unknown to the broad, brave breast of Ruabino."

"Then suppose you lead Buster?"

"What?"

"Suppose you lead the horse?"

"Er—just so; but see you here, Leo, I do not desire to inculcate lazy habits in your breast. I am the leader of men, you are the leader of horses. We must keep to our respective spheres. In a well-ordered circus like this it must always be done. Strict discipline and Ruabino are synonymous. Lead on, and I will follow—at a distance, which shall be greater than the radius of Buster's heels. Lead on, dear boy. Some horses are better led than driven."

"I know they are, Rubby!" exclaimed Leo, looking doubtfully at the vicious brute; "but, you see, Buster is a horse

that will neither be led nor driven. He has bitten me repeatedly."

"Then you must be used to it. He has never bitten me, and I do not want to let him commence now. We might use Muerte for the purpose. You can lead a donkey with a loaf of bread, perhaps you could lead Buster with a donkey. Walk ahead of him, Muerte. You are the biggest ass I have ever come across, and perhaps Buster will appreciate you. If so he will be about the only living creature that does."

"You insolent, cowardly reptile!" snarled Muerte. "You are not fit to live."

"I am quite certain that you are not fit to die, dear boy; but don't get excited. It makes you show your teeth, and then you always remind me of a snarling wolf, though I must say it is an insult to the lesser beast. Now then, Leo! Don't be all night. You are worse than a child about to take a dose of medicine. You who deal with lions are surely not afraid of a simple horse?"

But, then, Leo knew Buster so well. He had so many ways—all of which were playful, not to say painful. However, he got a hold of the bridle so close to the bit that he could not get bitten, and Buster appeared to be almost amiable. He followed like a retriever dog, and seemed to be as gentle as a lamb. Leo knew that this was one of his playful ways. He was always remarkably docile until he became demoniacal.

"You observe, Muerte," exclaimed Rubby, "that is a horse in a hundred. You have no horse like that. Neither have you a rider who could sit him for five minutes."

"You lie, you silly fat beast!" snarled Muerte. "I admit that you are a good judge of lies, seeing that you are fully accomplished in the art, but this time you are in error."

"I have a score of riders who could ride the brute, and as regards myself there is no horse ever yet foaled that I could not sit."

"I will bet you a level sovereign that you do not sit Buster for five minutes," said Rubby, producing the coin.

"I take your bet."

"Then cover my sovereign, dear boy!" exclaimed Rubby, placing his coin on the ledge of the partition surrounding the circus. You shall time yourself. Leo has a whip. You will not need spurs with Buster."

Muerte placed a sovereign on the top of the other one, then Rubby placed them both in his pocket.

"Here, leave these coins alone!" snarled Muerte.

"Dear boy, they are perfectly safe in my pocket," said Rubby. "You might purloin them were I to leave them there, and as I shall win the little bet—why, it saves time if I pick them up now. Of course, if you win, I shall hand them to you. You need have no fear. I know that a sovereign is a large amount of money to you, but you are dealing with an Englishman, while I am dealing with a Spanish gipsy. Now mount the horse."

"Bah!" exclaimed Muerte, striding up boldly to Buster and vaulting on his back: then he got hold of the reins, and Leo got to safe quarters.

Muerte pulled out his watch, and Rubby took the precaution of checking him. He showed the time to Joe and Jim, so that there might be no mistake, although he did not think it at all necessary, knowing Buster as well as he did.

That sagacious brute smelt the tan, and Muerte, who was really a good rider, although he fondly imagined that he was a far better one than was really the case, let him do what he liked. He wanted to win the sovereign, but was quite prepared for any tricks. To waste time was exactly what he desired, and Buster was certainly doing it.

To Joe and Jim it appeared that he would not only waste the five minutes with comfort to himself and his rider, but that he would waste another hour on the top of those five minutes.

Muerte smiled, but still remained on his guard. "What about your sovereign, you bloated brute?" he demanded.

"Dear boy," exclaimed Rubby, "it is perfectly safe in my pocket."

"You mean to say you won't pay me?"

"I shall hand you the two sovereigns if you are on that horse's back five minutes hence, minus the minute you have already been there—that is, of course, supposing you are not thrown off during the interval. This is our first turn, and I must admit that it is a very slow one, but I have faith in Buster. I admit he is a perverse brute, and if he heard me make the bet, he may want to make me lose a sovereign out of sheer perverseness. However, I fancy he will have you off yet."

"Never! No horse has ever thrown me. Ha, ha! To think that a spavined brute like this can do so is too ridiculous."

Perhaps Buster understood the insult. At any rate, he

promptly stopped Muerte's boast by bringing up his head with a jerk, and catching the Spaniard on the nose with a force that made it bleed. Was Buster satisfied? He was not. He slowed himself round, and got Muerte's toes between his bristling teeth; then, judging by the Spaniard's yells, Buster bit.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Rubby. "That horse is really too funny. Don't you think so, Muerte?"

Muerte did not say what he thought. He merely yelled, and when Buster let go, it was obvious that Muerte would need a new pair of boots, for there were holes in his uppers.

Then Buster kicked, and backed into Rubby, who promptly fled round the ring. He did not want to sample the power of those heels. It looked far too dangerous. Next Muerte roared, and tried to get at Leo, who was not taking any. After that the horse did everything it could think of; and finding that did not unseat the rider, he rolled on him.

Buster was the first up. He waited. Muerte, yelling with pain, rose on his hands and knees; then Buster uttered something between a neigh and a scream, and running at his late rider, fastened his teeth in his back, and bit as hard as he conveniently could.

After that, Buster turned round, with a view to kicking the damaged man out of the ring; but Muerte was out of that ring before the first kick came.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Rubby. "He is the funniest horse that I have ever met. Don't you think so, Muerte?"

"You demon!" hooted Muerte, who was really badly bitten.

"Ha, ha, ha! I don't know when I have enjoyed an entertainment as much as this one," declared Rubby. "And the best of it is that I have gained a sovereign."

"Fury!" hooted Muerte, stamping about in pain. "I'm bitten! By my life, I'll stab the brute to death!" Then, drawing a most formidable-looking knife, he rushed at Buster.

Leo, who had a sort of affection for Buster, tried to stop the infuriated Spaniard; but Muerte bowled him into the tan, and then rushed at the horse.

Buster, who had his back towards Muerte, looked quite quiet; but then there was no relying on his quietness. He was like a tropical storm in that respect, and always appeared quietest when he was about to become most dangerous. He merely slewed round a little, then he kicked Muerte into the place where the sixpenny audience ought to have sat.

It looked dangerous, and it made Rubby look quite serious for a few moments, but when he saw the rival showman rise without apparent serious injury, he burst into roars of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha! Sorry, dear boy. Ha, ha, ha! Glad he hasn't hurt you. Ha, ha, ha! I never saw a funnier scene. Look here, Muerte, I'll bet you a level fiveer you don't sit him for five minutes. Why, bother it, Buster is as good as a circus! I've frequently run a show and not made a pound profit."

"Here, don't give the show away!" murmured Leo. "Though, of course, I frequently make as much as ten thousand pounds profit in one night," added Rubby, taking Leo's advice.

"Then perhaps you will raise my screw," said Leo.

"Hang the lad! I can't satisfy him anyhow," growled Rubby. "If I tell the truth he says don't give the show away, and if I tell abominable falsehoods, he asks for a rise in his screw. Oh, who would be a showman! I almost pity you, Muerte, because you are one, and the biggest ass at the job I ever met. Never mind! You are like the sailor's monkey. You have got the kicks, and I have got the ha'pence. I am perfectly satisfied."

"I am seriously injured. I am internally injured," groaned Muerte, who intended to make the most of it.

"Well, dear boy," observed Rubby calmly, "I don't see how a form like yours could possibly be externally injured. If Buster had kicked off your long nose, he would have improved your face. The fact of the matter is, Buster must have mistaken you for a bunch of catmeat, of which he is particularly fond. He wanted to eat you, which shows that his tastes are vitiated."

"I shall sue you for damages, you beast!"

"No necessity, dear boy. You can have as many damages as you like without suing. All you have to do is to get into the ring, and Buster will give you the damages, I'll warrant. But look here, Muerte, I'll have another bet with you, and give you four minutes. I know Buster is a horse that wants riding."

"The brute wants shooting, like his master!" declared Muerte. "I am seriously injured."

"Why worry about a trivial thing like that? You don't find me worrying about it. I have made a clear sovereign, and am perfectly content and happy. We will have a nice little supper with some of it."

"Why not spend it all, and have a nicer one?" suggested Leo.

"Do you want to ruin me, boy?" exclaimed Rubby. "I would not mind if Muerte wasn't such a coward, and would have another try to ride Buster, because then I should make another sovereign."

"Why don't you ride the brute yourself, if you are so brave?" sneered Muerte.

"My dear fellow," exclaimed Rubby, "if you owned a horse like that, and knew all his qualities, would you ride him? No, I feel sure you would not. Would you like to have a mount, Joe?"

"I don't know that I would," growled Joe, gazing at Buster in a manner that was far from affectionate. "All the same, I'm going to have a try. I wouldn't mind his kicking and rearing if the brute would not roll. You see, if a horse rolls on you it hurts, and it seems to hurt when he bites. However, here goes! You need not send any flowers."

Joe approached the fiery steed with caution. Buster slewed round with a view to getting in a kick, but although he made two attempts, they were unsuccessful. Then Joe grabbed him by the mane, and vaulted on his back with an agility that would have done credit to Jim the acrobat.

Now, Joe had a great advantage over Muerte. He knew—or thought he knew—exactly what Buster was going to do.

The biting and rolling Joe was determined to evade, and he made a mental vow to be outside the circus ring in no time in the event of being thrown.

Buster turned to get in his favourite bite, but found Joe's toes too far back for the purpose. Then he tried to hit him on the nose with his crest, but failed again.

"Ha, ha, ha! That lad is a born rider!" cried Rubby. "Stick to him like glue, boy! Look here, I'm a sportsman, Muerte. I'll bet you a sovereign that Joe sticks on for five minutes, and I'll give him a shilling if he succeeds."

"I take your bet!" cried Muerte, who wanted to get his sovereign back, and who felt perfectly confident that Joe would never stick on.

"Done!" cried Rubby, pulling out his watch. "Now, Joe, do your best, or you will ruin me."

"I'm going to," said Joe, "only I wish you would tell the brute not to roll."

"Dear boy," exclaimed Rubby, "he's like the rest of the beasts I employ. He never will obey my orders. Leo is another of them."

Finding rearing and kicking quite useless to unseat his rider, Buster commenced buck-jumping, and Joe had a fearfully rough time of it. Then Joe gave the brute a taste of the whip, and matters became very lively.

Buster did everything that a horse might be expected not to do, then he stood still, preparatory to rolling.

Now that was the very thing that Joe wanted to avoid. Buster found the whip so painful that he gave up his idea of having a roll, and bolted to the side of the ring, where he tried to grind Joe's leg against the woodwork; but that worthy turned Buster's head into the partition, and lashed his hinder quarters.

Buster could not stand that. He went round the ring at lightning speed, and Joe fondly imagined that he was going to conquer, when the vicious brute got the bit between his teeth, and dashing straight across the ring, leapt the barrier.

He landed amongst the benches, which he damaged badly, then he damaged them considerably more by kicking at them. After that he leapt back again, but Joe was still on his back.

"Ha, ha, ha! Well done, Joe!" shouted Rubby. "You are a grand rider, lad. Mind you stick on. You have been on two minutes."

"It seems more like half an hour," growled Joe.

"You shall ride him every day of your life, dear boy. It will please the spectators. I will send out a challenge to Muerte, stating that he has no rider in his circus who can manage Buster, and that my youngest lad can do so. It will be a good advertisement. Look out, the brute is going to roll!"

Joe was very fond of horses, and also very kind to them, but this was an occasion where kindness would have been very much misplaced. It would simply have meant that Buster would have rolled on him, and that would have finished Rubby's bet. Joe did not want his new employer to lose money over the affair, neither did he want to lose his life over it, so he used the whip with a freedom that caused Buster to change his mind about rolling, and go round the ring again. But now Joe had got him under better control, and he took particular care the brute did not leap the barrier again.

Round and round they went, and Joe took particular care that Buster maintained his speed, because he was a horse that required a lot of exercise, and he was getting it now.

It maddened Muerte to think that he had failed where a

mere lad was succeeding; besides, he had lost a sovereign. He made up his mind not to pay the second one, supposing that he lost it.

"Time!" cried Rubby.

"That is a lie; it is only three minutes!" declared Muerte.

"I vow it is over five!" said Rubby. "However, Joe can stick on as long as he likes, so it doesn't matter. I'd rather lose a sovereign than see him come off now. He's a plucky youngster, and I've never seen a better rider. I'll make something of that boy. He's got ability."

Buster was behaving himself in a model manner now. He would have liked to lessen the pace, but Joe was not having that. He had no intention of allowing the horse to turn itself into a common or garden-roller, and so he used the whip each time Buster showed signs of flagging. Ten minutes elapsed, and Muerte had to admit that time was up; then Joe reined in, and springing to the ground, got a grip on the reins close to the bit, while he took care to stand clear of Buster's forelegs.

"I will trouble you for a sovereign, dear boy!" exclaimed Rubby.

"Bah! You will not get it!" snarled Muerte. "You have robbed me, and I will not leave this place till that young villain Jim comes with me."

"Well, I will consider the matter," said Rubby, disappearing, and quickly returning with a man who stood about five feet nine, and looked muscular. "Jupiter, my strong man," observed Rubby, bowing politely.

Jupiter was evidently a man who followed his instructions without many words. He walked up to Muerte, seized him round the body, and flung him on his back. Then gripping him by the legs, lifted him up, and shook him upside down. About a poundsworth of silver and coppers dropped from Muerte's pockets, together with two or three sovereigns.

Jupiter picked up one sovereign, and gravely handed it to his employer.

"Is that all you require?" he asked.

"No, dear boy," exclaimed Rubby; "I want you to have supper with me to-night. Show that party off the premises."

"What time supper?" inquired Jupiter, grabbing Muerte by the collar, as he groped for the remainder of his money.

"As soon as we can cook it, dear boy. Be very gentle with Muerte, because he's delicate."

"I'm always gentle," declared Jupiter. "Come up there!" And he gave Muerte a wrench that caused him to gasp.

"Villain! Release me!" cried Muerte.

"Steak and onions is my mark," observed Jupiter, wrenching the rival showman from the place, for he had now picked up his money. "Fried potatoes and half a pint of stout. I'll buy the things if you give me the money."

"Take it out of that sovereign, dear boy," exclaimed Rubby, handing him the coin. "Be back as soon as you can, because we shall be hungry by the time it is cooked. You might bring in some ginger-pop for these youngsters. It's better than beer for boys, and they always like it better. Be sure you don't hurt Muerte."

"Hurt him?" inquired Jupiter, turning round and wrenching the unfortunate Spaniard with him. "How should I hurt him? I'm going to treat him as gentle as a pet lamb, before its mistress considers it too old for mutton. Come on, mate; you have got to be treated gently."

Then Jupiter winked at the grinning lads, looked gravely at his employer, and ran Muerte off the premises.

"If you come back I shall chuck you into the lions' cage, and let them treat you gently," were Jupiter's parting words, as he went to purchase the supper.

The great Ruabino, with Joe, Jim, and Leo, was seated in his caravan when Jupiter returned with the supper, in the shape of rumpsteaks, onions, and a pint can of ale and three bottles of ginger-beer.

"Good man!" exclaimed Ruabino. "You have done so well that you shall cook it. The oil-stove is alight. The utensils are there. You know the rest."

"Yes, Rubby. I know the rest, although I never get it in your service."

"Hark at the man, and to my knowledge he has not done a day's work for a week!"

"He went for a walk this morning," said Leo. "To sleep this afternoon. Then he worked hard at his dinner and his tea, because I saw him. Now he is going to work hard at his supper. Besides, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he has chucked Muerte into the ditch. I call that fairly hard work, so would you, Rubby, if you had seen him at dinner. You will get some idea as to what a splendid worker he is when he starts on those steaks and onions. Let's slice some potatoes, you chaps. Fried potatoes go well with the rest."

"Potatoes there," said Rubby, pointing to a basket in the corner with his cigar. "Make yourselves useful, lads. Work is good for the brain, and good for the muscles. Dear me, it often makes me weep salt tears when I think of all the work that I have done in my lifetime."

"You started young, didn't you, Rubby?" inquired Leo.
 "Boy, I started very young."
 "I thought so, because I noticed that you stopped young. I don't call it such jolly hard work to take it out of the clown with your whip in the ring. Ha, ha! He gets many a cut for past misdeeds."

"It does him good," declared Rubby, smiling at the thoughts of it, "and it pleases the audience. After all, that is what we want to do."

"And take their money?"
 "It follows, as the night the day, that we shall take their money if we please them. But, listen here, we must please them better than does Muerte, or he will queer my pitch, and then the ghost will walk. Did you hurt Muerte, Jupiter?"

"Didn't stop to ask him," observed the strong man, weeping copiously, because he was busy ailing onions, and unless you hold them under water they are sure to make you cry.

"No matter. He ought to be hurt," said Rubby. "Now, listen to me, Jim. I want you to go through the same performance as you used to when at his circus. If you can go one better, well and good. As for Joe—well, I shall let him ride Buster; then you might punch Leo's head with the gloves. Think you could do that?"

"No. I feel jolly certain that I couldn't! All the same, I don't mind trying, especially if Leo will give me a few tips as to the best way to do it in."

"You can box?" inquired Rubby.
 "Yes. But I'm nothing like a professional, and I expect Leo is."

"That is so. Will you teach him how to punch your head, Leo? I think you two could make a good show of it."

"Yes; I'll have a turn with him," answered Leo. "He looks like a hard hitter. Of course, Joe, it's no good if you don't hit hard. The public don't care for it, the same as they don't care much for trapeze work when nets are beneath. I often try to get Rubby to forget the nets, but he's so beastly obstinate. Showmen always are, especially when you ask them for a rise in your screw. You have noticed that with Muerte, Jim?"

"Rather!" laughed Jim. "The fellow goes about flashing his diamonds—which I believe are paste, because he never pawns them—and he brags of his money; then, if I asked him for two pence—he never paid me wages, you know—he used to vow that I was ruining him, and referred to my food, which wasn't as good as he gave to his lions. Still, I have done with him for ever!"

"That reminds me to be seen, my lad," observed Rubby. "Muerte is a wily Spaniard. He will do me one for having taken you on. Still, I don't care. Now, be quiet, because I want to work out the posters."

"Lucky it's not lightning, Rubby. Don't forget to make a lion chawing off someone's head," said Leo. "Slop it on thick. Don't forget that thrills bring twopences. You might show one where Joe has knocked out both my eyes, and me walking calmly across the ring, picking them up, and replacing them."

"You silly varlet. If your eyes were knocked out, how could you see where to find them?"

"That's what the public will wonder," said Leo. "It will prove sort of mysterious, and they like mystery. All you need after that will be a little pathos. You might get that by making Joe set the eyes at proper focus, and patting my nose into shape. Or, I tell you what—"

"And I tell you what, my lad. Your ideas are like the brook and flow on for ever. They are about as weak as the waters of that brook, and as senseless as the jackass who drinks those waters. Don't I tell you I'm busy?"

Rubby set to work while the others did the cooking; then, when the supper was ready, Rubby flung his papers aside and set to work again.

The supper was excellently cooked, for Jupiter was a good all round man, and, having made full arrangements for the morrow's entertainment, Rubby left the youngsters in Jupiter's hands to find them sleeping accommodation.

The following day was Saturday, and Muerte, the rival showman, had arranged to have an afternoon performance, knowing that his rival did not intend to have one till the evening.

Leo was passing the time in giving Joe some boxing lessons, and they were getting on admirably, both lads being very good-tempered, except when roused by some wrong action, when a message came from Rubby that they were to come to him at once.

Now, a kinder-hearted employer than Rubby it would be difficult to find. There was usually a smile upon his face. Now he looked very grim.

"My lad," he said to Joe, "I must compliment you on the success of your trick. I generally read a boy's character by his eyes—you never can read a man's, though some pretend to do so. Jim got you here under false pretences, but here

you shall remain, if you wish it, because I do not go back from my word. Of course, the act of engaging you both was no kindness to you. It was a matter of business. I knew Jim was a valuable asset, and I thought I could make you one. Apart from that, I do not believe you will accuse me of unkind behaviour, and I must say that your trick should not have been played on one who treated you as a friend. Whether you have acted honestly or not, I leave you to judge."

"I don't understand a bit of what you mean," declared Joe, looking full in his employer's eyes. "If I have played you a trick it was without my knowledge, and you would be just the very last man on the face of this earth that I would play a trick on."

"Good! I could almost believe you, boy; but read that letter, my lad."

And this is what Joe read:

"Dear Rubby.—Thanks for all the information you have given me! Muerte and I didn't play the part badly, did we? You are a little soft, if you will excuse me for mentioning it. We shall take the wind out of your sails tomorrow afternoon. Thanks for having billed me, only I appear at Muerte's circus. You can keep that idiot, Joe. He will be good enough for your tinpot circus.—Yours with laughter,
 "JIM THE GYMNAST."

(But not Rubby's.)
 "Well," said Joe, handing the letter back, "you jolly well deserve to be called soft! I can go; but before I do go, I'm going to tell you that never while I live will I forget your kindness, and if I ever can repay it, I will, I vow, even if I risk my life in doing so."

"But don't you see, boy, if I was kind to you in any way, I had to trust you both? Therein my softness lies."

"No, I am as certain as I'm standing here, feeling savage with you, in spite of your goodness, that that letter is a lie from start to finish. Jim never wrote it. If he did, he did so under threats—no, he never wrote it. I don't know his handwriting; that does not matter. How did the letter come?"

"Delivered by a boy," answered Rubby, looking brighter, for there was something about Joe's manner that convinced him he was speaking the truth. "But, don't you see, as far as Jim is concerned, this thing is clear?"

"As clear as night follows day," observed Joe. "You said that."

"You have a good memory, but you have no right to crib my ideas, especially as I cribbed from Shakespeare. But what I mean to say is—what? Why, don't you see Jim has stolen a march on us? He came here to learn when our first performance took place, and a few other things concerning it, and now he has gone back, and is actually going to perform at three, which means that the crowd will be there, and they won't care to go to another circus the same day, which means that Muerte will get their shillings and twopences, and I shall not, although I was first on the scene."

"Why don't you blame Muerte?"

"What? Well, business is business. He has been sharp. Perhaps I ought not to blame Jim."

"Of course you ought not! Bother it! You heard how he talked about Jim. Do you suppose he would have done that if they had been working together?"

"Of course he would, my lad! Just the very thing he would do to throw me off the scent!"

"Rats! Do you think that Muerte is going to let me sit on his head while Jim flogs him to throw you off the scent?"

"What? I never thought of that! Eh? Why, when you come to think of it—what—well, perhaps they have made friends."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Joe. "You ought to have seen that flogging, and then you would never think a thing like that. My opinion is that that letter is a forgery. Mind you, Muerte may have collared Jim, and is keeping him; but I know a little bit about Jim, and I don't believe Muerte will make him perform against his will."

"What's your opinion, Leo?" inquired Rubby.

"Jim is true as steel. I've been with him. Look here, suppose you take three guinea seats, and we three will see that show."

"Good! We will! Send someone who is not known. Do you know what his guinea seats are?"

"Two bob, I expect. They used to be that price."

"Right, dear boy. I will give you half a sovereign."

Joe did not quite understand this. He waited for his employer to speak.

"Come, Joe, my lad!" exclaimed the good-hearted little showman. "I feel confident that I have wronged you, and I'm sorry for it. I may have wronged Jim to a certain extent, but I am certain that he will perform for Muerte this afternoon, though it may be against his will."

"He wouldn't perform under those conditions," declared

Joe. Look here, we haven't known each other for long, but he told you when you engaged him that he wouldn't come unless you took me. Now, I'm not much use—at present, at any rate. Jim was sticking by me, then. He will stick by me, now. I hope I shall stick by him, which means we are going to keep together. You will see this afternoon, Jim will not appear."

"He will," said Rubby, with conviction. "I know this line of business better than you do, my lad; but we shall see."

Leo got the three "guinea" seats for five shillings, and handed Rubby his change, and shortly after the performance commenced, the three took their seats. Rubby glanced up now and then, as the horses ambled round; but he was busy working out ideas for new posters, because he felt sure that Jim's name would never appear on his again.

"High trapeze," murmured Leo. "Jim's turn. He will be ill, or commanded to perform before the King."

"The King is abroad!" growled Rubby.

"So will Muerte be!" retorted Leo. "I'll eat that change you are thinking of giving me if—"

Leo ceased speaking, for at that moment Jim stepped into the ring, in tight, and bowed to the cheers of the audience.

His name was already well known, and he looked very young for the perilous work.

Grasping the rope, he drew himself up, hand over hand, and never once used his feet till he gained the high trapeze, which was at the very top of the great booth.

"Let's come away!" growled Rubby, rising.

"No, not yet!" cried Joe. "Look there!"

Jim drew a knife, and coolly severed the rope by which he had ascended. The only way for him to descend now would be to drop into the net, some eighty feet beneath him.

A murmur of surprise ran round the throng, and Muerte's face grew fierce as he stepped forward, for severing that rope was certainly not part of the performance.

"Ladies and gentlemen," cried Jim, in a ringing voice, that was plainly audible to everyone in the large circus. "I am here this afternoon against my will. I am engaged by Signor Ruabino, and I have been kidnapped by that miscreant, Muerte. I used to perform for him, and he treated me like a dog; worse than you would treat your dogs. He will tell you that I lie, and you are at liberty to believe him or me, as you choose; but this I do tell you, one and all—never in this life will I perform for Muerte again. He will say that he has taught me all I know. Suppose that should be so—and it is not—I have worked for him for nothing but my food. Now, I am pledged to work for Ruabino to-night at half-past seven, and I shall do so. Muerte thought to stop me, and he was rather surprised when I pretended to fall in with his views, and perform for him. He got me here by fraud, and I had to deal with him by trickery, otherwise he would have prevented my appearing at Ruabino's. He thinks he will prevent my doing so now, but he is mistaken. Ruabino was good to me and my friend, and I would take any measures not to let him think that I have acted a vile part with him. I can only say this, that if Muerte has billed me to perform here this afternoon, he had no right to do so. He ought to give your money back, if you are desirous of seeing me perform."

"What? The boy is a born orator!" muttered Rubby. "Bless his young heart! I wish we had Jupiter here! What? Is the boy mad?"

Jim stood on the trapeze. "I am going to Ruabino's Circus!" he cried. "I shall perform there to-night!"

Swiftly he climbed the ropes of the trapeze; then, holding by one hand, and before Muerte knew what the daring lad was about to do, Jim plunged his knife through the canvas, and ripped it for at least a yard.

In an instant he scrambled through the opening, then slid down the sloping canvas until he reached the edge. It was a pretty high drop from here to the ground, but Jim landed lightly; then across the circus-ground he darted, pursued by three or four of Muerte's men, for now the alarm had been given.

Jim was very active, and there was little chance of catching him. He darted round the tents and booths, gained the lane, and then fled into Rubby's circus.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Rubby, as Jim disappeared through the opening. "I will guarantee that they never catch him. He's as active as an eel, and as determined as a bulldog. I'm very glad about this."

"The people are not," observed Leo.

"So much the better, dear boy! I don't like creating a disturbance, but, hang it all, Muerte has behaved like a scoundrel, and he deserves a little punishment! Look here, ladies and gentlemen," bawled Rubby, in a voice that rose above the angry cries, "we came here to see Jim perform, and as I intend to see him perform at the great Ruabino's Circus at half-past seven this evening, I don't see why I

should have to pay twice over. I think we are entitled to our money back."

"You villain!" yelled Muerte, recognising Rubby. "I'll—"

Hoots and hisses drowned his words. No doubt some of the spectators cared very little about Jim's performance; but the fact that they had paid to see it, and were now going to be disappointed, was quite sufficient to make them want their money back.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Rubby, as they began to show their displeasure by smashing the forms. "We are going to see some fun, now. It serves that Spanish gipsy right, for he is the biggest thief on the face of the earth. I hope this will be a lesson to him not to try to spoil my show on future occasions. Fancy bringing two circuses into a town of this size, when there is only room for one! Ha, ha, ha! Just listen to them! If they don't get their money back, Muerte will wish that he had paid it. Mark my words, he will. What he has taken to-night won't pay for the damage they will do. But look here, lads! This is the place for us. Jim has made a ventilating hole in that circus, but he has made his escape. Suppose we do likewise, because Muerte may send a strong man to interview us, and that would be disagreeable!"

Then Rubby led the way from the circus, and went to interview Jim, while they could hear the uproar the irate spectators were making in the other circus.

As the hour drew near for the performance at Ruabino's Circus, a horrible noise burst forth. The fact is, that Rubby, being nothing if not patriotic, had started his steam-organ playing "Soldiers of the Queen." No doubt it was somewhat old fashioned, but it fetched the people, and this was really what the great Rubby wanted. It kept on fetching them in scores, and Rubby at once turned his twopenny seats into sixpenny ones, preferring to fill his circus at that price than at the lower one.

But the worst of it was that when Muerte, the rival showman, started his steam-organ playing a different and exceedingly noisy tune, the combination was not harmonious.

Beyond fetching the spectators, it fetched Sir Henry Timkins, a gentleman with a large waist, a short nose, and a short temper. He lived close by in a large mansion, which he had built out of candles, and candles had gained him his knighthood.

Rubby was in his caravan, talking to Joe concerning the evening performance, when the great man was shown in by Jim, who also entered, because he thought there was going to be some fun.

"I am Sir Henry Timkins, fellow, and—"

"I am Ruabino, dear boy!" exclaimed Rubby, offering his hand, which, needless to say, the great man did not deign to take. "Glad to make your friendship! Sit down, and make yourself at home. Nice evening, isn't it, old chap?"

"You insolent, strolling vagabond!" roared the great man, puffing like a grampus. He was greatly excited, and had walked thither quickly. "How dare you address me in that manner! How dare you make this howling row near my house! I'll—I'll have you indicted for a nuisance! I will have you turned off the ground!"

"My dear fellow, calm yourself!" murmured Rubby. "Temper is a very silly thing, especially with a man as fat as yourself. You see, you might have apoplexy, and I wouldn't like you to have fits in my caravan; there isn't really room. Joe, let that laughter cease! I am ashamed of you, laughing at such a great man! He can't help being funny, and you have no right to laugh at him."

"You impertinent rascal," howled the outraged knight, "if I have any more of your impertinence I will pull your nose!"

"Dear boy, pray calm yourself!" exclaimed Rubby, lighting a cigar and tilting his tall hat on the back of his head. "The noise will not last long. I am only here for about a week, and by that time you will be quite used to it. I don't mind it at all. I tell you what I will do with you. You shall have a half-guinea ticket to my performance for ten shillings. Just mark one of the half-crown tickets ten-and-sixpence, Joe, and let the old chap have it for half-a-sovereign. Mind you get the money before he gets the ticket, because I don't know him, and he may not be honest."

This was not quite exact. Rubby did know the great man by name, and he knew how he had made his fortune, having been warned against him, because he would be sure to cause trouble should there be any noise.

"You insolent hound!" roared Timkins. "Do you think you are coming here to annoy me, and the rest of the public, with this horrible uproar. It is a nuisance, and I will stop it forthwith."

"Now look here, Henry, my dear fellow. This circus is for the purpose of providing the public with enjoyment, and your affectionate friend Ruabino with money. When you were making your pile out of candles, did you consider

what a horrible nuisance the stench of cooking tallow was to your neighbours?"

"Why, I never heard such impertinence in all my life!" gasped Timkins. "It is unbearable, and I will not submit to it. I will pull your nose!"

"Don't you see, dear boy, that would not be stopping the noise? In fact, it would tend to increase it. Take my advice, and go home. You will get to like the music in time. I admit that when two steam-organs are playing different tunes that the strains are an acquired taste; but take my word for it, you will get to like it in time, and at the end of the week or fortnight, as the case may be, you will be quite sad when you see my circus going to fresh pastures. I don't mind meeting you in any way I can. For instance, I will let you smoke a cigar in the cage of my performing lions, provided they raise no objection. Or I will let you ride my horse Buster, a really charming animal for those who like his breed. You had better go and see Muerte, and order him to stop his steam-organ. If he won't do so, smash his organ—and his head at the same time, if you like. Good-evening! Mind how you tumble down the steps, because they are slippery."

Sir Henry raved for quite five minutes, then he left the caravan, vowing that he would go for the police, though what they would do in the matter he did not say.

"Don't you think you had better stop the awful row, Rubby?" inquired Joe.

"Can't, dear boy," answered Rubby calmly. "Directly I stop my organ Muerte will stop his, and the people will have music."

"Ha, ha, ha! You surely don't call this hideous din music?"

"Well, of course it is not first-class music. I admit that I have heard better."

"Ha, ha, ha! Have you ever heard worse?"

"Well, I don't think I have. At least, I cannot call it to mind at the moment; but, don't you see, Henry ought not to be selfish. He has made his fortune out of rotten tallow, and I am perfectly certain that the neighbours could not have liked the boiling of that. Now, I don't consider this music is so objectionable as the smell of a candle factory. At any rate, there is the noise—"

"Oh, yes, there isn't a doubt about that! It is there right enough."

"Well, if Henry doesn't like it—"

"I feel certain he doesn't."

"In that case he will have to stop it."

"How can he?"

"I really don't know. That is his own business entirely. It has nothing whatever to do with me, and I can give him no advice on the subject. Hallo, Jupiter, what's the matter?"

"A bobby is waiting to speak to you, and Muerte has come in to see our show."

"He has, has he?" exclaimed Rubby, ignoring the news concerning the man of law. "Then you can depend on it that he has come to create a disturbance. Look here, Jupiter, you are my strong man. Just go to Muerte and tell him that he can't sit in the best seats except in evening-dress."

"He is in evening-dress, tall hat and all."

"Ah, that alters the case somewhat. Look here, Joe, just you take this stick, sit a couple of seats behind Muerte, and every time he says anything insulting or makes a noise tap him on the hat, and tell him to behave himself."

"Suppose he doesn't wear his hat?"

"Then tap him on the head, dear boy. Be off! I will call you just before it is time for you to ride Buster."

Joe did not much care for this duty; however, he took the cane and hurried away, Jupiter showing him where Muerte was seated.

The performance commenced with a fair lady

ambling round the ring on the back of a white horse, and the colour deepened beneath her paint and powder as Muerte remarked to the person seated next to him that she must be fifty if a day, and the horse was a spavined brute, only fit for exportation to Belgium to make sausages.

He made these remarks, both of which were untrue, in a voice perfectly audible to all round about him, and they caused some laughter.

"Silence, there, my man!" exclaimed Joe, giving him some sounding raps on his tall hat. "You must behave yourself in this circus, otherwise I shall have to turn you out. You are not in Muerte's miserable circus, where people behave like brute beasts."

This remark caused a good deal of laughter, and it caused Muerte intense fury. He was a big man, and it was obvious to all that it would have been quite impossible for Joe to turn him out, but the cheeky threat appeared to amuse the people.

"Why, you insolent—"

"Silence, there!" cried Joe, giving him a few more raps, and holding himself in readiness to bolt, in case Muerte showed signs of clambering over the intervening row of seats, though as they were filled with spectators, he would have found considerable difficulty in doing so.

"Why, I declare it is Muerte himself!" exclaimed Joe. "Take your hat off, Muerte! These gentlemen have come to see the show, and not to gaze at your four-and-sixpenny tile. Here, I'll take it off for you!"

And Joe did. He gave the brim of the offending tile a dexterous flip that sent it flying into the ring.

Now, that lady rider owned to twenty-five, and she might have been a decade older, although she did not look it; but to be called fifty, as Muerte had done, angered her more intensely than if she had had her ears boxed. She was standing on the horse's back now, but when she saw that hat in the ring she sat down, and deliberately steered her horse over it, though it had not been in the line of her round.

The horse was not only a very fine one, but he was admirably trained, and he daintily trod over the hat, an action that did not please his fair rider at all. She promptly reined him in, and using her whip, made him prance all over that unfortunate hat, until it would have been hard to tell which was hat and which was tan. After that she smiled sweetly at Muerte, and galloped onwards.

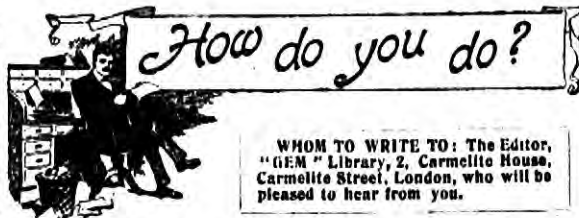
"Will you stop that noise?" cried Joe, rapping him over the head with his stick.

Then Muerte let himself go. With a yell of rage he made a rush for the daring Joe, who, after all, was only obeying his master's orders.

It so happened that seated behind Muerte was a gentleman with a florid complexion. He was the landlord of an inn in the town, and he also owned the gout. It may have been hereditary; most people lay the blame on their grandfathers, because it is more respectable to do so. On the other hand, in this landlord's case it may have been the chalk in the water when he mixed it with his whisky. At any rate, he had got the gout, and he had got it in that interesting state where it is impossible to wear a slipper with any degree of comfort, and a leather boot is too horrible to contemplate.

He had placed that slippered foot in what he considered the safest position. He could not place it in such a safe position as ladies place their tennisequin picture hats, which are spoiling the view of the people in the rear, because the landlord was far too fat to place his gouty foot on the top of his head. Leo, the acrobat, could have done it easily, but that landlord could not, so he placed it on the floor, like the grandfather's clock, and it was on the floor at the very spot where Muerte stamped.

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