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BLAKE & CO.'S TRIUMPH.

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TALE OF
TOM MERRY.

BY
MARTIN
CLIFFORD.

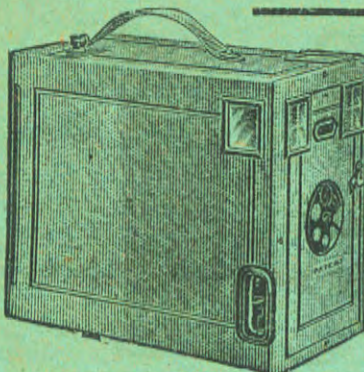


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VOL. 1.

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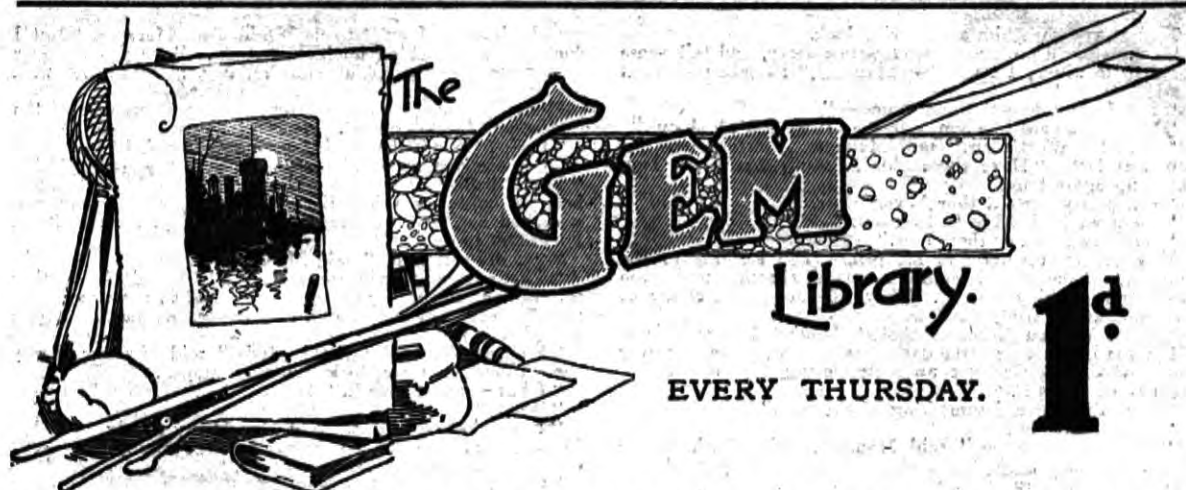
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BY MARTIN OLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1. The Mystery.

TOM MERRY stood at the window of his study in the School House at St. Jim's, looking out into the quadrangle with a half puzzled, half wrathful expression upon his usually sunny face.

He was looking at four juniors who were standing in a group under the elm-trees, chatting and laughing together as if over some great joke among themselves.

The four were Blake, Digby, Herries, and D'Arcy, the chums of Study No. 6 in the School House. Tom Merry had

been watching them for some minutes, as they stood chatting under the elms, the puzzled expression growing upon his face.

"The bounders!" he muttered. "What is it? What can it be? What is the giddy mystery, anyway?"

"Hallo! What are you muttering about?" asked Manners, looking up from some photographic prints he was finishing.

"Anything wrong?"

"Yes."

"What is it?" asked Manners carelessly.

"It's those rotters in Study No. 6 again."

"What about them?" asked Manners, devoting himself to his work. "Anything wrong in Study No. 6?"

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Tom Merry gave him a withering look.

"I wish you'd put those rotten prints away, and talk sense for a little while; I do really, Manners," he said somewhat tartly.

"But I want to get them done—"

"I expect we shall be done ourselves if we don't look out."

"Hallo! What's on?" said Manners, showing some interest at last. "Have those kids in Study No. 6 got anything up against us?"

"I'm pretty certain they have."

"Then we shall have to look out."

"Come and look at them now."

Manners reluctantly left his prints, and stepped to the window. Blake and his chums were still chatting under the elms, and laughing merrily. They did not see the chums of the Shelf at the study window.

"What do you think of that?" demanded Tom Merry. "For the last two or three days they've been chuckling over some wheeze they've got up their sleeves, and not letting on a word about it."

"Yes, I've noticed something of the sort."

"What can it be?"

"Blessed if I know," said Manners, going back to the table. "I can work out a chess problem for you, if you like, but I can't guess conundrums like that."

"It's been the same ever since that hamper came for Blake from his uncle in America," said Tom Merry. "There was a lot of mystery about that hamper. When Blake opened it, he had his study door locked."

"Yes, I know he did. I expect he was afraid there would be a rush for the grub."

"There wasn't grub in a hamper from a ranch in Wyoming, ass. I suppose Blake's uncle wouldn't send him a lot of canned beef or tinned things, would he? and anything else wouldn't keep. Blake wouldn't eat tinned meat."

"I don't know. I had an uncle once—I've got him still for that matter—who sent me 'Cruden's Concordance' for a birthday present," said Manners. "If an uncle would do that, he would do anything."

"I tell you there wasn't grub in the hamper. There hasn't been any sign of unusual feasting in Study No. 6 lately. Besides, Blake's not mean. He'd have asked a good many fellows in if there had been a feed going."

"Well, yes, there's something in that," assented Manners. "What do you think of this one, Tom?"

Tom Merry glanced at the photograph.

"H'm! I don't think the cow has come out very well, Manners."

The amateur photographer of the Merry Hobby Club looked at Tom Merry as if he would eat him.

"You don't think the what has come out very well?" he asked.

"The cow," said Tom Merry innocently.

"That's an interior," said Manners witheringly. "That's the chapel of St. Jim's on a Sunday afternoon."

"Well, I'm not a photographer, and I suppose you know best," said Tom Merry. "But I don't see how you can get a cow into a photograph of the inside of the chapel on a Sunday afternoon."

"You—you unspeakable ass! There's no cow."

"Yes, that cow—the grey cow—"

"That's the Head in his gown!"

"Oh, is it? I thought it was a cow. Now, don't be ratty, Manners, old chap. I really thought it was a cow, but it's just as much like the Head—"

"You ass—"

"It's a jolly good photograph," said Tom Merry, looking at it again. "Now I examine it more closely, I can see that it is the Head, and this figure in white is—"

"That's not a figure in white. That's the light on the stained glass window—"

"Yes, of course it is. And this black dog here—"

Manners snatched the photograph away.

"A lot of good it is showing things to a Philistine like you!" he exclaimed. "Of course, I couldn't expect you to understand."

"Well, I can't help it if you take a photograph of the Head that looks like a grey cow, can I? Don't be unreasonable, Manners. You took the photograph."

Manners only grunted.

"But to come back to business," went on Tom Merry soothingly. "It wasn't grub in the hamper Blake had from his uncle in America. It was something they have been keeping awfully dark, and that, I believe, is what they are jawing over now."

"Let 'em jaw!" growled the ruffled Manners.

"Well, if you want Study No. 6 to become top study in the School House, and Blake to go around crowing that he's cock of the House—"

"Oh, rats! Why don't you find out what was in the hamper, then?"

"That's what I want to do," said Tom Merry. "But I don't get any backing up in this study. With you dabbling over rotten photographic prints all day, and Lowther with his nose prodding into a book all the time—"

Monty Lowther looked up from the latest number of the "Magnet," and grinned.

"Hallo! Who's that taking my name in vain?"

"Oh, are you awake!" asked Tom Merry sarcastically.

"You'd better keep on reading, and Manners had better keep on hobnobbing, while Blake & Co. knock the study into a cocked hat, and we become a set of guys for the Third Form fags to grin at."

"Oh, draw it mild!" said Monty Lowther.

"That's what it will come to. Blake and those other rotters have something up against us, and in the time that's passed since they received that hamper, we haven't found out what it is."

"Well, you're leader of this study," said Manners, "why the dickens don't you look into the hamper?"

"I have looked into it."

"What?"

"I have looked into it," said Tom Merry calmly. "It has been shoved into the box-room; but it's empty now, so I didn't learn much by looking into it."

"Oh!"

"Whatever was in it has been taken out, of course, and it's being kept awfully dark by those rotters. Now, what is it?"

"Don't ask riddles."

"We've got to find out what's on," said Tom Merry.

"Manners, put away that boob at once. Lowther, shove that book out of sight. If I'm leader of this study I'm going to be followed. If I'm not backed up, to get to the bottom of this, I shall chuck this study and join Blake, or else Figgins & Co."

"Well, I'm about finished, and I can't work with you chaps jawing away like a pair of magpies," said Manners. "I'm done."

Lowther put his book into his pocket.

"There you are, my son!"

"That's better," said Tom Merry. "There's a time for work and a time for play, and it's a time for work now—"

"Then not so much gas," said Manners. "What I say is—"

"If you call my remarks gas, Manners, you're in danger of getting ornamented with a thick ear!"

"Rats!" said Manners cheerfully. "Come to the point. You think Study No. 6 have something up against us, and we're to get on to the little game. How are we going to do it?"

"That's the question."

"What's to be done?" demanded Monty Lowther.

"That will want thinking out," said Tom Merry, running his fingers thoughtfully through his curly hair.

"You might have let me go on with my book while you were thinking it out," grunted Lowther. "I was in an awfully interesting part. It was about a silly ass who would keep on talking—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" cackled Manners.

"Oh, don't be funny, Lowther!" said Tom Merry pathetically. "You are all right when you are not funny, but when you are funny, old man, life is not worth living; and, besides, you start Manners going off like a cheap German alarm clock—"

"Look here—" began Manners wrathfully.

"Oh, stick to the point! We've got to discover what Blake & Co. have on their little minds. We could lick them and make them own up, but there are difficulties in the way of a plan like that. They are four, and we are three, so—"

"They might lick us instead!" grinned Lowther.

"Besides, if they were licked, they mightn't own up. They can be awfully obstinate beasts when they like."

"True!"

"Suppose we try methods of persuasion? I've read that the most savage animals can be overcome and tamed by persuasive methods—"

"Ha, ha, ha! Then it ought to answer with those Fourth Form kids."

"Well, it might. We ought to take them separately, and treat them with kindness, and worm the secret out of them," said Tom Merry. "That's the only thing I can think of, besides walloping them, which wouldn't be much good."

"Good!" said Lowther. "We'll ooo to them as gently as a sucking dove."

"That's the idea."

"Then let's go and start the cooing!" said Lowther, rising and stretching his long limbs. "You won't let me read, so we may as well."

Tom Merry glanced out of the window.

Digby and Herries had gone off towards the cricket-field, where many of the juniors of St. Jim's were at practice at



Looking extremely dirty and dishevelled, the juniors rose out of the dusty lane and grinned ruefully at one another.

the nets, and Blake was walking towards the School House, with his hands in his pockets. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was still under the elms, engaged in the important occupation of flicking some specks of dust from his beautifully-creased trousers. Tom Merry turned quickly from the window.

"Now's our chance!" he exclaimed. "D'Arcy's alone, and we've got a chance to tackle him without the others, and he's the biggest ass of the lot! Come on!"

"Right you are!"

And the Terrible Three hastily left the study, and walked out of the School House, and bore down upon Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

CHAPTER 2.

A Hint of the Secret!

"NICE afternoon, Gussy!" said Tom Merry, with his most agreeable smile.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy flicked the last speck off his trousers, and looked up with a bored smile.

"Yaas, wathah!" he said. "It is a nice afternoon in some respects, Tom Mewwy; but, weally, I find this dust vewy twying!"

"Oh, it's not so dusty!" said Lowther, who never could be restrained from making puns in and out of season.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"But it's a pleasant afternoon," said Tom Merry, ingratiatingly. "Just the weather for a nice walk with some nice companions!"

"Yaas, I dare say it is, Tom Mewwy! I weally hope you will enjoy your walk!"

"Won't you come with us, Gussy? We've been looking forward to a little walk with you this afternoon."

"Have you weally? You haven't said anythin' about it before, Tom Mewwy."

"It's such pleasant weather," said Lowther. "And you can tell us all about the latest thing in fancy waistcoats!"

"The brooks are babbling through the singing rushes," said Manners; "the sky is shimmering with the golden glory of summer—"

"Oh, weally, Mannahs—"

"Come on, Gussy!" said Tom Merry, linking arms with the swell of St. Jim's. "We really want you to come for a little stroll, Gussy, old chap!"

"Pway excuse me, Tom Mewwy! I weally find it most exhaustin' to walk about in this warm summah weathah!"

"But it is ripping in the lanes—"

"It's a gweat deal more wippin' undah the shade of a twee, in my opinion, Tom Mewwy!"

"So it is," said Tom Merry immediately. "Let's take a stroll under the elms!"

"It's jolly nice in the shade there," said Lowther.

"First-rate!" said Manners. "Gussy is quite right, as he generally is!"

"Yaas, wathah! I think that you fellows will admit upon reflection that I am genevally in the wight!" said Arthur Augustus, with a nod. "But I weally don't feel inclined for a stroll at all, deah boys!"

"Let's sit on one of these nobby seats," said Manners. "It's delightfully cool and refreshing here, and we can watch the chaps on the cricket-field, too."

"Weally, I find it wathah exhaustin' to watch those chaps wunnin' about in the hot weathah!" said D'Arcy.

"Let's turn the other way, then," said Tom Merry, who was bent upon obliging. "It would be too bad if Gussy were exhausted!"

"This is wathah comfy!" said Arthur Augustus, sinking upon a seat under the shadiest of the old elms in the quadrangle. "But don't let me detain you fellows."

"Oh, you're not detainin' us!" said Tom Merry. "We want to have a little chat with you. What are you thinking of doing this afternoon?"

"Oh, I am goin' out with Blake and the othahs! I would weally wathah stay here, as I think goin' out in this weathah

is wathah exhaustin', but I suppose I must go and look aftah them!"

"Yes; they might get into mischief if they were deprived of your fatherly care!" Lowther remarked gravely.

"Yaas, wathah! You wemembah the time when we had a twip to London, deah boys, and all you fellows got lost, and made me awfully anxious?"

Tom Merry laughed.

"Yes; I remember, Gussy!"

"Why, you ass," began the incautious Manners wrathfully, "it was you who got lost, and you—"

"I uttably wufese to be alluded to as an ass!"

"Well, then, you—"

"Unless Mannahs withdwaws that extwemely obnoxious expwession, I am afwaid that it will be impos. for me to wemain in your company, deah boys!"

"I'm not going to do anything of the sort! I—"

"Then I will wefire!"

Tom Merry and Lowther glared at the unlucky Manners.

"Sit down, Gussy!"

"Unless Mannahs withdwaws—"

"He withdwaws everything—every word he's uttered!"

"No, I don't!" said Manners.

"Yes, you do, ass! You withdraw all of it, and you apologise to D'Arcy!"

"No, I don't!"

"Well, I do for you, then!" said Tom Merry. "As chief of the study, and leader of this party, I have the right to apologise for the misdeeds of any of my followers, and I hereby apologise for Manners!"

D'Arcy beamed.

"That is all wight, Tom Mewwy! Your apology is accepted, and mattahs are on their pwevious footin'!"

"My only hat!" granted Manners. "I—"

"Shut up, Manners! What the dickens do you mean by interrupting D'Arcy, when we're listening with rapt attention to his remarks?"

"Yaas, wathah! Mannahs is wathah wude, but it is extwemely pwob. that he was not bwought up to be anythin' else!" said D'Arcy.

Manners nearly exploded, but Tom Merry squeezed his arm in time. He rose from the seat.

"I think I'll go and have a look at the cricket," he said.

"I'll wait for you fellows."

And he strolled away. D'Arcy adjusted his eyeglasses and glanced languidly after him.

"Mannahs is wathah an outsidah!" he remarked. "He has newah weally tweated me with pwopah wespect! You two fellows are not much bettah, weally! As a mattah of fact, you are a set of wotten outsidahs!"

Tom Merry breathed hard through his nose.

"Gussy, old man—"

"Oh, pway don't take any exception to that wemark!" said D'Arcy. "As a wule, I twy to keep the circle of my acquaintances wathah select, not to say swaggah! But I am always willin' to twy to impwove you youngstahs!"

"Gussy, old chap!" said Tom Merry, resisting the desire that seized him to smash D'Arcy's silk hat over his head, and speaking with a sweet smile. "You're going out with Blake & Co. this afternoon, are you?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Anything on?"

"I am afwaid I can't tell you that, Tom Mewwy! You see, it's a secret."

Tom Merry and Monty Lowther exchanged glances. They were on the track at last. Whatever was the secret plan planned in Study No. 6, it was to be put into effect that afternoon, and the four Fourth-Formers were leaving the school to do it.

"Of course, you haven't any secrets from us?" said Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Now, that's rather unfriendly of you, Gussy; it is, really!"

"Is it, weally, Tom Mewwy?"

"Yes. I think you ought to let us know what's on, and perhaps we can help you in some way to carry out the idea."

D'Arcy screwed his monocle into his eye, and looked thoughtful.

"Blake told me I was not to say a word," he remarked.

"Pewwaps upon the whole I had bettah keep it dark, deah boys."

"Use your own judgment, old chap," said Monty Lowther.

"Don't allow your mighty brain to be governed by an inferior intellect!"

Arthur Augustus nodded.

"Yaas, there's somethin' in that," he remarked.

"Then what is the wheeze?"

"Well, weally—"

"Gussy! Hallo, there! What's up now?"

It was Blake's voice. Jack Blake, of Study No. 6, came

quickly towards the seat under the elms, with an extremely suspicious expression upon his face.

"Gussy, come along!"

"Oh, it's all right!" said Tom Merry affably. "We're just having a little chat with D'Arcy, and—"

"Yes, you rotters, I know!" said Blake.

"Oh, come now, Blake!"

"I wasn't tellin' them anythin'," said Arthur Augustus.

"In fact, I had just informed Tom Mewwy that you specially told me not to tell them anythin'—"

"You—you—"

"They advised me to use my own judgment, and I was just turnin' it ovah in my mind; but pwobably I should have told them nothin'."

"Come along, Gussy!"

"I am quite comfy here, thank you, Blake!"

"Possibly, but I'm not!" said Blake, seizing the swell of the School House by the shoulder and jerking him off the seat. "Haven't you ever heard, ass, that a chap who wants to keep a secret shouldn't only hide the secret, but hide the fact that he has one—eh?"

"Weally, Blake—"

"I suppose they would have wormed it all out of you in two minutes more!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Come along!"

"I wufese!"

"Ass!"

"I absolutely wufese to be chawactewised as an ass!"

"Will you come?"

"Weally—"

"Oh, come!" roared Blake.

And he put his arm through that of the swell of the School House, and marched him off.

Tom Merry and Lowther grinned at one another rather ruefully.

"Nearly had it, Monty!"

"Very nearly," said Lowther; "Blake spoiled it all. No good trying to get anything out of Blake. He's canny Yorkshire, and you might as well try to draw an oyster!"

"Still, there's Herries and Dig."

"Yes, there's a chance there. Let's get down to the cricket-field, and spot them as they come off."

"Right you are!"

And Tom Merry and Lowther joined Manners, who was standing by the ropes looking on at the cricket practice of the Fourth-Formers.

CHAPTER 3.

More Persuasion.

"HURRAH!"

"Well hit!"

"Bravo, Dig!"

The Terrible Three uttered those shouts of commendation at the top of their respective voices.

The Fourth-Formers were at practice, a New House team against a School House team, seven or eight players on either side. Digby, at the wicket, was facing Figgins's bowling, and he had just cut the ball away through the slips. It was a very, very ordinary stroke, and Digby seemed rather surprised at the roar of applause from the chums of the Shell.

He looked round from the wicket, and the Terrible Three clapped their hands in unison.

"Hurrah!"

"Well hit!"

"Bravo!"

"Oh, chuck it!" growled Digby. "What are you rotting about?"

"Blessed if I can see what you're kicking up that row

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about," remarked Gore, of the Shell. "Any kid in the Second or Third Form could have done that."

"What do you know about cricket?" asked Lowther politely.

"I know there wasn't anything in that stroke," said Gore. "Blessed if I could see anything, either," said Mellish of the Fourth.

"The things you can't see would fill an encyclopædia," said Lowther. "You can't see that you're an ass. Everybody else can see it."

Figgins was bowling again, and Digby stopped the ball dead on the crease. The Terrible Three clapped admiringly.

"Bravo!"

"Well stopped!"

"Well done, Dig!"

Digby looked round suspiciously. He had a suspicion that the chums of the Shell Form were rotting him, as he expressed it. But the hearty admiration in their faces seemed to be absolutely genuine.

"Do you call that batting, Tom Merry?" asked Pratt of the New House.

"Yes, rather!"

"You admire it, do you?"

"Didn't you hear me yell?"

"Well, all I can say, is, that you must be hard up for batsmen in your rotten House—Ow! What are you shoving me against the post for, Manners?"

"Because you're a cheeky kid," said Manners.

"Look here—"

"Oh, get off!"

Pratt got off. Figgins bowled again, and Digby hit out, and sent the ball within a couple of inches of a fieldsmen's outstretched hand.

"Hurrah!"

"Well hit!"

"Bravo!"

The chorus of admiration came from the Terrible Three again. Digby looked round at them more suspiciously than ever; and as he looked round, with his bat incautiously off the crease, the ball came in from Kerr at point, and the wicket went into pieces.

"How's that?" yelled Kerr.

"Out!"

Digby looked quickly back at his wicket in dismay. He was out. There was no controverting that patent fact. Digby looked thunderous as he came off the pitch with his bat under his arm. The Terrible Three met him with sweet smiles and congratulations.

"I say, Dig, that was ripping!"

"Splendid, old man!"

"Never saw anything like it!"

"Oh, shut up!" growled Digby.

"Eh?"

"Shut up! What are you rotting me for, you asses? You made me look round, and then Kerr stumped me."

"Really, Dig?"

"There wasn't anything in my batting!" said Dig warmly. "What do you mean?"

"Well," said Lowther, "I admit that as a rule there isn't anything in your batting—"

"Do you?" grunted Digby. "A lot you fellows know about batting, don't you?"

"Well, you see—"

"What's the little game? What were you rotting for?"

"Er—"

"Do you want me to lend you a bob, or what is it?" demanded the incensed Digby. "You have lost me my wicket with your silly rot!"

"Now, look here, Digby—"

"I'm looking, and I can see three silly asses. What the dickens did you mean by croaking out like that whenever I hit the ball, eh?"

The Terrible Three looked at one another with sickly smiles.

Digby prided himself on being a cricketer, and they had not been able to think of a surer way to his good graces than cheering his exploits at the wicket. But the plan seemed to have worked out awry somehow.

"Set of silly cuckoos, I call you!" said Digby. "You lost my wicket for me. Ought to be in a lunatic asylum, I think!"

"Oh, rats!" said Tom Merry, growing warm, too.

"Oh, Digby's right in one respect," said Monty Lowther. "Anybody who thinks his batting deserves a cheer ought to be in a lunatic asylum—"

"Right enough!" agreed Manners. "To come down to absolute facts, I never really saw such a rotten show in my life!"

"I must admit that I agree with you," said Tom Merry.

"I believe in encouraging the youngsters; but when it comes to saying that Dig can bat, I draw the line. I was brought up to be truthful."

Digby glared in speechless wrath at the Terrible Three. Then he marched on. The chums of the Shell chuckled.

"Another failure!" said Tom Merry. "There's only Herries left; and I'm beginning to think that we shall never get to the bottom of this secret at all."

"Never say die!" said Monty Lowther cheerfully. "We've tried D'Arcy and Digby, and it hasn't worked out. Blake is no good to pump. Herries may answer the purpose, but we won't go on the same lines."

"No; it's no good cheering him to soap him over," said Manners thoughtfully. "Digby is a suspicious beast, and Herries might smell a rat, too. I'll put him in a good humour by offering to take his photograph—"

"Or we might ask about his bulldog," suggested Lowther. "He's awfully proud of that horrible-looking beast."

"Good!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "But where is he? I can't see him on the field."

"He's out," said Manners. "Fatty Wynn stumped him before you came along. I think he's gone round to feed his beastly animal."

"Then let's go round, too!"

"Come on! Its our last chance for solving the mystery—"

"I say, Tom Merry—"

"Don't stop; it's only that ass, Skimpole!" said Manners. "Travel along, Skimpole, old chap; we're busy now."

But Herbert Skimpole planted himself in the path of the Terrible Three, and they had to stop.

"I want to speak to you—"

"Oh, go on," said Tom Merry good-naturedly.

CHAPTER 4.

No News!

SKIMPOLE dived a hand into the breast-pocket of his jacket, and drew forth a huge pocket-book, and felt behind his ear for a pencil. He wetted the pencil with his tongue, and opened the notebook.

The chums of the Shell watched this proceeding curiously. "I accidentally overheard your last remark, Manners," said Skimpole.

"Eh?" said Manners.

"You were speaking about solving a mystery—"

"Was I?"

"Yes, you were. Pray do not attempt to delude me. That is quite impossible with a fellow of my superior mental attainments. You were speaking of solving a mystery. I should be glad to lend you my assistance—free of cost to yourself."

Tom Merry laughed.

Skimpole, the brainy man of the Shell at St. Jim's, was a Socialist of the reddest of red-hot hues; but he also fancied himself as an amateur detective. There was nothing, in fact, to which he did not consider his brain equal—and, indeed, it was a very large brain, to judge by the size of his forehead, which was abnormal.

It was an open question in the School House whether Skimpole the Socialist or Skimpole the detective was the funnier merchant of the two.

"Solving a mystery is just in my line," said Skimpole. "If there is anything beyond the grasp of your average brains, my dear fellows, don't hesitate to engage my professional aid. I shall charge you nothing."

"My dear ass—"

"Come! Better let me have the details," said Skimpole, wetting his pencil again. "I have nothing particular to do this afternoon, except to write out a new chapter of my book, and I may as well take up this case."

Lowther grinned.

"Well, there's no harm in letting the ass into it," he remarked. "It's the Case of the Mysterious Hamper, Skimpole."

Skimpole jotted down in his notebook, in a sprawling hand: "Case of the Mysterious Hamper—Notes." Then he sucked his pencil again.

"Go on! Let me have all the details, please!"

"The problem is—given a hamper—to find out what was in it when it was received by Blake from his uncle in America," said Tom Merry.

"Can you produce the hamper?"

"Yes! Lowther's got it in his waistcoat pocket."

"Pray, do not be funny, Merry. I am taking up this case seriously. If the hamper cannot be produced, that is an important point."

"The hamper is in the box-room in the School House. It was shoved there after Blake had unpacked it."

"I must examine the hamper, and probably I shall find a clue to the contents." Skimpole closed his notebook. "I will immediately proceed to the box-room, and I will let you know later the result of my investigations."

And Skimpole hurried off. The chums of the Shell, grinning, resumed their way. The building where the pets of the St. Jim's boys were kept—known in the school as the "menagerie"—was behind the New House. The Terrible Three arrived there in a few minutes, and there, sure enough, they found Herries, feeding his bulldog.

Herries's bulldog was as ugly-looking a brute as could have been found in the length and breadth of England, but its owner was all the prouder of it on this account. Herries had frequently got into trouble for keeping the bulldog in his study, against the House rules. But it was not only the masters who were down on the bulldog being introduced into No. 6. Blake, Digby, and D'Arcy unanimously backed up the authorities on that point.

"Hallo, Herries!" said Tom Merry blandly. "Feeding Towser, I see."

"Yes!" said Herries.

"Fine dog!" said Lowther.

"Jolly fine!"

"You ought to be proud of him!" said Manners.

"I am!"

"He's quite well, isn't he?" said Tom Merry.

"Quite! My dog is never ill. If he were ill, I should take him into the School House to look after him; and Blake and the rest could go hang!" said Herries.

"Right-ho!" exclaimed Tom Merry heartily. "Blake and the rest could go hang! What right have they to interfere with a fellow and his bulldog?"

"What right, indeed?" said Lowther.

"I should say so!" remarked Manners.

Herries looked at them.

"What are you gassing about?" he demanded. "I suppose Blake, and Dig, and D'Arcy can do as they like without you chaps shoving your oar in, can't they?"

The Terrible Three smiled a sickly smile. This was rather discouraging. It seemed as difficult to soap Herries as to soap Digby.

"Yes, of course," said Tom Merry. "I don't say they're not right to refuse to have a bulldog in the study—"

"Don't you? Well, I do."

"I agree with Herries," said Lowther, with a reproving glance at Tom Merry. "If a fellow can't keep a bulldog in his own study, in whose study can he keep it?"

"That's so," agreed Manners. "Herries is quite justified in sticking up for his rights."

"Look here, what are you getting at?" demanded Herries unexpectedly.

"Getting at!" repeated Manners, rather taken aback.

"Yes. What are you getting at? What's all this gas about, anyway? Blessed if I can see what you're driving at, unless you want to borrow something."

"If that's your idea of politeness, Herries—"

"Well, don't bother."

The chums of the Shell were silent. Herries went on feeding his bulldog, and the bulldog went on eating. There seemed to be no limit to Towser's capacity in that line.

"Are you going to take Towser out with you this afternoon?" asked Tom Merry, struck by a new idea. Herries looked up quickly.

"Who told you we were going out this afternoon?" he asked.

"I thought you were."

"Well, then, don't you think about it," said Herries.

"Look here, Herries, it seems to me that you're looking for trouble," said Lowther, getting rather warm.

"Oh, rats!" said Herries.

"If you want a thick ear—"

"If you want Towser to take a lump out of you—"

"Oh, I say, we may as well be off!" said Tom Merry. "No good staying here talking to this pig!"

"Well, no; and it's a bit below our dignity to hang about with Fourth-Formers," Manners remarked.

"I was just thinking so," observed Lowther. "We've got the position of the Shell to think of."

"Oh, go and eat cake!" said Herries.

The Terrible Three walked away. They were looking chagrined; they could not help it. The attempt to get the secret out of Herries had been a greater failure than the previous ones. The only crumb of information they had received had been obtained from D'Arcy.

"The beast was on his guard," said Manners. "I suppose Blake had spoken to him and warned him that we were on the track."

"Shouldn't wonder."

"What I want to know is," said Lowther aggressively,

"what's the good of Tom Merry's persuasive methods? Seems to me—"

"Oh, don't start grouching!" said Tom Merry. "We're not done yet. We know from Gussy that Blake's wheeze, whatever it is, is going to be carried out this afternoon, and that they're going away from St. Jim's to do it."

"That's so."

"Well, then, we've only got to watch them, and we shall be able to follow on their track and run them down to their giddy lair."

"Well, that ought to be easy enough," said Manners thoughtfully. "I suppose if we hang round the School House door we can't miss them going out?"

"That's the wheeze."

"Then let's get on the watch at once."

And the chums of the Shell returned to the School House, and sat in a row on the stone balustrade of the School House steps. It was pretty certain that the chums of Study No. 6 could not leave the House now without the three being aware of it.

CHAPTER 5.

Skimpole Investigates.

"W EALLY, Blake—"

"Oh, don't talk to me!" said Blake crossly. "You were going to let out the whole bag of tricks if I hadn't come up in time to stop you."

"I wefuse to admit that I should have let out the whole bag of tricks. I was goin' to use my own judgment about the mattah."

"And what do you mean by using your own judgment when you haven't got any? Ain't I the leader of this study?" demanded Blake excitedly.

"Well, yaas, that is certainly the case, deah boy; but weally—"

"But you're an ass, and you haven't sense enough to go in when it rains—"

"I wefuse to be chawactewised as an ass. I uttahly wefuse to submit to anythin' of the sort."

"Ass!"

"Unless you cease to apply that extwemely oppwobwious expression to me, Blake, I shall have no alternative but to administrah a feahful thwashin', or else to drowp your fwendship."

"Dummy!"

"I wegard the term dummy as equally oppwobwious, and my remarks apply to that term also. Upon the whole, I think I had bettah leave you till you are in a bettah tempah," said D'Arcy, with a great deal of dignity. "I will wefire fwom the study—"

"That you won't."

"I beg your pardon, Blake!"

"You ought to. But you're not going out of this study until we're ready for the expedition to Rylcombe Wood," said Blake flatly. And he crossed to the door and locked it, and took out the key. D'Arcy watched this proceeding through his eyeglass, with growing indignation in his countenance.

"What does this mean, Blake?" he asked, in his most stately manner.

"It means that you are not going out of this study."

"I wefuse to be kept a pwisonah!"

"You can refuse till you're black in the face," said Blake. "I don't mind your refusing, as far as that goes. But you're not going out of this study till we're ready for the expedition."

"Blake, I wegard this conduct as unfwriendly—"

"I don't mind."

"I shall drowp your acquaintance—"

"Go hon!"

"I wegard you as a wude wottah."

"You can regard me as anything you like, Gussy, but I'm not going to have our little secret gassed all over the School House," said Blake. "It won't be long now. Those duffers ought to be here. Get the straps fastened round that bag while you're waiting."

"I wefuse to fasten the stwaps wound that bag."

"Then don't."

"Pway unlock that door, Blake."

"Rats!"

"I twust," said D'Arcy, with emphasis, as he slightly pushed back his immaculate cuffs—"I twust you will not compel me to pwceed to violence!"

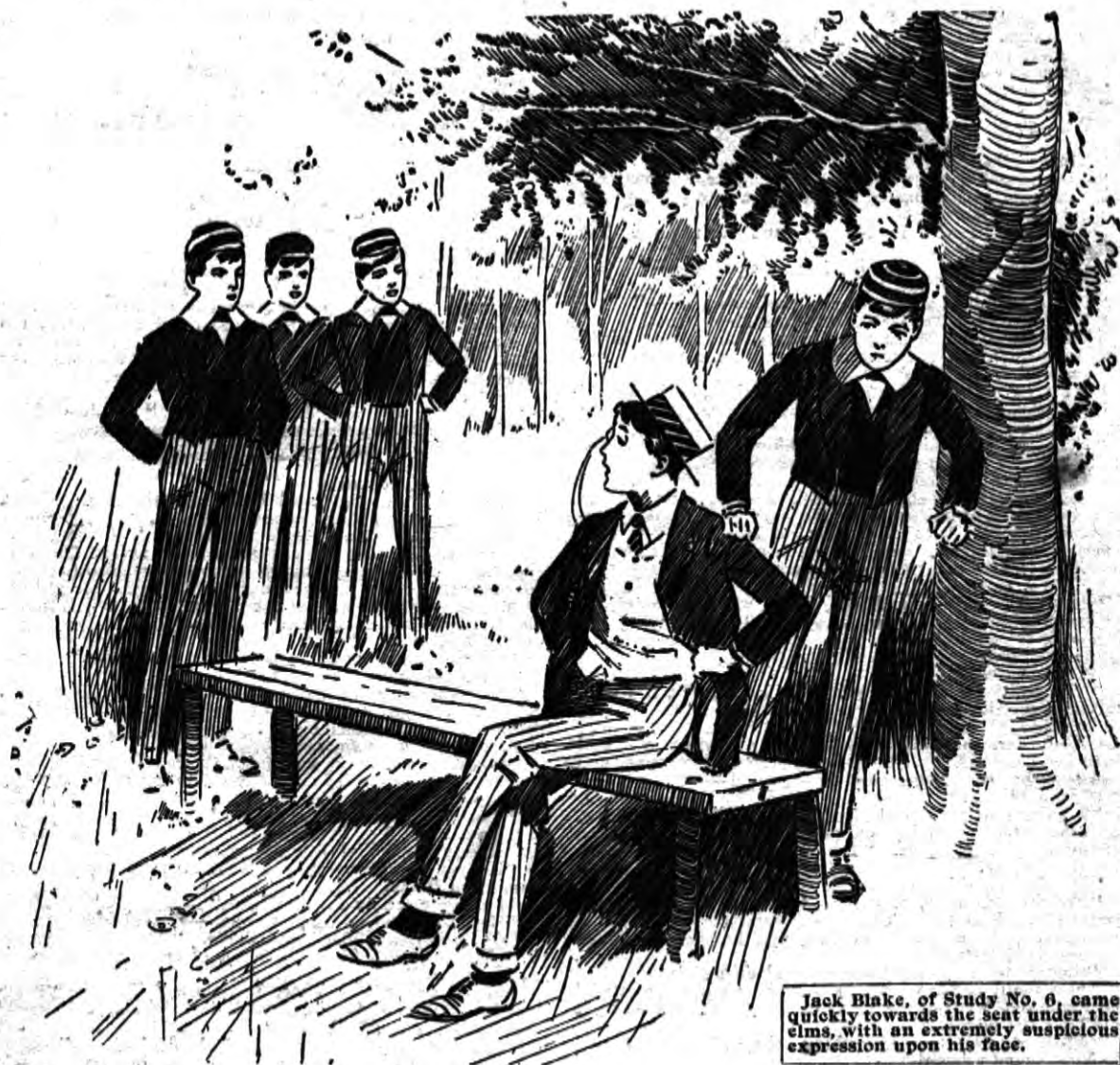
Blake grinned.

"If you want to be used as a duster, Gussy, I'm just in the humour for you," he said. "Come on, and I'll wipe up the floor with you."

"I shall be sowwy to use violence towards a gentleman whom I have always wegard as a fwend," said D'Arcy

NEXT
THURSDAY;

A DOUBLE-LENGTH TALE OF TOM MERRY.



Jack Blake, of Study No. 6, came quickly towards the seat under the elms, with an extremely suspicious expression upon his face.

slowly. "But my dig. demands it in this case. Unless you immediately open the door, I shall have no alternative but to thwack you."

There was a sound at the door of a hand trying it, and then a powerful kick on the lower panels.

"Open this beastly door! What the dickens have you got this rotten door locked for?"

It was the voice of Digby. Blake unlocked the door and opened it, and Digby entered the study, in his cricketing things, with his bat under his arm, and looking amazed.

"What the dickens—"

"You've come just in time," gasped Blake.

"Just in time for what?"

"To save me from being pulverised. Gussy was going to give me a fearful thrashing if I didn't unlock the door; and I wasn't going to unlock it. He—"

"I should have been sowwy to use violence," said D'Arcy.

"But my dig—"

"He wants to go and blab about our little game all over the school," explained Blake. "He nearly let it all out to those rotters in the Shell—"

"Weally, Blake!"

"So I was keeping him confined as a dangerous lunatic—"

"I wefuse to be alluded to as a dangewous lunatic."

"They've been trying to pump me," said Digby. "The rotters know there's something on, because we've kept dark what was in the hamper, I suppose."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"They'll be watching us, I suppose," said Blake. "Have you seen Herries? He can't be still batting?"

"No; he was out before me. He's gone round to feed that beastly bulldog of his."

"They'll be trying to pump him, too, and he's an ass—"

"Is he?" said Herries, coming into the study. "Not such an ass as some people—"

"My dear chap, you're getting mixed. You should say not such an ass as some person. Some people is plural—"

"Well, that sounds wrong, anyway," said Digby. "You should say some people are plural—"

"If you're going to start teaching me grammar, Digby—"

"Well, you could do with it. But to come back to the topic, Herries is an ass, and I expect Tom Merry has been pumping him—"

"They've been trying to soap me," grinned Herries.

"But it wouldn't work. I saw them sitting in a row outside the house as I came in."

Blake frowned.

"Watching for us, of course."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We shall have to shift them, somehow," said Blake thoughtfully. "If they followed us when we left the school, they would get on to the wheeze at once."

"I don't see how—"

Digby stopped as the door was pushed a little wider open, and a large head and a pair of spectacles came into view from the passage. Skimpole blinked at the chums of Study No. 6.

"Ah! I did not know you were here! I—"

"Well, now you know, you can travel further on," said Blake kindly. "We haven't any time for Socialism now."

**NEXT
THURSDAY:**

"SKIMPOLE'S FANCIES."

**A Double-Length Tale
of Tom Merry.**

"I am not thinking of Socialism at the present moment," said Skimpole. "I am pursuing the avocation of—"
 "You are pursuing what?"
 "The avocation—"
 "What is that? Some animal?"
 "My dear Blake—"
 "Well, go on pursuing it, old fellow. Don't let us detain you."

"Yaas, wathah!"
 "I am pursuing the avocation of an amateur detective," said Skimpole, unheeding. "I have had a case put into my hands by Tom Merry—"

"Then get on with it, Skimmy, and don't waste time talking," said Digby.

"I have examined the hamper in the box-room—"

"What!" roared Blake.

"I have examined the hamper in the box-room—"

"What are you investigating for Tom Merry, then?"

"The case of the Mysterious Hamper. I have examined the hamper in the box-room, and have come to the conclusion—"

"What have you discovered by examining the hamper?" asked Blake, his hand sliding towards a round ebony ruler on the table.

"Nothing," said Skimpole. "I confess that, with my—my unusual brain power, I have discovered nothing by my examination of the hamper. This is undoubtedly owing to the fact that the hamper is empty. But, of course, I am able to make a deduction from the fact that I have discovered nothing. It is evident to me that you have concealed whatever it was that the hamper contained, and that therefore there is some dark secret—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You may laugh now, Blake, but it will turn out to be no laughing matter for you, I expect. The best thing you can do is to confess."

Blake stared.

"Confess what?"

"The guilty secret. If your uncle in America has committed a murder—"

"A what?"

"A murder, and hidden the body in a hamper, and sent it to England to escape the consequences of his crime, and you have buried it somewhere in the quad—"

"My only hat!"

"I know that your uncle lives on a ranch in Wyoming, and that people who live on ranches frequently shoot one another," said Skimpole. "I have read all about that."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It is no laughing matter."

"My dear Skimmy, if you go to stories for your facts, you will be bound to succeed as a detective," said Blake solemnly. "As a matter of fact, the hamper contained several dead bodies."

Skimpole took his notebook out and opened it.

"It is really better to make a clean breast of the matter," he remarked, wetting the point of his pencil. "Please let me have the details."

"Shall we tell him everything, chaps?" asked Blake, looking round solemnly.

"Better own up," said Digby.

"Right-ho," said Herries. "No good trying to keep anything hidden when that deadly blughound is on the track."

"Yaas, wathah."

"Very well, then," said Blake resignedly, "there were three dead bodies in the hamper. Got that down, Skimmy?"

"Certainly. Go on."

"They were closely packed in cotton-wool, and tied up with pink ribbon."

Skimpole looked up.

"The bodies were all there with the exception of the heads, legs, arms, and trunks, which had evidently been cut off by the dastardly assassin."

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Digby.

Skimpole closed his book with a bang.

"If you are going to be funny, Blake—"

"I'm perfectly serious," said Blake. "The hamper also contained a large quantity of stolen jewellery, tastefully stained with blood, and a couple of missing wills. The rest of the contents were—"

"I shall continue to investigate this case," said Skimpole. "You cannot put me off the scent in this matter. I've given you a chance to confess—"

"Well, haven't I done it?"

"Now the law will have to take its course," said Skimpole majestically. And he walked out of the study.

The chums of Study No. 6 chuckled gleefully.

"Tom Merry is welcome to all the information he can get from Skimpole," grinned Blake. "But it's a bit more serious about their sitting on the steps outside and watching

for us to go out. We shall have to shift them somehow. By Jove, I've got it!"

"Got what?"

"The way to do it. Figgins & Co."

"What about Figgins & Co.?"

"Come on, and you'll see."

And Blake led the way from the School House, followed by his somewhat mystified chums.

CHAPTER 6.

On the Watch.

TOM MERRY, Manners, and Lowther were still sitting in a row on the stone balustrade outside the School House when the chums of the Fourth came out. They seemed to be deeply interested in a conversation they were holding among themselves, and did not observe the Fourth-Formers. Blake was pretty certain that it was all humbug, however, and he bestowed a glare upon them as he came out. Manners was speaking, and he went on without changing his tone.

"If Monty had moved up his rook, it wouldn't have made the slightest difference. You see, my queen's bishop was at rook's fourth."

"Now, look here, Monty—"

"Look here, Manners—"

"Talking chess, eh?" said Blake, stopping and fixing a basilisk eye on the chums of the Shell.

"Yes," said Tom Merry genially. "Manners and Lowther are playing an old game over again. Manners had Lowther checkmate in three moves, and Lowther had Manners checkmate in four moves, so the result would have been interesting, as well as something novel, only I mated them both by upsetting the chess-table."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I should have fixed Lowther in the next move."

"I had Manners already fixed."

"Only thinking about chess, eh?" said Blake pleasantly.

"Not sitting on this balustrade to watch for anybody to come out of the School House?"

Tom Merry looked amazed.

"My dear chap," he exclaimed, "what on earth should we want to sit on this balustrade for to watch for anybody to come out of the School House?"

"You might be watching for us."

"Nonsense! You exaggerate your importance in the House, my boy," said Tom Merry, very loftily.

"Do you mean to say you weren't watching for us?"

demanded Blake.

"I don't mean to say anything."

"If you had moved up your rook—"

"Oh, stop that piffle!" said Blake. "You can't take me in! You're sitting here like a lot of crows on a fence to watch for us."

"It's a guilty conscience, I suppose," Tom Merry remarked. "You know you'll not bear watching, and so—"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"If I had moved up my rook, I should have—"

"You'd have had it whipped off by my queen's bishop—"

"Oh, blow your queen's bishop!"

"Oh, come on, kids," said Blake, "I can't stand this piffle!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The Fourth-Formers went down the steps. Tom Merry slipped off the balustrade, but Manners and Lowther did not move. They had commenced that chess argument in order to keep up an appearance of being interested in matters of their own when the four Fourth-Formers came out. But they had already grown excited over it. It was an old question, which could never be quite settled, as Tom Merry had upset the chess-table before the game was finished, and the two contestants could not agree exactly as to where the pieces had been.

"Come on, you chaps," said Tom Merry.

"If I had moved up my rook—"

"You couldn't have moved up your rook!"

"I tell you—"

"And I tell you—"

"I had you mated in three—"

"Bosh! I had you mated in four—"

"Will you come?" shouted Tom Merry, seizing Manners by the ankles, and jerking him off. "Now, then!"

"You ass!" roared Manners, as he bumped on the steps.

"You're nearly broken my bones, you dangerous maniac!"

"Serve you right for chattering chess when your lawful lord and master is calling you," said Tom Merry severely.

"Now, then, Monty!"

He turned to Monty Lowther to serve him in the same way, but Monty jumped down in time. Manners rubbed himself ruefully.

"All the same, I had Lowther mate in three——"

"I had you mate in four——"

"Shut up! We've got to checkmate Study No. 6 in one," said Tom Merry. "Follow your uncle, and stop arguing!" The Terrible Three went down the steps. Blake, Herries, Dig, and D'Arcy were crossing the quadrangle. Blake was carrying a large travelling-bag in his hand, and Herries had a portmanteau, and Digby a bundle with straps round it. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy carried nothing but a light cane.

"They're going out, and they've got their props with them," said Tom Merry. "I'll wager that what they're carrying is what was in the hamper."

"Most likely."

"They're going out—by Jove, they're not, though! They're going to the New House," said Tom Merry, looking extremely puzzled.

"So they are, by Jove!"

"Is it possible that they're going to take Figgins & Co. into the wheeze, and leave us out?" exclaimed Manners, in amazement.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Not likely! They're more up against the New House than they are against us. I don't quite catch on."

"There! They're talking to Figgins!"

"Yes, I can see they are."

The Terrible Three watched their rivals in surprise and doubt. Figgins, Kerr, and Fatty Wynn—otherwise known as Figgins & Co.—had come off the cricket-field, and were still in their white flannels. Blake had stopped them when he came up to the group of New House juniors, and was talking to Figgins in the most friendly way.

"Blessed if I understand it," said Tom Merry.

"Figgy's looking at us," said Lowther, as the eye of the chief of the New House juniors was turned upon him.

"Blake's telling him about it, I suppose."

"Anyway, they're not going out without us knowing," said Tom Merry determinedly. "Let's get down to the gates, and we can wait there for them."

"Right you are!"

The Terrible Three walked down to the gates. They glanced back as they reached the old stone arch, and saw that Figgins & Co., and the chums of Study No. 6 were looking after them, and laughing.

CHAPTER 7.

Figgins Lends a Hand.

"FIGGY, old son——"

That was how Jack Blake greeted the New House junior when he spoke to him, and Figgins looked at him suspiciously.

"What's the little game?" he demanded. "You're growing remarkably affectionate all of a sudden."

Blake laughed.

"I want you chaps to do me a favour," he said.

Fatty Wynn was already glancing at the bags the Fourth-Formers were carrying. There was a greedy glimmer in the eyes of Fatty Wynn.

"I think I can understand what you mean, Blake," he remarked, "and we'll be very pleased indeed. I can answer for myself, anyway."

"Can you?" said Blake, staring. "You must be a blessed thought-reader to know what I want you to do, anyway."

Fatty Wynn chuckled.

"Oh, as soon as I saw those bags, I guessed!"

"Did you?" said Blake, rather grimly.

"Yes. You're going to have a picnic in the woods, and you want us to come along with you," said Fatty Wynn genially. "And I, for one, wouldn't think of refusing."

"Catch Fatty refusing a feed," grinned Figgins. "But I think you're a bit wide of the mark this time, Fatty."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I fancy so," said Blake. "There's no picnic on this time. It's not grub we've got in these bags. Sorry if I've made your mouth water, Fatty."

Fatty Wynn looked extremely disappointed.

"I don't see what you wanted to come hinting at a picnic for if you're not giving one," he grunted. "It's not fair to me."

"I didn't hint at it."

"Well, that's how I understood you, anyway. I think that, under the circumstances, the least you can do is to stand a feed in the school shop."

"Feeds are off, my plump pippin. What I want you to do is this——"

"Oh, cheese it, Fatty!" said Kerr. "Anybody would think we starved in the New House, from the way you go about like a ravening wolf."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I seldom get enough to eat," said Fatty. "I get so hungry in this June weather, too. I've been playing cricket since dinner, and I had very little dinner—only a couple of cold veal-and-ham pies, besides the dinner in hall, and a few tarts and cakes afterwards at the tuckshop."

"Poor chap! You must be famishing," said Blake sympathetically. "There was a sardine left in our study after tea yesterday. It fell on the floor somewhere, and we forgot to pick it up. You can go and look for it if you like, and if you find it you can have it—all of it."

"Bai Jove——"

"What are those Shell bounders watching us for?" asked Figgins, noticing the Terrible Three at this point. "Is anything on?"

"That's it," grinned Blake. "That's what I was going to ask you, Figgins. Will you do me a favour; something quite in your line, and up against those Shell bounders? You ought to stand by your own Form against the Shell, though you belong to that measly New House——"

"That what?"

"That ancient and honourable branch of the College of St. James," said Blake.

"That's better. Well, we don't mind lending you kids a helping hand," said Figgins condescendingly. "What trouble are you in now?"

"Those Shell bounders know we are going out on a little expedition, and they've got a wheeze of tracking us down like a set of giddy detectives."

"Oh, I see!"

"They're going down to the gate now," said Kerr.

"Yes, they're going there to wait for us to go out."

"You want us to stop them?" asked Figgins.

Jack Blake nodded.

"Yes, rather! You could do it easily enough. Follow us out of the gate, and when those rotters start after us, go for them. Wipe up the road with them, and sock into them; let them have it fairly in the neck; anything you like, so long as they don't follow on our track."

"Right you are," grinned Figgins. "But what's the wheeze? What are they following you around for?"

"That's a little secret."

"Oh, keep your giddy secrets! We'll stop those rotters, if you like. It will be one up against the School House, anyway."

"One up against the Shell Form, you mean?"

"Oh, put it how you like!" said Figgins. "We'll do it."

"Good! We'll do as much for you some time," said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! I should be most happy to do anything in my powah to weturn this gweat favah Figgins is doin' us," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "If you evah want any instruction in cwicket, eithah battin' or bowlin', I shall be vewy pleased to put you up to a w'inkle, Figgins."

Figgins glared at the obliging swell of the School House.

"Thank you, Gussy! And if at any time you particularly want a thick ear, just come over and repeat your offer——"

"Weally, Figgins——"

"Oh, ring off, ass!"

"I wufuse to wing off, and I decline to be called an ass. Blake, stop pullin' my arm! I decline to leave this spot until Figgins has apologised."

"Do you?" said Blake.

"Take his other arm, Herries!"

"Right-ho!"

"Pway wleaze me——"

"Thank you very much, Figgy! We rely on you. Now come on, chaps, and sprit!"

The chums of Study No. 6 sprinted towards the gates. D'Arcy had to go with them whether he liked it or not. They passed out into Rylcombe Lane, and, as they expected, found the Terrible Three sitting on the fence opposite in a row, waiting for them.

"There they are," said Blake, with a sniff. "Setting up in the crow line again. Never mind; we can depend on Figgins."

"Yaas, wathah! Upon the whole, as he is goin' to do us this favah, I will not thwash Figgins."

The Fourth-Formers walked down the lane. The Terrible Three slipped from the fence. At the same moment Figgins & Co. came out of the gate, and stopped in the path of the chums of the Shell.

"Hold on!" said Figgins blandly.

Tom Merry stared at him.

"What do you want?"

"Nothing."

"Get out of the way then!"

"Sorry, but it can't be did."

"Don't be an ass, Figgins!" said Tom Merry. "We're in a hurry. We're not looking for a House row just now."

"Then you've found one without looking for it," grinned Figgins.

Tom Merry frowned. As a rule he did not go about avoiding rows, exactly. But just now the forms of the chums of Study No. 6 were disappearing down the lane, and he saw the discovery of the secret growing more and more difficult as they vanished.

"Now, look here, Figgins, we're in a hurry——"

"Are you really?"

"Let us pass, you silly rotters!" broke out Lowther. "By Jupiter, if you don't get out of the way we'll wipe up the road with you!"

"Good!" said Figgins. "Start the wiping. We're waiting for it."

"Yearning for it," said Kerr.

"Rather!" grinned Fatty Wynn.

"Get out of the way!"

"Rata!"

"Come on, chaps!" said Tom Merry.

The Terrible Three rushed on. They tried to avoid the New House trio, but Figgins & Co. were not to be avoided. In a moment more the six juniors were grasping one another, and staggering to and fro in the dusty lane in breathless combat.

Blake looked back from the bend of the lane, far ahead, and chuckled.

"Good old Figg!" he exclaimed. "They're at it. It doesn't matter which side gets licked; we're all right now. Let's cut through the wood here, and Tom Merry will never be able to find the track."

"Yaas, wathah!"

The chums of Study No. 6 disappeared into the dusky depths of the wood. Meanwhile, Figgins & Co. and the Terrible Three were having a terrible tussle.

The New House juniors were determined to keep their word to Blake, and the chums of the Shell were determined to pass, and so there could not fail to be a really terrific encounter. The clouds of dust that arose from the trampling feet formed a sort of veil round the combatants, in the midst of which they wrestled and struggled and gasped, with red faces and panting breath.

"You rotters——"

"You asses——"

"School House cads——"

"New House beasts——"

"You're not going to pass——"

"Yes, we are!"

"Yah!"

"Rata!"

These and other similar complimentary expressions were jerked out from time to time as the juniors swayed and wrestled. Upon the whole, weight was on the side of the chums of the Shell. Fatty Wynn was the first down. He went down with his back in the dust, and Manners sitting on his chest, and Fatty wriggled and gasped.

"Now then, are you giving in?" demanded Manners.

"No!" gasped Fatty Wynn, with true Welsh determination never to admit that he was beaten. "No, I don't!"

"Then I'll sit on your chest till you do," said Manners.

Lowther was down next, and Kerr sat on him to keep him there. Tom Merry and Figgins were wrestling desperately, but Figgins's foot slipped at last, and he was over. Down he went, and Tom Merry pinned him down with his knee.

"Done you!" gasped the hero of the Shell.

"Rotter!"

"Beast!"

Figgins burst into a gasping laugh. Figgins always knew how to take an adverse turn of fortune cheerfully.

"Yes, we're done!" he gasped. "We'll make it pax if you will, Merry. We've stopped you, anyway, and you'll never get on the track after all this time, and that's what we wanted."

Tom Merry rose to his feet.

"It's pax, kids."

The struggle ceased. Looking extremely dusty and dishevelled, the juniors rose out of the dusty lane, and grinned ruefully at one another.

"Well, you are a nice set of scarecrows, and no mistake," said Monty Lowther, looking round.

"What price yourself?" demanded Kerr. "You wouldn't exactly take a beauty prize at this moment."

"Well, we've licked you New House wasters——"

"That you haven't," said Kerr promptly. "Figgins made it pax because he took pity on you. If you like to start again we're ready."

"Oh, rats!"

"What I say is——"

"Oh, cheese it!" said Tom Merry. "We've all had enough, I think. I feel as if I had been through a mowing-machine, and Figgins wouldn't fetch twopenny from any rag-merchant that knew his business. I suppose Blake & Co. put you asses up to this, didn't they?"

Figgins grinned.

"We promised to stop you if you followed them," he remarked; "and we've done it."

"Yes, you ass, and now we sha'n't be able to get on to the jape. I suppose you know all about it, though—what those kids have got on this afternoon."

"Yes, Blake had flannels, and D'Arey a silk hat, and——"

"Don't be an ass! I mean, the wheeze they have got on."

"No, we don't know."

"You might have found out if you'd joined us instead of going for us like a set of lunatics," said Tom Merry. "Now it's too late."

"May be a chance yet," said Lowther. "Let's go on and see."

"Come on, then."

The Terrible Three ran on up the lane, to look for traces of the Fourth-Formers, and Figgins & Co. looked at one another. Figgins was looking very thoughtful.

"There's something in what Tom Merry says," he remarked. "If Blake has some wheeze on, we ought to get on to it. It seems to me that we've been rather done by that boulder Blake, come to think of it."

And the Co. nodded assent.

CHAPTER 8.

The Redskins.

JACK BLAKE halted under the foliage of the great beech-trees, and threw down his bag upon the thick, rich grass.

"This place will about suit us," he remarked.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Lonely enough," observed Digby, looking round. The spot did, indeed, seem lonely. It was in the heart of the wood, where the great trees grew thickly with intertwined branches, round a small ferny glade. In the glade stood the ruins of an old forester's hut, tumbling to decay. The spot was far removed from the haunts of men; but it was well known to the St. Jim's juniors. They had helped, on a never-to-be-forgotten occasion, to capture a desperate character who had taken refuge in that ruined hut, and on another occasion Tom Merry had camped there.

"Good!" said Herries. "We sha'n't be spotted here. I say, I wish we had brought my bulldog."

"I don't," said Blake.

"He would be jolly useful now. You remember Tom Merry had him the time he camped in that little wooden hut——"

"Yaas, wathah! But we don't require a beastly bulldog now, Hewies, old man. That beast of yours is a nice animal to keep away from, as a mattah of fact."

"A lot you know about bulldogs," said Herries disdainfully. "Besides, we ought to have him to keep watch for us, in case we're surprised here."

"If anybody surprises us, he'll get surprised himself when we've got our warpaint on," chuckled Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Blake commenced to unstrap the bag.

"Let's get to business," he remarked. "It will take us some time to get up in the Indian rig, and—— My hat! I forgot to bring a looking-glass!"

"That is all wight, Blake!"

"No, it isn't! How are we to make up without a looking-glass?"

"What I mean is, I've got one in my pocket," said Arthur Augustus, opening a little leather case. "I nevah twalah without my pocket miwwah."

Blake grinned.

"Well, even a silly ass may be of some use sometimes," he remarked. "Stick it on that tree, Gussy."

"I object to that remark."

"Go on objecting, then. Stick the glass on that tree. Here are the things. Don't they look ripping?"

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"By Jove! Yes!"

Any casual observer would certainly have been astonished by the contents of the bags, now they were turned out on the grass.

The mysterious hamper, which had excited so much curiosity at St. Jim's, had been known to contain a present for Blake from his uncle on a Western American ranch. But what the present was, only the chums of Study No. 6 knew, and they had kept the secret. Blake's uncle was a believer in outdoor training, and he had sent his nephew a present that Jack valued probably more than anything else he could have received. It was a complete outfit of Red Indian garb, and weapons and war-paint. The sight of them had filled the hearts of the Fourth-Formers with delight, and they had waited for the first half-holiday for a chance to carry out their plans. To garb themselves as Redskins, and camp in the woods, was a novel and attractive idea.

The Head's permission had first been obtained, and Dr. Holmes, after some thought, had given it. The present adventure was only an experiment, and the chums of Study No. 6 hoped to obtain permission later for a more extensive excursion, camping out for several days at a time.

Blake lifted up a pair of leggings adorned with beads and coloured feathers, with moccasins to match. His eyes danced as he looked at them.

"Ripping!" he exclaimed.

"Got the paint there?" asked Digby.

"Yes, and plenty of it."

"Bai Jove, are you thinkin' of paintin' our faces, Blake?"

"Yes, ass! How would white faces go with Indian clothes?"

"Yaas. But, I say—"

"What's the trouble now?"

"I was thinkin' about my complexion—"

"Hang your complexion!"

"That's all vewy well, Blake, but I can't put on my face anythin' that would be likely to damage the skin. I'm expectin' my Cousin Ethel down soon at St. Jim's, and I don't want her to see me lookin' a fright."

"Why not? It wouldn't be anything new."

"Weally, Blake, I object to that remark. If you mean to imply that I have looked a fright on previous occasions, I can only say—"

"Rats!"

"I can only say—"

"Oh, ring off, Gussy! Life's too short for all your remarks! The paint won't hurt your face, and it doesn't matter if it does. Surely that's enough to satisfy any reasonable mortal!"

"Oh, vewy well!"

"Exactly. Get on with the washing."

"But surely we haven't to wash our faces before puttin' the paint on?"

"Ass!"

"We shall wash them aftahwards!"

"I mean, get to business!" roared Blake.

"Oh, weally! If you'd say what you mean, Blake, it would save a gweat deal of time."

"Get your things off, kids," said Blake. "Better shove them into the hut for safety. It would be no joke if somebody came along and collared them while we were dressed up as Redskins."

"Ha, ha! You're right!"

"Nobody's likely to come along here," said Herries. "But I wish I'd brought my bulldog. He'd have guarded the clothes."

"So he would. You can go and fetch him if you like," said Blake affably.

To which remark Herries deigned no reply. It was a walk of three miles to St. Jim's. The juniors removed their outer clothing, and the garments were placed inside the ruined hut. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy carefully folded his trousers and waistcoat and jacket, and laid his silk hat tenderly on the pile.

Then the metamorphosis commenced.

The juniors drew on the Indian garments, which fitted them, as Digby said, where they touched. But Blake remarked that you couldn't expect a Bond Street fit in redskin garments, which was certainly true.

Blake's uncle had sent him an outfit sufficient for a dozen young Redskins, but only sufficient for four had been brought along by the chums of Study No. 6. If others were to be admitted to the wheeze, that would come later, and then the rest of the outfits would come in useful. There were spears, in sections, which the juniors now fitted together, and blunt tomahawks and wooden knives for scalp-purposes.

It was not an easy task to array themselves in Indian garb for the first time. But they finished at last, lending each other assistance with the unaccustomed garments.

D'Arcy's little mirror was not of much use for viewing the tout ensemble, but it came in useful when they commenced to paint their faces. Daubed with red and yellow ochre, the four juniors gradually assumed a ferocious aspect calculated to strike terror into the hearts of their enemies.

"My only hat!" said Blake, staring at Digby when he was finished. "If it wasn't for your hair parted on one side, I should take you for a giddy Indian out of Buffalo Bill's show."

"Ha, ha! You look the same, except for your ears!"

"What's the matter with my ears?"

"Well, as a rule, Red Indians don't have white ears."

"My hat! I'd forgotten them! Give them a touch for me, will you?"

"How do I look, deah boys?"

"Ripping Gussy! You look ever so much better with the paint on your face. It hides your real appearance splendidly, and, of course, that's an improvement."

"Weally, Blake—"

"You would frighten a wooden image with that chivvy now, Gussy. But you haven't got your hair done in the proper Blackfoot style."

"I am goin' to put on a head-dress, you know."

"Yes; but you must have your hair done first. You can't leave that nobby little curl over the forehead."

"I don't want that interfered with, Blake. I am afraid that the effect of it would be spoiled, and I want to look nice when my cousin—"

"You can't spoil the effect of this redskin business simply for the sake of looking nice when your cousin comes to St. Jim's."

"But weally, Blake—"

"I'll dab some grease on that curl and twist it the other way!"

"You will do nothin' of the sort—"

"Hands off that curl," grinned Digby. "Gussy puts that in pins every night to keep its shape, and it mustn't be touched by sacrilegious hands."

"Digby, that is an absolute untwuth!"

Blake jammed the grease on D'Arcy's favourite curl, and the swell of the School House gave a yelp.

"Blake, you howwid beast!"

"There! It looks ever so much better now, and much more like a Blackfoot."

"I weally—"

"Now stick on the feathers, and you'll be all right."

The painting having been done, the head-dresses were the next and last item. The work was done at last, and four young Redskins, as natural as life, stood and looked at one another admiringly.

"Ripping!" said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"My word! I never thought we could rig up anything quite so good as this," said Digby, squinting into the little mirror. "We could give a fright to any keeper who happened to come along just now."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What are we goin' to do, deah boys? When we get tired of lookin' at one another, it seems to me—"

"What do Redskins usually do in a wood?" demanded Blake. "We're going on the warpath, of course."

"Yaas; but whom are we goin' to attack, deah boy?"

Blake looked thoughtful, wrinkling up the red ochre on his brow.

"I'm! I'm rather sorry those Shell bounders couldn't track us down, now we're ready for them," he remarked.

"I should like to tackle them now."

"Bai Jove, wathah!"

"That's not the way for an Indian to talk," said Blake severely. "Did you ever hear a redskin in the Rocky Mountains lisp like that, ass?"

"But I've nevah been in the Wocky Mountains, Blake."

"You are a redskin now, though, and you've got to learn to speak like one, or else get a thick ear—I mean or else get scalped."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Stop that cackling, Dig. Indians scalp one another when they get waxy, as you know perfectly well. Let my brothers follow me."

Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy stared at Blake as though they thought he had suddenly become demented.

"What did you say, deah boy?" said Arthur Augustus, at last.

"Let my brothers follow me on the warpath."

"What warpath?"

"Ass! I mean, silly coyote, I'm going to find one!"

"Where are your brothers," said Dig, "and what are you talking about, anyway? You haven't any brothers at St. Jim's."

"Ass! Indians always talk like that."

"Like what?"

"Like that!" roared Blake. "Instead of saying, 'Buz

along, you silly cuckoos," they say, "Let my brothers follow me."

"Do they?" said Digby doubtfully.

"Yes, they do."

"But supposing they haven't any brothers?" asked Herries, who was certainly a trifle dense.

Blake gave him a withering look.

"It's a term they use," he explained, with laborious patience. "They call all the other chaps their brothers."

"But if the other chaps are not their brothers, it's not true—"

"It's a way they have."

"Well, I don't see what they want to tell lies for," said Herries obstinately.

"Then take my word for it, ass! Let my brothers follow me on the warpath," said Blake. "We will raid the ranches of the dastardly palefaces."

"The what?"

"The dastardly palefaces, who have stolen the prairies of our forefathers."

"Look here, Blake, if you're getting at us, say so! You know perfectly well that there aren't any prairies in Sussex."

"Herries, old man, if you find yourself dead some time in a corner somewhere, you'll know the reason," said Blake darkly. "Just you follow me, and don't argue."

"I don't want to argue, but when you want to make out that there are prairies in Sussex, I think it's time to—"

"Let the braves of the Blackfeet follow their chief."

"Ugh!" said Digby.

His three companions looked at him quickly.

"What's the matter?" asked Blake.

"Nothing," said Dig.

"What were you grunting for, then?"

"Yaas, wathah! Just explain that, Dig, dear boy! If there's nothin' the mattah, what the deuce were you gwuntin' for, you know?"

"You lot of silly asses—"

"Weally, Dig—"

"That's an Indian mode of talk," said Digby condescendingly. "Of course, you don't know much about Red Indians. They always say 'Ugh!'"

"What do they do it for?" asked Herries.

"Blessed if I know!"

"Well, I'm not going about grunting like a pig," said Herries. "You can do the grunting for both of us, Dig, if you think it's the proper thing."

"Yaas, wathah! I am weally afwaid that it would injah my thwoat if I were to gwunt in that widiculous mannah."

"Oh, come on!" said Blake. "I mean, let the braves of the Blackfeet follow their chief on the warpath. I am waiting for my brothers to follow me on the trail of the dastardly palefaces."

"Wrong!" said Digby.

"What do you mean, Dig?"

"Red Indians don't speak in the first person. They never say 'I.' They always use the third person."

"Yes, so they do. Make it the third person, chaps."

"Rot!" said Herries.

"What do you mean by rot?"

"Well, it was arranged that this affair was to be strictly among ourselves, without any third person being let into it—"

"Ass!"

"You can call me names if you like, but I object to any third person."

"Villain, I was speaking grammatically!"

"I never said you were speaking ungrammatically. What I say is, that we ought to think over it carefully before we let any third person into the business at all."

"Herries, old man, you'll make my hair grey," said Blake pathetically. "I mean that I was speaking in a grammatical sense. It's a grammatical third person I'm alluding to—the third person in pronouns."

"I don't see why you couldn't have said that at first, instead of wasting time like this," said Herries.

"Oh, come on!" said Blake resignedly. "The Blackfeet chief is waiting for his warriors to follow him on the warpath against the base palefaces. That's all correct, Dig?"

"Yes, that's all right."

"Come on, then. Hush!"

Blake broke off suddenly, as his quick ear detected a sound in the deep wood. He waved his hand quickly to his followers.

"Cover—quick!"

The juniors understood, and, with a swiftness worthy of real Indians, they darted into cover in the thickets, just as Tom Merry came into sight.

CHAPTER 9.

Put to Flight.

TOM MERRY came along carelessly enough, with his hands in his pockets. Lowther and Manners were a few paces behind, and as unconcerned as their leader. It was evident that they had not the slightest suspicion of an ambush in that remote recess of the shady old wood.

The Terrible Three had cleaned themselves somewhat after the encounter with Figgins & Co., but they still showed signs of that terrific combat. The signs were as thick in their faces as in their clothes, and Blake & Co. chuckled, as they noted them.

Tom Merry stopped as he came in sight of the old hut, half-hidden by the ferns and grasses, and glanced at his companions.

"There's the place, kids."

"Yes, there it is," said Lowther, "and nobody there, as I expected."

"Well, you couldn't tell. It struck me that they might have been going to have a picnic here," said Tom Merry mildly. "As we were out for the afternoon, there wasn't any harm in strolling this way, and looking, anyway."

"Quite right!" said Manners. "But it's pretty certain they're not here, all the same. We should have heard or seen something of them as we came up."

"My idea all along was that they had gone to the ruined castle," said Lowther.

"I suppose they're there, as they're not here," Tom Merry observed. "May as well just glance into the hut, though. They may have spotted us coming, and might be lying low."

"I don't see why they should lie low, when there are four of them, and only three of us."

"There's the secret they're keeping, Monty. If we come upon them, we shall spot them, anyway."

"Blessed if I'm not beginning to think that there isn't any secret at all," said Monty Lowther. "Suppose they have only been rotting us, from start to finish?"

"I don't think that's likely."

"Well, I'm beginning to think so."

"In that case, what did the hamper from America contain?"

"Oh, it might have contained anything; and those wasters would make a mystery about it for the sake of rotting us."

Tom Merry shook his head.

"There's something more in it than that, Monty."

"I should like to know what it is, then."

"So should I. We're going to find out. If this place is drawn blank we'll go on to the old castle, and if they're not there, there's the priory in Rylcombe Wood. But we'll look into the hut here first, to make sure."

"May as well," agreed Manners.

The hidden juniors had heard every word uttered by the Terrible Three, and they exchanged glances as Tom Merry moved on towards the hut. If the hero of the Shell once looked into it, he could not fail to see the clothes of the Fourth-Formers, and then he would be fairly on the track.

"Get ready!" murmured Blake. "Yell when I do, and charge!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Mind, nothing but yells. If you say anything they'd know our voices. Just yell like mad, and charge them with your tomahawks."

"Bai Javs, they'll have a fwight!"

Blake chuckled softly.

"If they don't pelt off like champion sprinters, you can use my head for a footer," he murmured. "What do you think, Dig?"

"My word, they're bound to be startled! They'll buzz off!"

"Rather!" said Herries.

"Now, then; ready!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Then yell, and follow your uncle!"

Jack Blake leaped to his feet with an ear-splitting yell. It may not have been in exact accordance with the customs of the Blackfeet Indians, but it was certainly discordant and hideous enough to do credit to any Indian tribe. His comrades were not behind him. Yelling ferociously, they leaped from the thicket, and charged at the Terrible Three.

The chums of the Shell swung towards them at the sound of the yell.

Then they stood petrified.

The sight of four savage, war-painted redskins in an English wood was startling enough; but when those redskins were charging with ear-splitting yells and brandished tomahawks, it was small wonder if the chums of the Shell were dismayed, and it would have been a miracle if they had not run for it.

They did run for it.

For one moment they stood spellbound, and then they dashed off with one accord, running for their lives.

"Run!" gasped Tom Merry.

But the word was not needed.

Lowther and Manners were running their hardest, and they kept pace with Tom Merry, and in a twinkling the three chums were vanishing in the wood.

Loud and savage rang the redskin yell again!"

"After them!" gasped Blake.

And after them went the pseudo Blackfeet, tearing through the bushes, and letting out a ferocious yell at every step.

Blake caught sight of Tom Merry in the underwood, and hurled his tomahawk.

He took care to miss the hero of the Shell by a couple of feet or so, and the weapon hurtled past Tom Merry, and struck against the trunk of a tree, and fell quivering to the ground.

Tom Merry saw it, and if he had had any doubts as to the reality of the danger, he could have none now.

The chums of the Shell tore on madly, and crashed through the underwood in frantic style.

Blake came, gasping, to a halt.

"Hold on! I can't run any more! Hold on!"

He was laughing too much to run. He stopped, and threw himself down on the green sward, and laughed and laughed till the tears of merriment made furrows through the paint on his cheeks.

Digby reeled against a tree, laughing as if his ribs would crack, and Herries reeled into a bush, overcome with merriment.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy sat down on a root of a tree, and doubled up with uncontrollable laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was no danger of the Terrible Three hearing the yells of laughter sent forth by the convulsed juniors. They were still running at top speed, and were already out of hearing.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Blake rolled over on the greensward. He was almost in convulsions, cackling and gasping, and gasping and cackling.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My word!" gasped Digby. He wiped his eyes, and wiped smears of damp paint all round them. "My word, it was too funny!"

"Funny?" shrieked Blake. "Fanny ain't the word! There's not a word in the dictionary equal to it! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Herries wriggled out of the bush. He rolled over on the grass and kicked up his heels in ecstatic enjoyment.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove, I weally wegard that as funnay!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Blake sat up. He was absolutely breathless, and yet he could not help laughing. The sight of the Terrible Three running for their lives, with imaginary Indians after them, had been too exorcisingly funny.

"My only hat!" murmured Blake. "I never thought those Shell bounders were so great in the sprinting line before!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I think this is where we smile, kids! Ha, ha, ha!"

Their laughter rang in the woods again. The Terrible Three were far away. Blake staggered to his feet, holding on to the tree trunk for support.

"Oh, my only Aunt Susan!" he said. "That I should live to see this day! I rather think the Red Indian wheeze is a success, you fellows!"

"Ha, ha! Rather!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We'll make the whole School House shriek with this story!" grinned Blake. "Tom Merry & Co. will have to sing small, and no mistake!"

"Bai Jove, I should wathah say so!"

"They won't forget bolting for their lives from the redskins in a hurry!" chuckled Blake. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm jolly glad they found their way to the hut. I only wish Figgins & Co. would come along. I should like to have the same thing up against the New House."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Let's go on the giddy warpath," said Digby. "We may meet Figgins & Co. in the wood; I know they were going out after the cricket. I say, your paint wants touching up, Blake!"

"So does yours."

"Hand over that looking-glass of yours, Gussy."

"I'm sowwy, Dig, but I left it on the twee near the ruined hut. We shall have to go back for it."

"Stuff!" said Blake. "We're a quarter of a mile from there now. We shan't go back till we go there to change our clothes. We can touch up one another's chivvies."

"Right-ho!" said Herries. "Let's go on the warpath. If we keep on like this we shall make our ribs ache!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The warpaint was soon renovated equal to new, then the Fourth Form warriors set out on the warpath.

CHAPTER 10.

Figgins & Co. on the Track!

"I'M getting fearfully hungry, Figgins!"

Fatty Wynn spoke pathetically, but the pathos in his voice did not seem to move the heartless Figgins; he only grunted.

"You can go back if you like, Fatty."

"Of course, I stick to you," said Fatty Wynn. "But we've been four or five hours in the wood already—"

"Nearly an hour and a half," said the exact Kerr, looking at his watch.

"Well, then, an hour and a half. And I was peckish when we started, and Blake made my mouth water by pretending he was going to ask us to a picnic!"

"Oh, cheese it!" said Figgins. "Blake took us in by making us tackle the Terrible Three. He's up to some dodge, and we ought to get on to it."

"Yes, rather!" said Kerr.

"We've been hunting for him for an hour and a half, and we're bound to find him if we keep on," said Figgins.

"Yes, but we haven't seen anything of him yet; and suppose it turns out when we find him that he hasn't any grub with him? We shall be in a nice fix!"

"You'll make me hungry if you keep on talking about grub!" growled Figgins. "We're going to find those rotters if it takes us till calling-over. We're going to know what the little game is."

"Then we ought to have brought some sandwiches!"

"Well, why didn't you?"

"I wanted to go back for some, but you wouldn't wait," said Fatty Wynn. "I can't say I consider that you've acted like a chum in this matter, Figgins!"

"Oh, rats!" said Figgins.

Kerr held up his hand suddenly.

"I say, I heard something then!"

"I only had three pork pies and a—"

"Shut up, Fatty! Listen."

The Co. listened intently. Once before they had heard a sound of distant shouting in the wood; but had not been sure. Rylcombe Wood was extensive, covering square miles of ground. But now the sound was nearer, and it was certain that Kerr had not been mistaken. There was a distinct sound of a footstep crunching on fallen twigs.

"Quiet!" whispered Figgins.

There was someone close at hand in the wood, and he was coming their way. Of course, it might have been anybody—a boy from St. Jim's, or a lad from the village. Figgins hoped it was the quarry they were seeking.

"There he is," murmured Kerr.

A head and shoulders came into view through the bushes. Figgins gave a start, and then a grunt of disappointment. It was Skimpole of the Shell.

"Skimpole! Hang!" said Figgins.

Skimpole looked up at the sound of his voice. The brainy man of the Shell was walking along with a book in his hands, reading as he walked, with his spectacles perched on his nose.

"Is that you, Figgins?" he said, blinking at the chief of the New House juniors. "Are you having a ramble in the woods, and utilising this beautiful and balmy summer afternoon for the purposes of meditation and reflection?"

Figgins grunted.

"No, I'm not, ass! And the afternoon is not the only thing that's balmy here, either. Have you seen anything of Blake and his lot?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Where?" exclaimed Figgins eagerly. "Where did you see them last, Skimpole, old fellow?"

"It was in Study No. 6."

Figgins glared.

"I mean have you seen them in the wood?"

"No; I did not know they were here. Have they left the school surreptitiously?" asked Skimpole, looking interested, his detective instincts roused at once.

"They're gone off somewhere, and we're trying to find them," said Figgins. "Why can't you keep your eyes

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open, ass, and see things? You might be able to give us a clue then!"

"Perhaps I can now," said Skimpole. "I am inclined to think that I know the reason of their going off in this secret manner. It is an indication of guilt."

"Of—of what?"

"Tom Merry has asked me to give him my services in elucidating the mystery of the hamper. I have already deduced that the hamper contained some guilty secret, the evidence of which was sent to Blake by his uncle to be destroyed. Blake as good as admitted that there was a dead body in the hamper, though he tried to turn it into a joke afterwards."

"A—a-a-a-a what?" murmured Figgins dazedly.

"A dead body. You know it is a common custom for people who live on ranches in the Wild West to shoot one another with revolvers, as you can see by looking into any of the volumes of the adventures of Deadwood Bill, the Broncho Buster. Suppose Blake's uncle had some dead bodies to dispose of—"

"Skimpole, old chap, I'd seriously advise you to stick to Socialism and let the amateur detective business alone," said Figgins solemnly. "And if you must be an amateur detective, don't take Deadwood Bill, the Broncho Buster, for your guide."

"A mind like mine naturally expects the carplings of smaller minds. I—"

"The what?"

"The carpling of smaller minds. You see," explained Skimpole, "if you read Carlyle, you would be aware of the undoubted fact that when a great genius appears, people misunderstand and deride him. That is the case with me."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"A great genius is impervious to the ridicule of the small and envious," said Skimpole. "Besides, as a Determinist, I cannot blame you. Your rude manners are evidently the result of bad training. The sordid surroundings of your early youth—"

Skimpole was fairly on his hobby-horse now, and nothing short of an earthquake or personal violence would have stopped him.

"Every human creature is the outcome of the combined influence of heredity and environment," he said, tapping his book with his knuckles to emphasise his points. "His heredity is modified by his environment, and his environment is modified by his heredity. If his hereditament is—I mean his heredity is—"

"Cheese it!"

"If his hereditament is more powerful than his enviroiny—I mean, if his enviroiny is more hereditament than his—"

"Cheese it, I say!"

"If his heredity is—"

"Oh, come on, chaps," exclaimed Figgins; "he'll go on like this for hours!"

And Figgins & Co. ran on into the wood, leaving Skimpole to waste his valuable thoughts upon the desert air.

The amateur Socialist shook his head solemnly.

"It is hard—very hard, indeed—to be continually thrown into contact with such dull and ignorant minds," he murmured. "But as a true Socialist I must go on labouring to improve those who are around me, and putting up with contumely for the sake of spreading the news of the coming reforms. Fortunately, I have the solace of this extremely interesting and instructive volume." Skimpole opened his book again. "How delightfully the author smashes up his opponents and proves the great truths of Determinism, and makes it perfectly clear to the dullest intellect that there is no effect without a cause, and that every cause may truly be said to be the reason of the ensuing effect—that effect being undeniably the result of the cause in question! I do not see how anybody can possibly fail to be convinced by this luminous reasoning."

And Skimpole, deep in the luminous reasoning of his ponderous volume, walked on slowly through the wood, stumbling every now and then over roots or twigs, but hardly ever looking up from his entrancing book—till, all of a sudden, he was startled from his intense perusal by a snedish yell ringing in his ears. He gave a jump, and the book dropped from his hands into the grass.

"Dear me!" gasped Skimpole.

For a moment he could scarcely believe his eyes—or, rather, his spectacles. Four ferocious-looking Red Indians had suddenly burst from the thickets, and were charging down upon him with brandished tomahawks and fiendish yells. Skimpole blinked at them for a moment, and then ran for his life.

The amateur Socialist had never been famed for his powers as an athlete, but on this occasion he put up a burst of speed that would not have disgraced a young champion

of the cinder-path. In a twinkling he disappeared in the depths of the wood, the Red Indians not taking the trouble to pursue him.

They acted, indeed, in a way that would have excited the surprise of any genuine redskins who might have been observing them.

The four braves, instead of pursuing the paleface and scalping him, sat down in the grass and roared with uncontrollable laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The amateur Socialist vanished. The Blackfeet warriors chuckled and laughed, and laughed and chuckled.

"My only hat!" said the Indian chief. "The wheeze works as well as ever! First Tom Merry, and now Skimpole! Oh dear, I wish we could meet Figgins & Co.!"

"The young ass has left his book here!" remarked Digby.

"Shove it in your pocket, then; we don't want him to lose it!" grinned Blake, the Blackfoot chief.

"Haven't got any pockets!"

"Stick it in your pouch, then, or down the back of your neck! We can't let the ass lose his book!"

Digby pounced the precious volume on Determinism. The chums laughed till the woods rang with the merry shouts.

"Bai Jove," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, grinning through the war-paint daubed on his aristocratic features, "this is weally wippin', you know! I weally considah that this will be a triumph for us—we shall take the beastly cake, you know; and when the wheeze gets out, all the fellows at St. Jim's will be dwessin' up as Wed Indians!"

"I fancy so," chuckled Blake; "but we've got first pull. But come on, kids, and let's see if we can track down Figgins & Co. I am anxious to see Figgins!"

"We mustn't keep this up too long," said D'Arcy. "My cousin Ethel is comin' to the school this afternoon, you know, and I want to get into pwopah attire before she sees me, and I shall want a lot of cleanin' affah this."

"You'll want a berth in an hospital if you disobey the orders of your great red chief!" said Blake darkly. "Follow me on the warpath, my red brothers!"

"But, weally—"

"Oh, cheese it! Follow your uncle!"

And the Blackfeet braves went scouring through the wood once more in search of fresh victims—and they were near at hand, as it happened.

CHAPTER 11.

Captured by Redskins!

FIGGINS paused in the dusky depths of the wood to listen. The Co. looked at him inquiringly.

"I heard something then," said Figgins, in answer to their mute questions. "It sounded to me like somebody laughing a long way off."

"I heard something," said Kerr. "Blessed if I could make it out, though. Might have been the wind in the trees."

"I say—" began Fatty Wynn.

"Well, what did you think it was, Fatty?"

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of that! I was wondering if either of you fellows had any toffee in—"

"Oh, go and eat coke!" growled Figgins.

"I can't eat coke, Figgins, and if you happened to have any toffee or bullseyes, it would stay my appetite, and perhaps save me from being ill!"

"Here's some aniseed balls," said Kerr. "They've been in my pocket a long time, and got mixed up with some bird-seed and cobbler's wax, but you're welcome to them!"

"You can keep them, thanks!"

"Well, I thought it was a case of saving you from dying of hunger. What are you listening for now, Figgins?"

"I think there's somebody yonder," said Figgins. "Blake & Co. are in the wood somewhere, and it may be them. Come on!"

"May as well," assented Kerr.

The New House chums plunged into the thickets. They came out into a glade, where the grass showed signs of recent feet. Kerr stopped.

"I think we could get a clue here!" he exclaimed, looking at the grass attentively. "There have been some fellows here lately, Figgy."

"Wish we knew the size of the boots they take!"

"I say, this is curious!" said Kerr, bending down and examining the tracks. "You see, the soil is soft and damp here, and it's taken the impression clearly. There is a single pair of boots—and, then, look at these other marks!"

"They're not boots!"

"No; but they've been made by feet! Look, here's the heel-mark! These prints were made by somebody who hadn't any boots on, and yet the feet weren't bare, or there would be traces of the toes."



Four savage-looking redskins rushed from the bushes, with brandished tomahawks and ringing yells, and faces aglare with hideous war-paint.

The New House chums looked at one another.

"What on earth are you getting at?" said Figgins. "I suppose there can't be any fellow going around with his feet wrapped up in cloth?"

"Well, no, I should say not; but you see the signs for yourself!"

"Chap in soft slippers, I should say," observed Fatty Wym.

"Yes," said Kerr witheringly. "Chaps come out into the middle of a wood in soft slippers, don't they?"

"Well, they're not boots, and the feet aren't bare, and so—"

"If it were possible—" began Kerr slowly.

Figgins stared at him.

"If what were possible?"

"Well, it would be queer, but—"

"But what? What the dickens are you driving at, Kerr, old man?"

"Well, if it were possible, I should say those tracks were made by chaps wearing something in the style of Indian moccasins," said Kerr, scratching his head thoughtfully.

Figgins grinned.

"Yes, I believe Red Indians are pretty plentiful in an English wood, as a rule!" he said, with heavy sarcasm.

"I don't know!"

"You don't know what? Do you mean to say you think

there might be a stray Indian about here—strayed from the Rocky Mountains by mistake, and stepped across the Atlantic Ocean absent-mindedly?" asked Figgins, still in the same strain.

"No," said the Scottish partner in the Co. quietly; "but there might be fellows here playing Indian for a lark."

Figgins started.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that that might be the wheeze Blake and his lot are keeping so jolly dark," said Kerr.

"My only hat!"

"You see, I— Holy smoke! What's that?"

"That" was a terrific yell ringing with savage suddenness through the wood, and echoing wildly among the trees and thickets.

The New House trio jumped up in alarm and amazement.

Four painted savages rushed upon them from the bushes—four savage-looking redskins, with brandished tomahawks and ringing yells and faces aglare with hideous war-paint!

For a second Figgins & Co. were stricken with dismay.

And there is no doubt that, had the redskins come upon them wholly by surprise, they would have taken to their heels instantly.

But Kerr's suspicion had come as a warning to the New

House chums, and after the first moment's shock, they suspected the truth.

"Line up!" yelled Figgins, confronting the charging savages boldly.

"Right-ho!" gasped Kerr and Wynn.

On rushed the redskins.

They expected Figgins & Co. to run, but Figgins & Co. did not run, and the result was that the two parties met with a fearful collision.

Tomahawks went flying right and left, and the juniors rolled on the ground.

Figgins & Co. were hurled down by the shock, and the odds being against them, they had no chance of getting up again.

Four to three was long odds, when individually the juniors were pretty well matched; and Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn gasped in the grass, with the redskins pinning them down and grinning in triumph over them.

"You—you rotters!" gasped Figgins. "I know who you are! You're Blake, you beast! Get off my chest!"

The Blackfoot chief gave him a ferocious glare.

"Ka-ka-ke-ki-ko-kkkoo!" he said, grinding his teeth.

Figgins shivered for a moment.

Blake could not be supposed to be able to talk redskin language, but that grinding sentence really did sound genuine.

Was it possible—

But the voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was heard the next moment, as if on purpose to dispel Figgins's doubts.

"Pway keep still, you paleface wottah, or I shall have no alternative but to scalp you with this beastly scalp'n-knife!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" gasped Kerr.

"I wufuse to be laughed at, paleface boundah! Ugh! I will lift the scalp of the beastly whitskin!"

"Oh! you cuckoo!" said Blake. "You were bound to give the show away, of course!"

"I wufuse to admit that I have given the show away, Blake! I was keepin' up the chawatah in pwopah style, and now you have given the whole thing away!"

"Ass!"

"I wufuse to be called an ass!"

"Lemme gerrup!" growled Figgins.

"Bosh!" said Blake. "You are the prisoner of the great chief of the Blackfeet. What is to be the fate of the dastardly palefaces, my brothers?"

"Oh, cheese that bosh!"

"Bettah burn them at the stake, deah boys!"

"Scalp them, I should say!" Herries remarked.

"Bind them to trees and shoot arrows at them!" suggested Digby. "If we happen to kill them, we can bury them quietly in the wood without anybody being the wiser! They'd never be missed!"

"Yaas, that's wathah a good ideah!"

"Oh, don't rot!" said Figgins. "Get off my chest!"

"The paleface dogs have been taken prisoners by the braves of the Blackfeet!" said Blake. "They are doomed

"Yaas, wathah! Whenever any paleface dogs are taken pwisonahs by the bwaves of the Blackfeet, they must considah themselves doomed!"

"Shut up!"

"I wufuse to shut up!"

"I am chief of this tribe!"

"You may be chief of this tribe, deah boy, but aftah givin' the game away as you have done, you cannot expect us to respect you as a leedah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" cackled Figgins & Co.

"If you are looking for a rap on the head with a tomahawk, Gussy—"

"I am not lookin' for a rap on the head with a tomahawk, Blake, and I wogard the suggestion as widdleous!"

"Well, you're going the right way to get it! First of all you give the show away, and then you—"

"Wats! I wufuse to admit for a moment that I have given the beastly show away, and I appeal to the othahs!"

"Oh, cheese it! Brothers, what is to be the fate of the paleface dogs? I suggest tying them up and leaving them in the grass, to wriggle home as they can! We could brain them with our tomahawks, but I doubt if they have any brains, and, besides, it would give us the trouble of cleaning the tomahawks afterwards!"

"There's something in that!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Tie them up, Dig, while we hold them! Bind fast the paleface dogs, hand and foot, and then—"

"If you tie me up, I'll wring your silly neck, Blake!"

"It doesn't matter if you hurt them!" said Blake, unheeding. "That's a point of no consequence! Just make them safe, that's all!"

"Right you are!" grinned Digby.

Figgins & Co. were shackled in a very short time. Digby

did not tie them very tightly, leaving the cords so that the prisoners could wriggle themselves free in a quarter of an hour or so, when they were left alone. Then the redskin braves rose, and left them to wriggle.

"I'll make you sit up for this!" grunted Figgins.

"Silence, paleface dog!"

"Silly ass!"

"The braves of the Blackfeet will now dance the war-dance round their captured foes," said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Let the dance be danced," said Blake solemnly. "If we tread on the paleface prisoners, that is their look out."

"Rather!"

The Blackfeet braves commenced the dance of triumph round their fallen foes. Figgins & Co. watched them rather apprehensively. They lay in the grass, and the dancers came very near them as they circled round with savage gestures and brandished tomahawks.

"Here we go gathering nuts and may," said Kerr sarcastically. "Here we—Ow!"

Whether by accident or not, Blake's foot came down on his leg, and Kerr yelled and squirmed.

"Keep off, you howling ass!"

The war-dance continued. It was something quite original in the way of dancing, and quite barbaric.

"Lot of jumping kangaroos!" grunted Figgins.

Then Figgins yelled, as a moccasined foot plumped into his ribs.

"Keep off, you villain!"

"Here we go round the mulberry-bush!" said Fatty Wynn.

And then Fatty Wynn received an accidental kick.

Figgins & Co. thought they had better keep their remarks to themselves after that, and the dance continued and finished without further interruption on the part of the New House juniors.

"Let us depart, my red brothers," said Blake, gasping as he stopped at last. "The paleface dogs can be left for the coyotes of the prairie to gnaw their giddy bones."

"Yaas, wathah!"

The Red Indians disappeared into the wood, and Figgins & Co. were left to wriggle themselves free as best they could.

CHAPTER 12.

The Terrible Three Get Their Own Back.

TOM MERRY stopped and looked back. He had run on at top speed for a good mile, after the meeting with the savage warriors. Lowther and Manners had fallen a little behind now, and Tom Merry stopped for them. The chums of the Shell were fully persuaded of the reality of the danger they were in, but Tom Merry was not the fellow to leave his chums, whatever the peril might be.

"Get on!" gasped Lowther, coming up panting.

Manners was only a few moments behind. The chums ran on again together, but at a more moderate pace.

"They're not following us," said Tom Merry.

"I heard them," said Manners.

"Yes, but they've stopped."

"Better keep on till we get to the road, at least."

"Right-ho!"

The chums of the Shell ran on. They came out into the Rylcombe Road at last, and there they threw themselves upon the grassy bank beside the road, breathless and exhausted, and looked at one another.

In the quiet country road it seemed as if the vision of the savage-redskins in the wood must have been a dream, an illusion of some kind; in spite of themselves, and the evidence of their own eyes, the chums doubted the reality of what they had seen.

"I say—" began Lowther slowly.

"Well?" said Tom Merry.

"I say, there's something queer about all this. There can't be any Red Indians in a wood in England."

"We saw them," said Manners.

"I know we did, but—"

"They might be redskins got away from some show, like Buffalo Bill's, and taken to a wild life again," said Tom Merry. "That's all I could think—though we didn't stop to think much, did we?"

"I say, it can't be the real thing," persisted Lowther, always the most sceptical of the three. "It's rot to think that they meant to hurt us with those tomahawks. Even if they were real Indians out of a show, or anything of that sort, they wouldn't want to hurt a lot of schoolboys."

"I suppose not," said Tom Merry thoughtfully. "But it seemed jolly real at the time, all the same."

"I admit that, but—"

"But you think we have been taken in?"

"Yes, I do. They weren't real Indians at all, I imagine, but a lot of chaps dressed up as Indians, trying to frighten us."

"And they succeeded."

"I know they did. We were taken by surprise. When you suddenly see a fellow bolting at you, brandishing an axe, you don't stop to think whether it's a hoax, I suppose," said Lowther. "It's safer to bolt first and think afterwards."

"Yes, rather!"

"But all the same, I believe this is a hoax."

Tom Merry looked very thoughtful.

"Did you notice how many of them there were?" he asked.

"Four, I thought."

"I thought I saw four, too," said Manners.

"So did I," said Tom Merry, and his face relaxed into a grin. "And, you remember, we came into the wood to look for four fellows—though we didn't expect to find them in the guise of Red Indians."

Manners and Lowther gave a simultaneous jump.

"Blake & Co.!" yelled Lowther.

"Study No. 6!" gasped Manners.

Tom Merry laughed.

"Yes, and we were asses not to think of it before; but as Lowther says, it's not easy to think quietly over things when a fellow is bolting at you with an axe. We couldn't guess what was the wheeze Blake & Co. had on; but I think we've guessed it now. They're playing Indians."

"My hat!"

"It's all simple enough now, when we've got the clue," said Tom Merry, grinning. "Of course, that was what Blake's uncle sent him from his ranch in America—the redskin rig-out. That's what they've been keeping so dark."

"Of course! We ought to have guessed."

"Well, I don't see exactly how we could have guessed," said Tom Merry. "Anyway, we didn't! That's what they sneaked off into the wood for this afternoon, and it's no good denying that they've got the laugh of us."

"Yes, and they'll be cackling away like a lot of geese. And so will the School House be, when they tell the story at home!" growled Lowther.

"Perhaps they'll have something else to tell as well," said Tom Merry quietly. "I've got an idea which will enable us to get our own back, if it works out."

"What is it?" asked Lowther and Manners together eagerly.

"Well, I suppose there isn't much doubt now that the redskins were really Blake & Co."

"None at all."

"Then it's pretty clear that they went to the old hut in the wood to change into the redskin rig. That's where we found them, and you remember they jumped on us just as we were going to look into the hut."

"Yes."

"They have left their own clothes somewhere," grinned Tom Merry. "I imagine that if we got to the old hut we should find them there—what?"

"Ripping!" exclaimed Lowther, jumping up. "If we could collar their togs—"

"They'd have to go back to St. Jim's as Red Indians," cackled Manners. "My hat! That would be getting our own back, and no mistake."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It all depends upon whether we can get hold of the clothes," said Tom Merry, rising as he spoke. "I think we can go into the wood safely enough now, as we have found out what kind of Indians they are."

"Ha, ha! Yes."

"Then let's get along to the old hut, and see what we shall see."

"Come on!"

Full of their new idea, the Terrible Three plunged into the wood. The idea of making Blake & Co. walk along the public high road back to the school in the Red Indian rig-out made them chuckle whenever they thought of it. They lost no time in getting through the wood, taking care to make as little noise as possible in case the chums of Study No. 6 should be at hand, and at length they came in sight of the ruined hut again.

Tom Merry made the sign to halt, and he advanced cautiously, peering through the bushes. There was no one in sight; the spot seemed to be wholly deserted. The glimmer of a small looking-glass on a tree caught Tom Merry's eye. It was D'Arcy's pocket mirror. But its owner was not there.

"I think the coast's clear, kids."

"Looks like it. Come on!"

The Terrible Three ran towards the hut. There were no redskins in the bushes this time. The spot was deserted. Tom Merry looked into the hut and uttered an exclamation.

"Look!"

There were the clothes of Blake & Co., and the sun, glimmering through the gaps in the hut, shone upon the bright polish of D'Arcy's silk hat.

Tom Merry laughed heartily.

"No doubt on the subject now, kids."

"Rather not," said Lowther. "That's Gussy's topper, and, besides, it is his pocket-mirror sticking on the tree. They used it to paint by, of course."

"Of course. And here are the clothes of the bold warriors. Better not lose any time; we don't know when they will come back to change."

Manners picked up D'Arcy's topper, and then slung the School House swell's clothes over his arm. Lowther took up three jackets and waistcoats, and Tom Merry three pairs of trousers and some other articles of attire.

"Can't carry the boots," said Tom Merry. "Besides, it would be a bit rough making them tramp all the way to St. Jim's in skin moccasins. They can have their boots."

"They can have this topper, too," said Manners. "It's too much trouble to carry it. We'll take the other things along."

"Right-ho! Let's clear!"

The Terrible Three hurried out of the hut with the captured clothes. The redskins were still not in sight, but the chums of the Shell lost no time. They plunged into the wood, and not till they were at a good distance from the ruined hut did they pause to give vent to their merriment.

CHAPTER 13.

A Shock for Blake & Co.

"WELL, I think we have really had a ripping afternoon," Jack Blake remarked, as four dusty and tired Blackfoot warriors came towards the old hut in the gathering dusk of the summer evening.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I should say so," Herries remarked. "The Shell bounders will have the laugh up against them this evening, and so will Figgins & Co."

"To say nothing of that ass Skimpole."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yaas, bai Jove. We have weally twiumphed to-day, deah boys. The secret is out now, owin' to Blake givin' it away to Figgins, but it was bound to come out. If the wealdin wheeze is taken up, we started it."

"Here we are," said Blake, as he came up to the hut, "now for a quick change, and a sprint back to St. Jim's. We shan't be able to get all the paint off our faces."

"Bai Jove! I nevah thought of that."

"I didn't either," confessed Blake. "Next time we'll bring a sponge and some water and a towel. But we can give it a rub with our handkerchiefs, and it won't be noticed in the dark. We shall have time to run in and wash before turning up in the hall for calling over."

"That's so. Let's get changed."

Blake stepped into the hut. He looked about him with a puzzled expression.

"I say, did you move the clothes?" he asked.

"Certainly not, deah boy."

"Did you, Herries?"

"No."

"You, Dig?"

"Of course not. What's the matter?"

"I can't see them."

"Oh, weally, Blake!"

"I can't see them. I laid mine here."

"And I laid mine here."

"Here's the boots."

"And Gussy's topper."

"Where are my togs?"

"And mine?"

"And mine?"

"My only hat! They're gone."

The chums of Study No. 6 stared at one another in utter dismay.

The boots were there, and D'Arcy's silk hat, but the clothes were gone. Four suits of clothes had vanished as utterly as though they had sunk into the earth.

"Bai Jove!"

"Some beastly tramp has been this way, and collared them," muttered Digby.

Blake shook his head.

"Why should a tramp come to such an out-of-the-way place as this? He couldn't expect to find anything here."

"Then, how—"

"Besides, the boots are left here, and a tramp would have made a clean sweep, if he stole anything at all."

"I don't know, you know. It would be no joke twyin' to cawwy Hewwie's boots."

"Oh, ring off," grunted Herries. "You let my boots alone."

Herries did not take a small size in boots, but he was sensitive on that point.

"Certainly, dear boy. I was only remarkin'—"

"Well, don't."

"It wasn't a tramp," said Blake. "It was some fellow japing us, and, as a matter of fact, I think I can guess whom it was."

"Tom Merry?"

"Yes, I suppose it dawned upon them whom the redskins were, when they had time to think, and they came back and collared our togs," said Blake ruefully. "We ought to have thought of it."

"You mean, you ought to have thought of it," suggested Digby. "You're chief of this tribe, you know."

"Yaas, wathah! As chief of this tribe, Blake ought to have thought—"

"Oh, it's no good saying I told you so," said Blake, tartly. "Don't begin to cackle like a lot of girls."

"Blake, I wefuse—"

"Oh, cheese it."

"I decline to cheese it. I wefuse to allow your dis-pawagin' remark concernin' girls to pass uncowed. I have a great admiration for girls, and I wefuse to wogard, as a friend, any fellow who speaks of them dis-pawagingly."

"You ass."

"Pway, do not address me as an ass, or I may be compelled to proceed to violence," said D'Arcy. "Before we go any further, I considah that Blake ought to withdraw his extremely ungallant remark."

"I haven't time to brain you now," said Blake. "I say, what on earth are we do for clothes? We can't go to St. Jim's in this rig."

"My hat! No."

"We can't stay here all night," said Herries. "It's getting dusk, now. This wouldn't have happened if we had brought my bulldog."

"But we didn't," snapped Blake.

"No, I know we didn't, but if we had—"

"Oh, rats! What's to be done, that's the question."

"Blessed if I know," said Digby. "We can't stop here, as Herries said. We can't whistle the clothes back. Tom Merry means to make us show up at the school in this rig, and I fancy we can't help it."

"It is imposse, for us to appeah in public in this widiculous rig, Digby."

"What wig are you talking about? You're not wearing a wig, are you?"

"I am alludin' to this widiculous wedskin wig-out."

"Oh, I see! Well, Gussy, you'll have to; there's nothing else to be done."

"It's imposse. My cousin Ethel is comin' to St. Jim's, and the Head is comin' back from Wayland by the same twain. We shall wun into them; I feel quite sure of that, and it will be Blake's fault that I am placed in a widiculous position."

"Oh, go and eat coke," grunted Blake. "You are always, more or less, ridiculous, and so it won't be noticed, but about me."

"I wefuse to allow—"

"The duds may be hidden about here somewhere," Digby suggested.

Blake's painted face brightened up.

"It's possible; let's look."

"Yaas, wathah."

They hunted for the clothes; but they were not to be found. The garments had, evidently, been taken away. The dusk was deepening in the wood, and Blake ceased to search at last with an exclamation of disgust.

"They're gone, kids."

"Yaas, there doesn't seem to be much doubt about that, dear boys."

"It's getting on, too," said Blake. "We haven't much time to get to St. Jim's before calling-over."

"Bai Jove! We shall have to find time to change before showin' up in the hall," said D'Arcy. "It would make wathah a sensation if four Wed Indians came in for callin'-ovah, you know."

Blake laughed.

"Yes, I can imagine what Lathom would look like. It's no good hanging about here, chaps. We've got to get to the school."

"It's rotten."

"I know it is, but it can't be helped. Come on."

"Let's get our boots on, anyway. We can carry the moccasins."

"Yaas, and I shall put on my silk hat," said D'Arcy, stripping off the Blackfoot headdress of feathers. "It's as well to look as respectable as possible."

The sight of D'Arcy in Indian leggings and shirt, war-paint and a silk hat, was too much for his comrades. In spite of the worry on their minds, they burst into a roar of laughter. D'Arcy screwed his monocle into his eye.

"Weally, dear boys—"

"That's right, Gussy; you're complete now," said Blake.

"Oh, dear, I wish I had Manners's camera here. Are you fellows ready?"

"Yes, rather."

"Then let's get along."

And the Blackfeet, shod in boots now, and carrying their moccasins slung upon their tomahawks, went through the wood towards the Rylcombe road, to return to St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 14.

Redskins to the Rescue.

THE dusk of the June evening was deepening. Blake made good speed, anxious to get into the school in time to change before calling over.

D'Arcy was silent and disconsolate. He realised that Tom Merry and his friends would be waiting at the school to greet the returning Indians, and that the Blackfeet warriors would be unmercifully gayed.

And Arthur Augustus did not like the prospect.

Cousin Ethel was coming down to St. Jim's, and the Head was coming from the station with her; which was the reason why the chums had not gone to meet the train. D'Arcy had a foreboding that Cousin Ethel would see him before he had had time to change his attire.

"This is wathah wotten," he murmured. "Blake, I wogard you as havin' let me in for this widiculous contro-tempa."

"Rats!" growled Blake.

"If you say wats to me, Blake, I shall—"

"Oh, ring off."

"Don't bother," said Digby. "I suppose Tom Merry and the rest will be waiting at the gate, and we shall be gayed to death."

"Certain," said Herries.

"It is weally too wotten."

"Oh, we've had our fun, and now we've got to pay the piper," said Blake, as cheerfully as he could. "It can't be helped."

"If we had taken my bulldog—"

"Oh, blow your bulldog. I'm getting fed up with your bulldog, Herries."

"All the same, if we had taken it—"

"Yaas, wathah! It was careless of you, Hewwies, not to take your beastly bulldog. It was careless of Blake. I shall look widiculous, and—"

"That won't be anything new."

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"Hallo," exclaimed Blake, "there's a cart, or something, coming. We might get a lift, and, by Jove, if we could get somebody to drive us right into the place, we could jump out, and nip into the house without—"

"It's only a trap," said Digby, peering through the dusk at the approaching vehicle, which was coming from the direction of the village of Rylcombe.

"There's only two in it," said Herries.

Blake gave a start.

"Cover! Quick!"

"What—"

"It's the doctor's trap. It's the Head driving, and that's Miss Cleveland—Cousin Ethel—sitting beside him."

"My hat!"

"Bai Jove!"

The juniors scuttled into the trees beside the lane. The trap, with its two lamps glaring into the dusk, came rattling by. The concealed boys saw the occupants of the vehicle plainly as it passed. Dr. Holmes, the Head of St. Jim's, was driving, and Cousin Ethel was beside him.

Quiet as mice, the juniors crouched among the trees. Not for worlds would they have been seen at that moment. But they were secure in the dusk.

The trap passed on towards St. Jim's.

Jack Blake drew a deep breath of relief. They came out from the trees, and looked down the road after the disappearing lights of the trap.

"Bai Jove! That was a nawwow escape, dear boys."

"It was, rather! There would have been a row if the Head had spotted us on a public road in this rig out."

"I wasn't thinkin' of the Head, Blake. I was thinkin' of the widiculous impresson I should make upon Cousin Ethel."

"They—hallo! What's that?"

Blake broke off suddenly. There was a sound of clattering hoofs, a snorting horse, and a savage voice in the dusky distance.



"Cover—quick!" said Blake. The juniors understood, and with a swiftness worthy of real Indians, they darted into cover in the thickets, just as Tom Merry & Co. came in sight.

"Something's gone wrong with the trap."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Come on!" exclaimed Blake, breaking into a run. "It's an accident of some sort."

The juniors ran hard.

There was evidently something wrong with the doctor's trap. The lights of the vehicle could be seen turning, making it clear that the trap had been backed against the high grassy bank which at this place bordered the road.

Forgetful in the excitement of the moment of their strange attire, the chums of Study No. 6 ran to the rescue.

Blake gritted his teeth as he came near enough to see what was wrong.

A man in rough garb was standing at the pony's head, gripping the bit, and forcing the restive animal to a standstill. Two others were close up to the trap, one on either side, and each of them had a bludgeon in his hand. There was no mistaking what was happening. It was a daring attempt at robbery. More than once of late there had been robberies with violence in the neighbourhood of St. Jim's, and this was evidently a more than usually daring attack by the same gang. The trap, in the lonely lane, after dark, with only an old gentleman and a young girl in it, was at the mercy of three powerful footpads.

Blake grasped the situation, and he paused for a moment to whisper to his comrades.

"It's a robbery! Look out!"

"Right-ho!"

"Keep on the grass—don't let them hear us!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Follow me, and give them the back of the tomahawks."

"Ha, ha! Rather!"

The juniors ran on silently on the belt of grass that bordered the lane. They could hear the savage voice ahead clearly through the summer night.

"Hand over your money, quick! We've no time to waste!"

Then the Head's voice was heard, trembling with anger, not with fear:

"I will do nothing of the sort, you brutal ruffians!"

One of the footpads brandished his bludgeon so close to the doctor's head, that he involuntarily shrank back.

"Do you want me to brain yer?"

Ethel Cleveland clung to the doctor's arm. The girl's face was white with terror, but she was not shrieking. There was nothing hysterical about Cousin Ethel.

"Dr. Holmes, give them what they ask!"

"I'll brain yer if yer don't!"

The Head hesitated.

He was helpless against the footpads, and he had Ethel to think of. Unwillingly he slid his hand into his pocket.

"You shall suffer for this, you scoundrels!" he said, in a low voice.

"Not so much jaw! Your money, quick!"

There was a sudden yell in the darkness.

"At 'em!"

The three footpads jumped in sudden alarm, and looked quickly round. Four savage-looking figures leaped into the light of the trap's lamps, and rushed upon them with brandished tomahawks.

For a moment the three ruffians seemed paralysed with terror. The tomahawks were within a few inches of them when they realised their danger, and sprang to escape it.

Not for an instant did they dream of showing fight.

With gasps of deadly fear the three footpads went racing and stumbling through the darkness, and plunged through a hedge, and disappeared.

They were gone so swiftly that the juniors hardly realised that the combat was over without a blow being struck, and D'Arcy was still brandishing his tomahawk, somewhat to the peril of the heads of his comrades.

"Hold on!" said Blake. "They're gone!"

"I'm sowwy! I weally wanted to bwain some of the wathahs!"

The doctor and Cousin Ethel were staring down from the trap at the strange figures before them, in utter amazement.

"What—what—who are you?" said the doctor, at last.

"I thank you very much for coming to my aid in this manner, but—but who are you? Can you speak English?"

"Yaas, wathah, sir!"

The Head gave a violent start.

"D'Arcy!"

"Yaas, sir, and vewy sowwy to appeah before you in this wiculous attire, I assure you!"

"D'Arcy!"

The Head stared at Arthur Augustus in utter bewilderment.

Cousin Ethel looked at him, too, and the colour slowly came back into her fair cheeks. Something like a smile stole over her face.

D'Arcy stood hat in hand, bowing. The spectacle of a Red Indian bowing over a silk hat was so ridiculous, that the Head, in spite of himself, burst into a laugh.

"D'Arcy!" he said, for the third time. "I—I am amazed!" And, indeed, he looked it. "What does this mean? What can you possibly mean by appearing on a public road in such an utterly ridiculous fashion?"

"If you please, sir—" began Blake.

"Is that you, Blake?"

"Yes, sir. We—"

"Pway allow me to explain, Blake. I shall be able to put it evah so much more clearly to Dr. Holmes."

"Dry up, ass," whispered Herries.

"I wefuse to dwy up. I—"

"If you please, sir," said Blake, "we've been playing at Indians in the wood, with the things my uncle sent me from America, sir."

"Ah, yes, I remember!"

"And some rotter! I mean some bounder—that is to say, some chap came along and scoffed our clothes—"

"And what?"

"And took our clothes away, sir."

The Head smiled.

"I see; and so you are returning to the school in this absurd state."

"Well, sir," said Blake diplomatically, "we thought you wouldn't like us to be late for calling-over."

"That's it, exactly," said D'Arcy. "We were not particulah about passin' a night or two in the beastly wood, sir, but we thought you wouldn't like us to be late for callin'-ovah, sir."

"Indeed, that was very thoughtful of you," said the Head, smiling. "You do ne' always consider my wishes on that subject so carefully."

Blake coloured under his paint.

"You see, sir—"

"Yes, I see, Blake. I think you all merit some punishment for appearing in public like this, whatever reason you have to offer, for I dare say the boys who played this trick on you were not quite unprovoked."

The juniors laughed involuntarily.

"We might have given them a scare sir," confessed Blake.

Dr. Holmes laughed.

"Yes, I thought as much. Under the circumstances, however, as the matter has turned out so fortunately for Miss Cleveland and myself, I shall overlook any fault you have been guilty of, and I can only thank you warmly for your splendid pluck in coming to my aid as you did."

"Oh, really, sir—"

"It is fortunate that those wretches were frightened by your appearance, or you might have been hurt," said the Head. "I am sure you did not stop to think of that, though. It was very brave of you, and I am proud of you, my lads."

"Yes, indeed," said Cousin Ethel, very softly. "It was very, very brave."

"Weally, Ethel, you know, these chaps are wathah bwavo when I am leadin' them," said Arthur Augustus. "I have— Howwies, if you twead on my foot again, I shall punch your head! This is the second time you have twodden on my beastly foot!"

The doctor glanced up the dusky lane.

"It is possible that those wretches may recover from their fright, and return," he said. "We must get to the school, and I will telephone to the police the news of this outrage. I think you lads will find room in the back of the trap."

"Certainly, sir."

"Yaas, wathah! I say, Ethel, I suppose you think I look awfully wiculous?"

"Yes, I do indeed, Arthur."

"Oh, weally, Ethel, you know—"

"Jump in," said Blake.

"Weally, Blake—"

"Are you going to jump in, or shall I chuck you in?"

"Oh, if you are goin' to be wude about it, I'll jump in, Blake."

Blake led the horse round into the straight road again, and the juniors piled into the trap behind. It was a roomy vehicle, and there was space for them with a little squeezing. D'Arcy had no clothes to be rumpled or crushed, fortunately, so there was no trouble on that score.

The doctor gathered up his reins, and drove on. The trap rattled away merrily towards St. Jim's.

Blake squeezed Digby's arm.

"It's all right, now, old son!"

"What's all right?" asked Dig.

"This giddy home-coming! Instead of crawling in with all the chaps cackling round us, we are going home as giddy heroes, and it will be a regular triumph."

"Bai Jove, yaas, wathah!"

CHAPTER 15.

The Triumph.

TOM MERRY stood in the dusk at the gates of St. Jim's, looking down the road. It was time for locking up, but Tagglea had not yet closed the gates, as he knew the train the Head was coming by, and that the trap was waiting for him in Rylcombe. As soon as the Head was in, the gates would be locked, whether Blake & Co. had returned or not.

"Can't see them yet," said Tom Merry.

Figgins & Co. were there, too. They had wriggled themselves out of the loose cords that had confined them, and had returned to St. Jim's in a somewhat chastened mood. But as soon as they met the Terrible Three, and learned of the jape that had been played upon Blake & Co., their spirits revived.

Now, the chums of the Shell and Figgins & Co. were at the gate, waiting for the Red Indians to appear, and a crowd of other juniors had collected to see the fun.

"My hat," said Figgins, "we'll guy them! We'll teach them to go around as Red Indians, by Jove!"

"It is really too bad of them!" said Skimpole. "Now that you speak of it, I am convinced that the dreadful savages who startled me in the wood were, in reality, Blake and his misguided companions, and through their absurd freak I have lost my valuable book on the subject of Determinism."

"Jolly good thing, too!" said Monty Lowther.

"Really, Lowther, you speak in ignorance of the value of that remarkable book," said Skimpole. "If you knew the beautifully clear way in which the author proves that heredity and environment and the cause, and also the effect of—"

"Rats!"

"Certainly not! The subject has nothing whatever to do with rodents of any description. Hereditament and enviroiny—I mean, heredity and environment—"

"Oh, cheese it; here comes somebody!"

"It's the Head's trap," said Figgins. "Stand back, there!"

The trap drove up to the gates.

The juniors stood, cap in hand, to the Head and Miss Ethel, as the trap came in, and then there was a general gasp of stupefaction.

"The redskins!"

"Blake & Co."

"My only hat!"

Four savage Blackfoot braves grinned at the juniors from

the trap, and waved their hands as the Head drove on towards the School House.

"Ugh!" said the four braves in chorus, and one of them raised a silk hat in polite acknowledgment of the stares of the juniors.

"My word! What does it mean?"

"They're not in disgrace," murmured Figgins. "The Head hasn't run them in. They're in high feather."

"Can't understand it," said Tom Merry, running his fingers through his curly hair. "Can you, Monty?"

"Blessed if I can!"

The crowd followed the trap. It stopped before the School House, and the Head alighted, with the juniors, and D'Arcy, of course, was the one to assist Cousin Ethel down.

Dr. Holmes turned to the amazed crowd of juniors. There was a genial smile on his kind old face.

"My boys," he said, glancing over the curious throng, "your four schoolfellows here have acted in a very brave and gallant manner, by coming to my assistance when my trap was stopped in the lane by three ruffianly footpads. For that reason I shall not inquire into this absurd freak which has come to my notice. Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy are four brave lads, of whom you should be proud."

And the Head and Cousin Ethel passed into the house.

In a moment the four redskins were surrounded, and each of them became the recipient of hearty slaps of congratulation on the back and shoulders.

"Here, hold on!" roared Blake. "If you hit me again, Figgins, I'll wipe up the quad with you!"

"I was only showing my admiration—"

"Then go and admire someone else, if that's the way you show it."

"What have you been doing?" demanded Tom Merry. "We were waiting at the gate to gey you, as you deserve, and now you come in in high feather!"

"Mean, I call it," said Manners.

Jack Blake laughed.

"Oh, we've fallen on our feet!" he exclaimed. "No thanks to you bounders, though. I suppose it was you had our togs."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Never mind, we won't lick you, as it's turned out so well."

"That's all the better for you—"

"Oh, don't waste time, talking to these kids!" said Blake loftily. "We're giddy heroes, that's what's the matter with us, and they ought to be proud of us. The Head said so, and he ought to know."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Let's go in and get cleaned before calling over."

The juniors went into the house.

"Well," said Tom Merry, "you're a cheeky set of kids, but you've played up jolly well on this occasion, so—"

"Cheers for Blake & Co.!" said Figgins.

"Bravo!"

And the cheers were given with a will. Blake & Co. walked in with their ears tingling. They had come out ahead, after all, and they were very well pleased with themselves and things generally. The cheers followed them in, and there was no doubt that that day had been signalled by Blake & Co.'s Triumph.

THE END.

(There will be a double-length, complete school tale of Tom Merry & Co. next Thursday. Please order your copy of The GEM Library in advance. Price 1d.)

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 join Muerte's rival, Ruabino. During a performance of Ruabino's circus, Muerte creates a disturbance. He rushes at Joe, who has knocked his hat into the ring, but unfortunately stamps upon the gouty toe of a local publican.

(Now go on with the story.)

The Rival Showmen.

A wild howl rent the air, and the landlord's fist landed in Muerte's chest with a force that sent him sprawling backwards. One of his hands smashed a lady's hat, and the other seized a gentleman's hair, while his feet shot upwards.

The gentleman was angry, but nothing like the lady. Muerte's hand had smashed a sunflower, or an orchid, or one of those representations you see in ladies' hats. It had also severely damaged a bird that had the head of a flamingo and the tail of a bird of paradise, with no perceptible body. At any rate, it was badly damaged, so was Muerte the next moment, for that lady withdrew her hatpin, and inserted it in Muerte's leg as it waved gracefully upwards.

Another howl rent the air, and then Rubby stepped forward, cracking his whip menacingly.

"Understand me, Muerte!" he cried. "If you come here disturbing my patrons in this disgraceful manner, I shall horsewhip you, and have you turned out of the place."

The lady preened the feathers of her bird, stuck her hat on, and sent the hatpin through with a viciousness that nearly jabbed the business end of the aforesaid pin into her husband's eye; and then she fixed a gaze on Muerte that ought to have caused him to tremble.

After that he was as silent as the bird in the lady's hat. For business purposes he wanted to see the show, and so he remained to the end, but Joe found that his tapping duties were at an end, and so he retired to get ready for his turn, trusting that Buster would confine his gyrations to the ring, and not leap amongst the audience.

"Ladies and gentlemen," cried Rubby, when the preliminary ambling round the ring had come to an end, "you are now going to witness one of the most daring performances on the high trapeze that has ever obtained. When I tell you that Leo is about to delight you with his abnormal skill and daring, you may know something of what you are to expect. I may tell you, ladies and gentlemen, however much you expect will be eclipsed as the noonday sun eclipses the lesser lights of the stars. Leo!"

Rubby's last word was said in an impressive whisper, yet it was audible to all, and had Dan Leno or the German Emperor entered the ring, they would scarcely have received greater applause, even though the German Emperor had carried an open telegram in his hand.

Rubby was perfectly satisfied, but Leo was not. His idea had been to go through his ordinary performance, but after that little introduction he felt that something more would be expected from him.

Bowing to the audience, he grasped the rope hanging

NEXT
THURSDAY:

"SKIMPOLE'S FANCIES."

A Double-Length Tale
of Tom Merry.

from the high trapeze, and drew himself up to the top of the booth, hand over hand; then he seated himself on the bar, swung to and fro without holding the side cords, and flung down the rope by which he had ascended.

Leo was quite at home at that giddy height, and his performance gave great satisfaction, while some of the things he did looked so dangerous that some of the female spectators scarcely dared to look at him.

At last he hung by the backs of his knees, then standing the trapeze, he hung over the height by his heels, and it looked so dangerous that even Rubby wiped his brow, and gazed at the daring lad in wonder.

Presently, to the surprise of all, Leo released his hold with one of his heels, and hung by the other one, while as his body slightly turned it seemed inevitable that he must fall.

There was a deep silence in the booth now, and every eye was fixed on Leo. There could be little doubt that most of the spectators expected that he would fall, but he slowly regained his hold with his other heel, then drawing himself up, grasped the bar, and drew himself up until once more he was sitting on it.

It was now that deafening cheers burst forth, and Rubby knew that his spectators were by no means disappointed, while Rubby himself felt greatly relieved, for although the height was so great that he would have been very sorry to see Leo come down.

Once more the daring lad hung by the backs of his knees, and now he worked himself into a high swing; then suddenly he shot into space, and some of the women uttered suppressed shrieks.

Leo turned a somersault, then there was a smack, as his hands gripped the bar of the lower trapeze; and now Jim ascended.

The way those two performed together maddened Muerte, who knew that he could show nothing like it now that Jim had left him.

Cheer upon cheer burst forth as the two exhibited their skill. Their one aim was to please the spectators, and they did not appear to care what risks they ran, provided they could only do this.

All doubt concerning the matter was at an end when they came down, for they were called back three times by the cheering, which only ceased when the unruly Buster was brought into the ring.

"Ladies and gentlemen," cried Rubby, "there is no one in this circus, not excepting Muerte, who runs the other little show, who can sit that horse for five minutes. It would be rather ridiculous for me to speak of Muerte as my rival, because his circus is so utterly insignificant compared to this one. You could easily convince yourselves on that point, provided that you do not mind wasting your money by going there. You have noticed that this Spanish gipsy Muerte has endeavoured to create a disturbance here."

"That is a gross libel," shouted Muerte. "I will make you pay for those words."

"You see, he now wants me to pay the salaries of his unfortunate employees," continued Rubby. "However, that is a most unlikely thing, almost as unlikely as that he will be able to pay them himself, unless, of course, you care to waste your money on his miserable performance. Muerte professes to be a great rider, and I promised to make him a present of a sovereign if he could sit the docile Buster for five minutes. He tried. Well, we won't laugh at the fellow, because I am sorry for him. The best thing for him to do is to go back to Spain, and once more sell baskets and mend tin-pots. I will buy the poor rascal another hat, because I know that he cannot afford to pay for it himself, and I don't suppose he will care to wear this one."

Here Rubby produced the battered tile, and held it up for inspection, and roars of laughter burst forth.

"We can imagine Muerte doing the grand in this tile," continued Rubby, putting on the hat, and cocking it over his left eye, and strutting up and down in the most ridiculous manner. "Consider that I am Muerte, ladies and gentlemen. Unfortunately, I have not got his moustache; but then, you scarcely want to pay fourpence to see the waxed moustache of a Spanish gipsy who used to mend pots and kettles before he tried to run a circus. As I tell you, the fellow fears to mount that horse; but Joe is now going to do so; and you will at once become convinced that Buster is no trick-horse, although he is up to every trick under the sun. Joe will have to ride him bare backed, because, amongst the many other things that Buster objects to, is wearing a saddle. You might as well try to induce a Suffragette to wear whiskers, or to induce Muerte to shave off the bristling blacking brush which he calls his moustache. He only came here to spoil your evening's entertainment, so that I hope you will spoil his entertainment on Monday by not going to it. There is your hat, fellow! You had

better give it a good brush, and use it for everyday wear. I will buy you another for best."

Then Rubby pitched the battered hat towards his infuriated rival, and the spectators shouted with laughter at him.

There was only one possible way to mount Buster, and that was to take him unawares. For some moments Joe tried to do this, and at last he succeeded. After that the show commenced.

Buster's one aim in life appeared to be to unseat Joe; and at first it looked very much as though he would succeed.

For obvious reasons, Rubby was no longer in the ring.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he bawled, as he bolted. "When Buster is performing, there is not room in the ring for two. You will notice that directly."

They did. Buster was all over the place. He reared, and kicked, and plunged; in fact, he did everything that a well-trained horse should not have done, but still Joe retained his seat, and the spectators cheered the plucky young horse-man.

Buster made several attempts to leap the barrier, and it needed all Joe's strength to restrain him. Then he tried to grind his rider's leg against the woodwork, but Joe turned the brute's head into it each time, and gave him more of the whip than he appeared to relish.

The two principal things that Joe had to guard against was that Buster should leap the barrier, or that he should roll.

This latter he kept trying to do, but found his head hoisted in the air, while the whip came down frequently and hard.

After the first five minutes Buster became a little less frantic, but Joe never relaxed his vigilance; and when ten minutes had elapsed, Buster was a mass of foam, and looked as though he had had enough of it.

Now Joe galloped him round the ring, and the cheers rang out as he rode off.

Notwithstanding this, Joe was not at all satisfied with his share in the performance. He had the feeling that the good-natured Rubby had only engaged him because of Jim; and Joe was quite determined to make himself as useful as that worthy.

Rubby's performing lions were a great attraction. They were brought on in a huge iron cage, and Joe watched the trainer put them through their performance with much interest.

This gave him an idea, and he determined to carry it out if he only could get the trainer's assistance. But that worthy was a particularly surly fellow. He was a big man with a black moustache with long waxed ends, and he went by the name of Luigi Mandona. What his real name was, Rubby neither knew nor cared. It was quite sufficient for him that Luigi Mandona could handle the lions with comparative safety. What Joe did not know about lions would have filled large volumes, but he meant to learn a lot about them, with a view to helping Luigi Mandona. But when he approached that worthy after the performance was over, he was received in a very cold manner. Luigi Mandona was not the sort of man to help a lad to step into his shoes.

"See you here," he growled, glaring at Joe as though he had been a lion that required to be quelled; "I ain't 'aving no boys fooling about my business. I'm a Italian, and we're a thumping 'ot sort, so I can tell you."

"I would have taken your agent for an East End costermonger's more than an Italian's, Luigi. But that does not matter. Don't you see; I want to help you in your work."

"So that's your little game is it, you young varmint. I can see through Rubby's move. He wants to work you in my place and get the work done for five bob or so a week, instead of the miserable scrow he pays me—when he's got it!"

"Well, he can't pay you when he hasn't got it, stupid! But Rubby knows nothing about the matter. I haven't spoken a word to anyone. If you like to show me how to manage the lions, I will pay you half a crown a week; and if you don't like that, I'll teach myself."

Luigi was not a man of many words. Joe's offer merely convinced him that Rubby was going to pay that half-crown a week, and that it was simply a trick of that worthy's to take his living from him.

Luigi did not discuss the matter any more with Joe. Uttering some very abominable language, he caught the lad by the back of the neck, ran him to the doorway, and kicked him through.

"Just you tell Rubby that's my answer to his stoopid question!" he roared. "And if he comes any more of his tricks on me, I'll serve him the same road! Strike me silly, if I won't!"

Now, Joe was hurt; but the pain of the thing only made him the more determined to succeed in his enterprise. He knew the names of the two male lions—Ajax and Vulcan—

but he did not know their natures; and he determined to learn them.

Luigi only went through his performances with the lions each day, because whenever Rubby wanted him to do anything else, he always declared that he had to attend to the lions, and was going to teach them a new trick; and Rubby invariably gave way, because Luigi was a man that could not be replaced at a moment's notice. There are plenty of men who will jump through a paper hoop off a horse's back, but not many will enter the lions' den. At any rate, Luigi was not an early riser, and the following morning Joe was up as soon as it was light.

He had gained a little information from Rubby, though he had mentioned nothing of his desperate intention—having an idea that his brilliant scheme would be nipped in the bud if he did so.

Rubby did not know much about lions, but he mentioned that Luigi was the laziest brute on the face of the earth; and that if you took the upper hand with lions, there was no more danger in entering their cage than there was in entering a cage of cats.

"In dealing with a lion—or a lady—all you have got to do, dear boy, is to show them that you are master. They don't care for a man who can't control them."

"What, lions don't, Rubby?"

"No, ladies. If a man doesn't control the lion, the lion eats him. Now you get off to bed, because I'm getting tired."

Joe had obeyed, and the following morning he took the lion tamer's whip, and strode up to the cage in a manner that he intended should impress the two huge male lions, who greeted him with the most ominous growls.

Joe had already made up his mind to enter the cage. He intended to become of service to Rubby, because he foresaw that unless he did so, he would receive a polite request to find a situation elsewhere, and he was not the sort of lad to accept charity.

He drew out the large pin, pulled back the bolts, and entered the small guard cage; then he pulled back the catch of that iron-barred door, and stood in the cage with two growling lions.

He had noticed that Luigi frequently spoke to the savage brutes, and Joe determined to do the same, because he wanted to come out of that cage alive.

"Up, Ajax!" he cried, in the gruffest voice that he could command. "Up, I say, Vulcan! Walk round now! Do you hear me?"

There could not be a doubt that they did, nevertheless, they did not appear to be at all inclined to obey, and the way in which they were growling would have caused a good many lads to leap from that cage, and never enter it again.

But although Joe thought somewhat slowly, when he had once made up his mind, he stuck to it.

Striding up to Ajax, he gave him a cut with the whip.

"Got up, you lazy brute!" he cried. "You have got to go through your performance—or, at any rate, as much of it as I can remember. Now, then, that's better! Walk round. Just you be careful, if you don't want me to hurt you!"

Keeping his eyes fixed upon the awful monsters as he had noticed Luigi did, he walked backwards round the cage, and the two lions followed, growling fiercely all the time. They did not growl at Luigi, but then they knew him. Joe took no heed of that ominous growling. He knew that everyone must run the same risk on entering the cage for the first time, and so he determined to go through with it.

Time after time he walked the lions round the cage, and then he decided that he had gone through a sufficient ordeal for one day, and so he determined to come out.

He had noticed that Luigi lost no time over that operation, and so, as he passed the door of the guard cage, he slipped through, and Ajax made a dab at him with his paw that shut the gate with a clang.

Joe felt quite satisfied, however, and, having bolted the outer gate, he made his way to Rubby's caravan, for he and his comrades had received an invitation to breakfast, on conditions that they cooked it.

Rubby was snoring peacefully in his sleeping-apartment, which was curtained off; but Joe did not trouble to wake him. He knew the sort of breakfast he himself would like, and felt convinced that the easy-going Rubby would be content with the same.

Having lighted the oil-stove, Joe got out some eggs and bacon, then commenced his cooking operations, and was about half way through them when Jim and Leo arrived on the scene.

"Do you think Rubby will mind being woke up?" inquired Joe.

"I don't know," answered Leo; "but we can easily try."

"Hallo, there, Don Rubino! You are not in sunny Spain or Italy, where they sleep all day!"

"Go away! I'm tired!"

"Look here, Rubby, don't you be so jolly lazy. How do

you expect me to be energetic when you set such a bad example?"

"I don't expect you to be anything of the sort, except on the days when your screw is due, and you hurry to receive it. Go away. I am extremely tired."

"Which do you think would be the best way to get him up?" inquired Leo. "Boiling bacon fat, or cold water? We might try the boiling fat first. Get up, Rubby. It's a dreadful thing to see a man of your time of life so lazy."

"Will you go away? I shall give you the sack directly."

"Then I'll go and perform for Muerte, and cut you out. I tell you your breakfast is ready."

"And I tell you I'm tired."

"Well, get up, and then you won't be."

"Well, go away! You can start on breakfasts and save some for me."

"He must be tired, too!" exclaimed Leo, seizing the corner of Rubby's bedclothes, and wrenching them off; then he got the water-jug, and Rubby was up like a shot, for he had not the slightest doubt that Leo would give him a drenching.

Leo just made sure that Rubby really intended to dress, and then he went to the other side of the curtain, and they heard the little showman growling.

"Ha, ha, ha! What's the matter, Rubby?" inquired Leo.

"You have upset all my clothes."

"Pick 'em up again, then."

"I have lost my sock."

"Perhaps you have put it in your pocket."

"No such thing!"

"Well, hurry up. You don't need a sock to eat your breakfast with."

They got Rubby up at last, and after an excellent breakfast, they all went for a walk in the country. Rubby put up at a little inn, where they had dinner at his expense, and when they got back, Joe sneaked off to the lions' cage, for Luigi was out.

The following day was rather a busy one for Joe, because Rubby wanted to go into accounts, and he found Joe a great help in such matters. It is true that he was not very quick. Rubby could add up a column of figures in less than half the time; but Joe was invariably right the first time, while Rubby generally had to go over them three times before he got the correct answer.

"Don't you think if you went a bit slower you would go faster?" suggested Joe.

"I can't, dear boy. I have to turn the amounts into tens before I can add them together, unless I take my fingers. You see, I take a seven and three, then dodge back for an eight, and take a two up at the top—it's the simplest and quickest system."

"It doesn't seem to be a very correct one. You've missed a five out somewhere, and—"

"Look here, Rubby," cried Luigi, entering the caravan, "I'm not going to stand this treatment, and—"

"Oh, go away, you stupid villain!" howled Rubby. "You have made me forget my count!"

"Bother your count!"

"Bother you, I think! Get out of it! How dare you come bothering me when you see I'm busy?"

"You have billed the lions pretty freely for to-night, ain't you?"

"Of course I have, and I've billed you in the biggest type they had got. What more do you want?"

"I'm not going to perform to-night."

Rubby dropped his pen on his account-book, and as it rolled down, it blotted it pretty considerably.

"You must perform to-night, you silly villain! You shall perform!"

"I won't!"

"Why not?"

"I'm not having that boy worked into my place, and so I tell you straight."

"You empty-headed lout, who is working him into your place?"

"You are!"

"No such thing. I have never mentioned such a matter to him, nor even thought of it. But see you here, Luigi, you are paid by the week, and must give me a week's notice."

"I ain't going to do anything of the sort. I've got my last week's screw, and I'm a-going to take the law into my own hands."

"All right, my beauty! So am I!" cried Rubby. "I have always treated you well, and I expect reciprocity. Now I can see through your little game. You want to go over to Muerte. Well, I suppose I can't stop you, and Muerte is getting a bit of his own back in taking you; but—and this is what interests you and me—you shall finish the week's work, or else I will know the reason why."

"I'll never do another turn for you."

"Joe, just tell Jupiter to come this way immediately."

The strong man quickly made his appearance. He did not like Luigi, but that was all the better for Rubby's purpose.

"Now, listen to me, Jupiter!" exclaimed Rubby. "Luigi declares he will not put the lions through their performance to-night. I say he shall, but I can't exactly make him do it. Once for all, are you going to fulfil your contract, Luigi?"

"No, I ain't."

"Well, that's ungrammatical and ridiculous, as you will shortly find to your cost. You know that you have the whip hand of me, because I cannot possibly supply your place at a moment's notice. Well, you are seeking vengeance for nothing, for, as I say, I have always treated you with kindness and consideration. It was only the other day that I raised your screw, and I consider you are behaving with base ingratitude, which is a thing I detest. Now, I can't make you perform against your will, and as it is very certain that I am not going to seek the aid of the law, because I should have to pay the costs, I am going to follow your example, and take the law into my own hands. I am not going to do it myself, because I am not strong enough. But Jupiter is quite strong enough for the purpose. Take that riding-whip, Jupiter, and if you flog him with the severity his behaviour deserves, I will give you half-a-sovereign."

"Right you are, Rubby. I would do it for nothing with the greatest pleasure, for if ever a man deserved a thrashing, it's the one standing there."

"Well, if you prefer to do it for nothing—"

"Not at all—not by any means. I much prefer to do it for half-a-sovereign, and if there's anyone else you would like flogged—"

"Not! You get on with that ungainly brute. I can't afford to pay half-a-sovereign for all the people who deserve to be thrashed. You will find a nice stout riding-whip there. Flog him severely, dear boy!"

"Will he? Do you think as I will stand that 'ere treatment, and at his 'ands?" roared Luigi.

"You are going to take a flogging, just as surely as I am going to take half-a-sovereign for giving it to you," said Jupiter, seizing him by the collar. "Of course, you can fight me first, if you like."

Luigi did not like. He was not so silly as to strike the strong man, because he knew his strength so well. He commenced to howl and struggle, but he did no damage, as Jupiter held him firmly; and that worthy certainly earned his half-sovereign, for he had a good many old scores to settle with Luigi.

"You can stop now, dear boy!" exclaimed Rubby, when the victim was howling for mercy. "I think he has had enough. Here is your half-sovereign. Now, Luigi, you can go as soon as you please."

"I'll never play for you again, strike me silly if I will!" roared Luigi.

"No, you won't play for me again," observed Rubby. "But if you are not very careful, you will dance for me."

"There's such a thing as vengeance!" snarled Luigi.

"Quite so."

"And I'll have it on that boy, jest you see if I don't! I ain't the sort of man to submit to this 'ere treatment."

"Not willingly, perhaps. But you submitted to it all right. The smart of the thing will go off in a few hours, but I want it to be a lesson to you. No doubt you have the power of doing me a considerable amount of harm, and I have taken the only means possible of punishing you. Now you can go."

"I'll take a week's screw in place of notice."

"Then you will have to take it from Muerte, for it is a dead certainty that you will not take it from me. It was you who refused to perform, and you did this after I had got out all the bills, and just after I had raised your screw. You may get more for a week or so from Muerte, but what are you going to do after that? If he engages you, it will only be to do me a bad turn, and you may rest assured that he will sack you as soon as it suits his convenience. Well, you will never come back to me, and if it is difficult to get a lion-tamer, it is also difficult for a lion-tamer to get a place. I will only add that you were quite in error as regards Joe, and you ought to have had the common sense to know that I would never allow a lad of his age to enter the lions' cage. Now go."

"Well, what are you going to do without me?"

"That is my business!"

"I hope there's a riot to-night. I hope the people smash your show up, and it won't be my fault if they don't!"

"Thanks for the information!"

"I'll make you pay for what you have done!"

"Try it on! Go away, you annoy me!"

"Bust you! I'll make you sorry for this day's work!"

I'll show you who's master of the situation! You can think yourself mighty clever, but—"

"I don't think I am clever at all, otherwise I should never have engaged such an utter idiot as you. Be off with you, unless you want another thrashing!"

"I'll make you smart for this, you stupid fat beast!" snarled Luigi, hurrying away. "I'll have a vengeance that will ruin you, jest you see if I don't!"

"Pretty awkward this," growled Rubby. "Who would be a showman? How am I going to appease the public? They will smash the place up if the lions don't perform."

"Let them perform without anyone in the cage," suggested Jupiter.

"Dear boy, can't you suggest anything more brilliant than that?"

"I don't know that I can, unless you go into the cage yourself. That would be bound to cause some excitement."

"Won't do at all. I'm too plump. They would eat me. I really don't know what to do. What's your opinion about the difficulty, Joe?"

"There isn't any difficulty."

"Dear boy, there is. You don't know the public as well as I do. They enjoy the lions' performance, because there's a good deal of risk attached to it."

"Well, they are going to perform to-night."

"Who is going into the cage with them?"

"I am."

"What?"

"I say I am going to put them through their performance. It is perfectly simple. They may refuse to do some of the tricks, but I will make them do enough to satisfy the people."

"The boy is mad!" gasped Rubby. "Do you suppose that because I order a rough a thrashing, I am such a brute as to risk a lad's life for my own profit?"

"I don't know anything about that; but I do know that I am going to put those lions through their performance to-night, so it is useless to argue the matter further. I'm off."

"We are in an awkward predicament, Jupiter," growled Rubby, mopping his brow. "What are you grinning at?"

"You!" answered Jupiter, with more candour than politeness.

"Well, what is there to grin at in me?"

"There is a good lot, Rubby. Some of your sayings are enough to make a judge grin, while some of your actions are enough to make a cat choke itself with laughter; but on the present occasion I was only grinning at you because you have said that we are in an awkward predicament for about forty times. If that's the case, all you have got to do is to get out of it."

"How?"

"I don't run this show."

"You have a lot to be thankful for, Jupiter. It's a weary life, and we were doing so well here. I don't see how we are going to perform to-night without the lions. The public will be furious and wreck the show."

"Tell them the lions are dead."

"My dear boy, that would make no difference. They expect the lions, and whether they are dead or not makes no difference. If I were dead they would expect me to come and crack my whip, and say foolish things."

"You can always do that right enough."

"I get no sympathy. Sympathy is what I need, and a lion tamer. But see you here, Jupiter, nothing shall induce me to take Luigi back."

"He won't ask you, after the flogging I have given him. He's a lot too vindictive for that. He's far more likely to burn your show down, or stick a knife into Joe or you—probably both of you. I suppose it wouldn't do to let Joe go into the cage?"

"Are you mad? I would as soon think of going in myself. I wouldn't even let you go in."

"I know you won't. I don't mind pitching the public out if they kick up a row, but I'm not entering lions' dens."

"There's only one den."

"No, but there are two lions, and I'm not facing them."

"Well, leave me to think the matter over, dear boy," growled Rubby. "If I could only give them an extra instead of the lions! But I know them so well. It would have to be even a more thrilling turn, and I can't give them that. I had a splendid show, too. We should have coined money. There's a lot of tickets already sold. Muerte will be able to laugh at me, and he will get my people to his show. It is a bad state of affairs; but leave me alone to think it out."

"Shall I bring you a chunk of ice to cool your head with?"

Rubby gazed about for a missile; then, picking up a boot, hurled it at the head of his strong man, who promptly ducked; and at that critical moment Muerte opened the door of the caravan, and received the heel of the boot on his nose.

Joe Proves His Worth.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Rubby. "Ha, ha! Sorry, dear boy. Ha, ha, ha! I'm exceedingly sorry!" Then, to show their sorrow, Rubby and Jupiter howled with laughter.

"You fat little villain, you!" howled Muerte.

"Dear boy—ha, ha, ha!—I have said I am sorry. Ha, ha!"

"How can you be sorry when you guffaw like that, you silly brute?"

"You have touched my feelings, and—"

"You have touched his, too," roared Jupiter.

"Some people when their feelings are touched can't help laughing," continued Rubby.

"Muerte isn't one of them," observed Jupiter. "At least, he's not started laughing yet."

"Do be quiet, Jupiter! I was going to say that I once knew a man who always laughed. Couldn't help it. If he went up to a chap who had lost his wife, he would say: 'Sorry to hear of your terrible affliction, dear boy. Ha, ha, ha! Sad thing. He, he, he! You have the consolation of knowing it's a happy release for her. He, he, he!' It's a fact. He positively couldn't help it. If he had told you that his own mother was dead, he would have grinned. Well, I am much the same way, and no doubt that is what makes me laugh when I gaze upon your damaged snout. I don't wonder at your not being able to boot such treatment; but it ought to heal quickly, if you will pardon the little pun."

"I have called here about a man who was in your employ," said Muerte. He had really come to gloat over his success. "I believe the man left you suddenly."

"Let me see. A man with red whiskers, and—"

"No; I mean the man who left you this afternoon."

"Oh, yes; the little, short fellow with the snub nose. He was no good to me, but might suit you."

"I mean your lion tamer, Luigi Mandona."

"Oh, yes, the East End Italian! I remember now. But there are really so many coming and going in a big establishment like mine, that—"

"Bah! Can you give the man a character?"

Now, Rubby knew perfectly well that Muerte needed no character with Luigi, but he pulled out an account-book, and took about five minutes turning the leaves. There was nothing about Luigi in that book.

"Excuse me just refreshing my memory, dear boy, but it is as well to be exact in these matters. Yes, here we are! Good plan to make entries concerning your employees. I advise you to do so when your circus gets larger. How does your nose feel now?"

"Perdition!"

"Sorry, dear boy—ha, ha, ha!—very sorry. Well, Luigi was in my employment some time, and he performed with the lions."

"Is the man honest?"

"I never heard of him robbing the lions. I should say you could implicitly rely on his being quite as honest as you are yourself. Oh, is that you, Joe? Come in! Here is an old friend of yours. I believe you sat on his head once, while Jim flogged him. Well, boys will be boys, won't they, Muerte?"

Joe shifted past the infuriated man, and having got to a safe distance, said:

"What has he done to his nose?"

"Been smelling the heel of my boot," answered Rubby. "I flung it at Jupiter's head, and it hit Muerte's nose. Ha, ha, ha! Quite by accident, and I have told him I am extremely sorry. But about Luigi's character. Do you know anything against him, Joe?"

"Only that he kicked me severely."

"That is in his favour," sneered Muerte.

"It was not in mine," observed Joe. "I think it was in Rubby's favour when he damaged your nose."

"I suppose you think you are smart?"

"I expect your nose does. In other respects, I don't think you are anything like smart."

"Perdition! If you are not careful I will break your head for you."

"You won't do it while Rubby and Jupiter are here."

"Are you going to give me Luigi's character, Ruabino?" snarled Muerte.

"You had better," said Joe. "He needs someone's character, for he hasn't got one of his own."

"That's not bad!" declared Rubby.

"Well," exclaimed Joe, "I can't see that it is very good, but I have the conviction that it is a good deal better than Muerte's character."

"Let him down lightly, dear boy," said Rubby, placing his hand to his mouth and speaking in a stage whisper. "You know what an empty-headed idiot he is. Well, Muerte, my dear fellow, I think you will find that Luigi suits your purpose. I can't say whether he is honest or not,

but if he is, he won't resemble his new employer in that respect. He never robbed me, because I never gave him the chance. It is certain that he won't rob you, because you have nothing worth the stealing. He can go into a lions' cage, or, what is more to the point, come out again. Any idiot can go into the lions' cage. Why, you could, if you had the pluck. I hope, for their own sakes, that your lions would not eat you. No doubt Luigi will be able to perform for you in a manner that will quite satisfy the people who are simple enough to go to your show."

"You cur!"

"No thanks, dear boy! I don't play cards this time of the day; besides, I never play euchre except with honest people."

"Is Luigi sober?"

"I couldn't say. I have not seen him for the last half-hour, but he was quite sober when he left me, and I do not suppose that you would have had the money to make him drunk."

"I don't believe that you are sane."

"Ever noticed, Joe, that lunatics and imbeciles always think other people mad?" inquired Rubby.

"Do you refuse to give the man a character?" snarled Muerte.

"My dear fellow, I keep giving him one. What more do you want me to say?"

"Has he given you entire satisfaction while he has been in your employment?"

"No one ever does. Jupiter did not give me satisfaction when I hurled my boot at his head, and he did not give you satisfaction when he ducked. That duck caused a foul by your 'chicken' the course of the boot. I do not know whether you could call the duck, the fowl, and the chicken a triple alliance. So far as the boot and your nose were concerned, I would call it a cannon off the red."

"You insulting viper!"

"Sad case; the man is seeing snakes now. Well, I don't wonder at it."

"You lying dog!"

"I feel quite sure, dear boy, that if a dog were standing up, you would be running away. But never mind, Muerte; we can't expect a Spanish gipsy and tinker to have any bravery, and you don't disappoint us in that respect. Run away, my lad, I have business to attend to!"

"You miserable, bloated creature! Bah! I would not wipe my feet on you!"

"Dear me, no; you would not be at all likely to do anything like that! It would be far more probable that I should wipe the toe of my boot."

"Lay a hand on me! Only—"

"I wasn't talking about laying a hand on you, dear boy; I was talking of using the toe of my boot to expedite your exit. It is a great scandal that the authorities allowed such a mangy alien to enter England; but I suppose you came before the stringent regulations concerning hydrophobia were in force."

"You dastardly scoundrel, if—"

"Are you going, dear boy?"

"No, you dog, I am going to stay here as long as—"

"Show him out, Jupiter!" said Rubby. And the way Muerte went out caused Joe to roar with laughter. He knew how shamefully the ruffian had treated Jim, and Joe felt glad at the rough manner in which Jupiter handled the Spaniard.

"Rubby," exclaimed Joe, shifting towards the door, "I want to ask you a favour. Read that." Then Joe flung an envelope on the table, and darted from the place.

"I am sorry for the lad," exclaimed Rubby, picking up the envelope. "There is something in his past, and he is going to bolt. Probably Muerte has discovered it, and—"

"You do run ahead!" laughed Jupiter. "Probably he only wants more screw."

"Then he won't get it. I'm raising no screws; in fact, I was thinking of lowering yours. I won't give the boy more. I can't. Ah, the young maniac!"

Rubby had torn open the envelope, and this is what he read:

"I am going to enter the lions' cage, and shall wait there till you come.—Joe."

"Wait there till I come?" yelled Rubby. "Of course the young idiot will! He will never leave the cage. But it's a hoax. He won't do it."

"He will, Rubby!" declared Jupiter.

"Come, hurry up!" cried Rubby, leaping down the steps in a most reckless manner, considering his weight. Then he went at a run towards the booth in which was the lions' cage.

Arrived there, he saw that which caused him to mop his brow and gasp. He was simply speechless with amazement.

Joe was in the cage, nuzzing the two lions walk round, and talking to them as though they had been little puppies.

"There's no danger in lions, Rubby," declared Joe. "Now, then, Vulcan, hurry up, else I shall have to give you a cut with the whip! This way, Ajax! Stop that growling; it isn't a bit pretty!"

"Come out, lad!" gasped Rubby. "Come out, and I'll raise your screw, and flog you!" he muttered beneath his breath. "Oh, won't I flog you for this, you young villain, if you ever do come out!"

"I don't want my screw raised, Rubby," said Joe; "I am quite satisfied."

"I am not. Come out!"

"Will you let me put the lions through their performance to-night if I do come out?"

"Yes; anything you like to ask. Come out!"

"Well, you will have to stick to that," said Joe, slipping from the cage. "I know that you are too honest to make a false promise, Rubby."

"It isn't a matter of honesty, you silly young rascal!" growled Rubby. "If a highwayman had got a pistol to your head, and threatened to blow your brains out unless you promised to send him a thousand pounds on the morrow, you wouldn't keep that promise. You made me promise through fear, and I mentally vowed that I would flog you for this fool's work. So I will!"

"I don't care, Rubby, so long as you keep your other promise! I am determined to go into the cage to-night. You can give me a whacking if you like, and I shan't think any the worse of you; but I'm going to make those lions perform!"

"I won't run the awful risk, boy!"

"You are running no risk at all, neither am I! I tell you that I can do it! Come, Rubby, don't be a beast!"

"Boy, it is because I do not want to be a beast and a scoundrel that I will not let you perform! Do you think, if I had one, that I would let a son of mine go into that cage? Then how can I let another man's son?"

"Leo performs on the high trapeze, and Jim will surely do so."

"That is different. There is risk, I admit. I have gone through it in my time, and know. Listen, Joe, I will return the money taken for the tickets sold, and we will leave this place to-morrow morning."

"That won't satisfy the people. They will be coming here directly. No; I will perform! I have entered that cage before, and will surely do it again; but I would rather do it with your sanction. Luigi did it."

"Trained from early boyhood, and he is a strong man."

"Of what use is strength against two mighty lions?"

"A man knows the risks he takes, and—"

"I know the risks that I shall take to-night. Look here, Rubby, if anything happened I know that you might get into trouble. Very well, you refuse your consent in the presence of Jupiter, then go away, and leave the rest to me."

"Not I, boy! I am not made that way! I give you my consent. I will be answerable for all my actions. After all, I am facing a light danger, you are facing—death!"

Then Rubby strode away, feeling that he had acted wrongly; but he saw no alternative.

That night he had a crowded house. He had made a great feature of the performance with the lions, and as he saw both Muerte and Luigi amongst the spectators, he determined to give them a disagreeable surprise.

Muerte found that it was quite impossible to get a good house at the same hours that Rubby performed, and so he always arranged matters so that his circus opened at different times.

"Ladies and gentlemen," cried Rubby, raising his tall hat, and bowing. "I beg to inform you that the next turn should be my performing lions. At the last moment, my late lion-tamer has refused to perform with the other beasts, and—"

This was all that could be heard of Rubby's words.

Luigi started the hooting, and it was well taken up.

Rubby stood in the centre of the ring, smiling blandly at the excited audience.

"The lions are about to go through their performance!" he shouted at last, and that immediately calmed the excited people. "You see, ladies and gentlemen, we never allow fortuitous circumstances to disappoint you. If Luigi feared to enter the lions' cage at the last moment, we are prepared. It was he who thought to disappoint you by going over to a certain Spanish-gipsy, who is trying to run an opposition show. Muerte did not want Luigi, but he wanted to disappoint you to-night; but he shall not succeed. A brave lad has made a special request to put the lions through their performance, and I have consented."

"As some of you may know, my lions are not worn-out, toothless creatures like those to be seen at Muerte's circus, but they are magnificent brutes, as you see for yourselves!"

The great cage was drawn on by horses, and Ajax and Vulcan certainly looked fierce enough to satisfy anyone.

They roared in a most awe-inspiring manner, and now as Joe stepped into the ring with a riding-whip in his hand, deafening cheers burst forth.

"Joe! The youngest lion-tamer in the world," cried Rubby, "and the bravest! Ladies and gentlemen, I am proud of that lad! He is undertaking this heroic action, so that you may not be disappointed. I shall be obliged if you will remain quite silent during the time he is in the cage."

Joe waited until the cheering had ceased, and then boldly stepped into the small guard cage. The next moment he was in the cage with the lions, and the only sound that could be heard was the growling of the lions, and Joe's voice as he spoke to them.

Vulcan appeared to be in rather a bad temper, for he remained crouching on the floor. Ajax had risen, but did not seem inclined to perform without the other.

"Now then, Vulcan, you lazy rascal!" cried Joe, walking up to him, and raising his whip. "Up you get! Ajax is not going to do all the work! Up, I say!"

The great brute slowly rose, and Joe walked backwards round the cage, while the two lions followed, growling all the time, and showing their huge fangs.

Rubby was having an exciting time of it. He kept his hand on the butt of his loaded revolver, while Jupiter and two other men stood round the cage.

At a sign from Joe, two short pieces of wood were handed to him, and he succeeded in making Ajax take one of them between his teeth, but he had considerable difficulty in inducing Vulcan to do the same, and there was far more growling than Rubby cared for.

"That's right," exclaimed Joe, "only you ought to have obeyed me quicker! Now then, give them to me! Thank you! The bar!"

A wooden pole was run through the centre of the cage, at a height of about four feet from the floor, and Joe made Ajax take the leap first.

Vulcan gave a lot of trouble. He would insist on walking under the bar, instead of leaping over it, and he growled ominously at Joe every time he tried to induce him to obey.

"Let him alone, Joe!" murmured Rubby. "It doesn't matter! The audience are perfectly satisfied! Get out as soon as you can! You are turning my hair grey!"

"He must be made to obey!" declared Joe, giving the great brute a sharp cut with the whip. "Over you go now! Ah, would you? Jump, you silly brute!"

Joe strode up to the growling lion, and raised his whip again, then he took the leap, and after that Joe made him go over several times.

Now two paper hoops were passed into the cage, and, after one or two failures, Joe induced the lions to leap through them, then he slipped into the guard cage; but as he did so, Vulcan sprang at him, causing the heavy bars to rattle.

Now Joe intended to go through the same performance night after night, and he knew that he must gain the upper hand once for all, so he re-entered the cage, and strode up to the lion.

"Look here, just you behave yourself!" cried Joe, giving the growling brute a cut with his whip. "Don't you dare to show your teeth at me, or I'll hit you!"

Joe did not show the slightest sign of fear, and herein lay his safety. Had he wavered for one moment, the fierce brute would have been upon him; but Joe kept his eyes fixed on the lion, and, walking backwards, left the cage without any hurry.

Then the applause burst forth, and Joe had to come back three times before they would leave off.

"It's all right, old chap!" exclaimed Leo, in the company of Jim. "You need not bother yourself any more about not being worth your screw. You will have pleased Rubby to-night, I can tell you; and he's not the sort of man to forget anyone who has done him a good turn!"

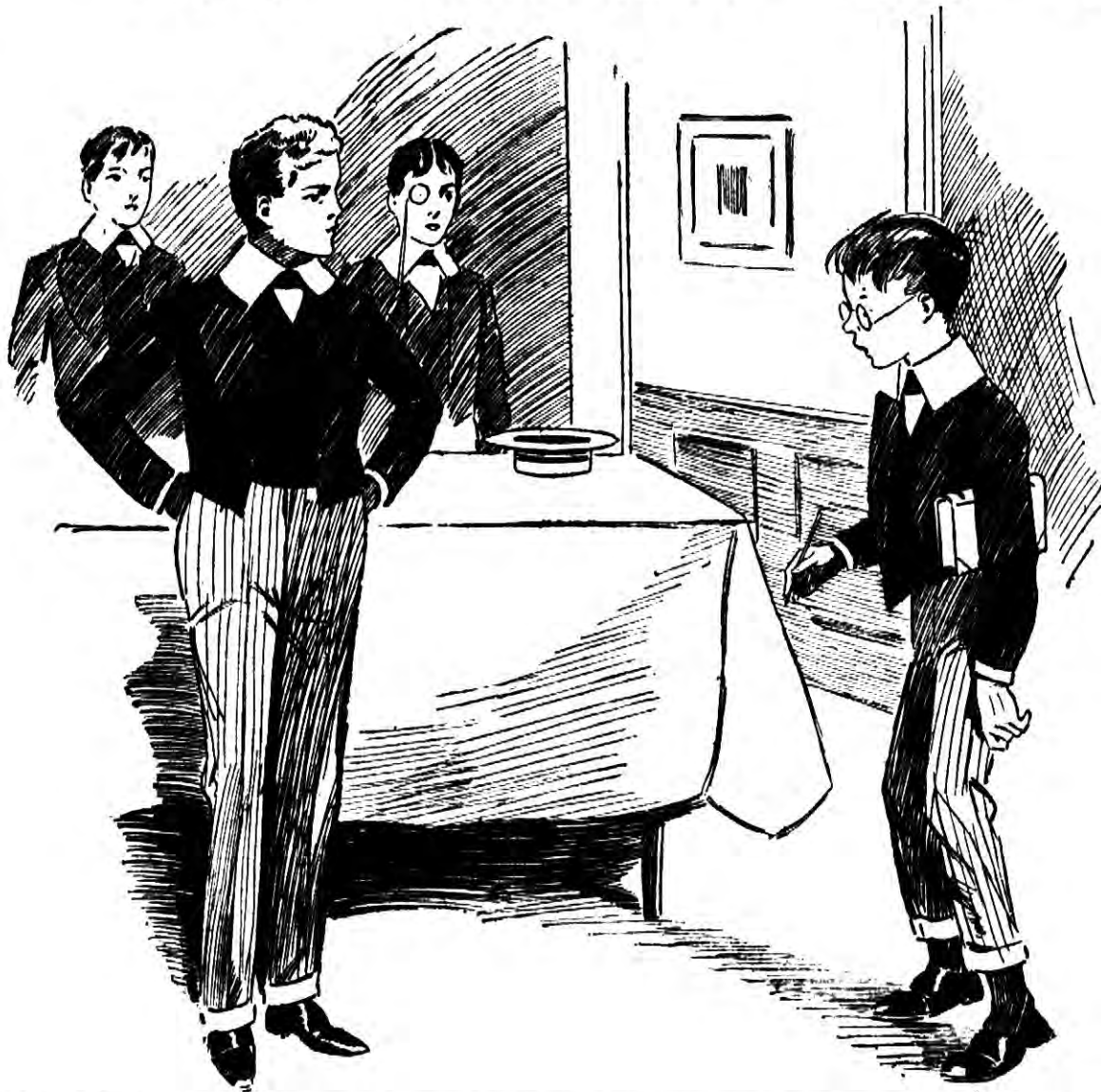
"And what a jolly sell for that beast, Muerte!" exclaimed Jim. "The show went far better than if Luigi had put the lions through their performance! How did you get the brutes to like you?"

"I don't think they do like me so much," observed Joe. "I always feed them, and go into their cage at every opportunity. A lion isn't really a fierce animal, if you treat him properly!"

"He's rather too fierce for my liking!" laughed Leo. "I don't mind frisking about on a trapeze at the top of the booth, but I'm not entering the lions' den, if I know it!"

"Vulcan is the worst one to deal with," observed Joe. "He's a nasty-tempered brute, but I'll make him friendly enough in time. You can't expect them to perform as well with me as they do with Luigi. You see, they don't know much about me yet."

"Oh, here you are, Joe!" exclaimed Rubby, entering the booth, where the youngsters were chatting. "You did splendidly, and I'm going to raise your screw to the same as Jim's. There won't be any jealousy, will there, Jim?"



"My dear Skimmy, if you go to stories for your facts, you will be bound to succeed as a detective," said Bluke, solemnly. "As a matter of fact, the hamper contained several dead bodies."

"Of course not! You can raise his screw to double mine, if you like, and I shall be only too glad!"

"Quite so; but that would not gladden me!" growled Rubby. "However, I want to do the fair thing; and, of course, if Joe puts the lions through their performance, he is worth as much to me as Luigi was—more, in fact, because a boy lion-tamer is something of a novelty. Are you satisfied, Joe?"

"Yes; I'm much obliged to you! I will teach them some more tricks, but I want to get friendly with them first. Vulcan is the one who isn't quite so amiable, but he will soon get to know me!"

"Well, just you keep your eyes open concerning Luigi!" said Rubby. "That man has vowed to have vengeance on you; and, if I know anything about the brute, he won't lose an opportunity of having it! You see, the chances are Muerte will sack him directly he knows that I can do without him."

"The amusing part of the thing is that Muerte will have wasted a week's wages over the brute. It stands to reason that he doesn't want two lion-tamers, and there isn't the slightest chance of Luigi proving a better man than the one Muerte has already got."

"Have you heard anything more of Sir Henry Timkins's complaint concerning the noise of the steam-organs?" inquired Jim.

"Yes; I got a letter from the old ass this afternoon! I think it must have been dictated by his lawyers. I told

the messenger that it should have my immediate attention, and that a reply would be sent within a fortnight. You see, we shan't stay here as long as that, so it will be all right. No; things are going very nicely now!"

"I say!" exclaimed Jupiter, rushing into the place, in a very excited manner. "Where are the lions?"

"In their cage, of course!" answered Rubby. "Do you suppose I keep them in my pocket?"

"No; but they are not in their cage! Look here, I caught that brute Luigi prowling around! He said he had gone for his pipe, and, as he showed me the pipe, I let him go. Then it occurred to me that he might have been fooling around with the lions, so I went to have a look. The cage door was open, and the lions were gone!"

"Quick!" cried Rubby, turning white. "Go and tell all the people that the lions are loose! Hurry up, Jupiter! This is a villainous deed!"

"They may be hiding in the booth," suggested Joe. "I'll go and look."

Rubby followed him, though not liking the job. They lighted a lantern, and then made a thorough search, but the lions were not there; and when the searchers went outside, they saw the brutes' footprints leading across the piece of ground on which the circus was pitched.

"I think we shall be able to track them, Rubby!" exclaimed Joe. "I will get some rope, and then we will make a search. There is one thing, the circus people need have no fear, for it is certain the lions have made their escape

across that field at the back. There is a wood there, and probably we shall find them in it."

"Quite so! But suppose they find some gamekeepers in it first?"

"Well, the gamekeepers will have to risk that! A man is bound to take a certain amount of risks in life."

"That is true enough," groaned Rubby, "especially if the poor brute happens to be a showman! But, you see, meeting a couple of lions in England is not the ordinary risk that a gamekeeper expects to take. However, come along! We must hope for the best, though I rather fear the worst is going to happen over this. There is one thing, Joe. If we can prove that Luigi let those lions loose, and they do any damage, Muerte will have to pay for it! I am not going to be answerable for my lions if a rival showman lets them loose!"

"Don't you think that it is a point that the law will decide for you, Rubby?" inquired Joe.

"Do you know the law on the point?"

"Not I, only it seems to me that if your lions ate, say, Sir Henry Timkins's sheep, he would look to you for damages. He would probably argue that he had some sheep, and you had some lions, and that now you had your lions and his sheep inside them, for which reason you would have to pay!"

"I don't mind them eating his sheep, so long as they don't eat his children, provided he has got any. Then, again, Timkins isn't a nice man by any manner of means; but my lions might think he was nice and tasty, and if they ate him—What?"

"Oh, he will be in bed at this time of night!" said Joe, who invariably looked on the bright side of things. "We shall catch the lions long before the morning!"

"We may, and they may catch us!"

"Well, all your troubles as a showman will be ended then!"

"True, dear boy; but I don't want them ended in that sudden and painful manner. I would much rather bear the troubles than be torn to pieces by two raging lions. Can you see their footprints?"

"No," answered Joe, shining the lantern on the ground; "but they are nearly certain to have made their way to that coppice, so let's come and search there!"

"Pleasant work, this, I must say!" growled Rubby. "I hate lion hunting. I am much too stout for that work. They would be sure to take a fancy to me. Then again, I expect we are trespassing on Henry's ground."

"That doesn't matter. No one is likely to see us. Besides, I suppose the old idiot would rather we trespassed and caught the lions, than let the lions catch him. Now, if we push through these bushes—"

"We shall get scratched. Still, it has got to be done. A colossal brain like mine requires rest at this time of night. I ought to be asleep. Why was I ever so mad as to become a showman? There's no peace in a showman's life. He has to please everyone, and never can please himself."

"Why don't you retire, Rubby?"

"Because the old-age pensions of five shillings a week have not come into force yet!"

"Ha, ha, ha! I'll bet you spend that on cigars. Now, follow this way. We are quite likely to find the lions crouching behind some of these bushes."

"Dear boy, I know it; but I do not know that they will continue to crouch. They may take it into their silly heads to spring, and that would make me jump. I don't like lions. I detest black-beetles, but would much rather meet a couple than I would meet a couple of lions on a dark night like this, and—"

"Now, then, you here!" cried a gruff voice, and a tall form stood before them. "I'm armed, mind you, and if there's any resistance I shall fire!"

"Dear boy, who are you?" gasped Rubby.

"I'm Sir Henry Timkins's head keeper."

"Indeed! Has he escaped?"

"What do you mean?"

"I knew the man was silly, but I did not know that he was actually mad, and needed a keeper."

"I'm his gamekeeper."

"Oh, I see! I thought you were his personal keeper."

"What are you doing in his preserves this time of night?"

"Hunting for lions."

"Come! That won't do for me."

"No! I didn't think for a moment that you would believe it, dear boy. It sounds quite improbable; all the same, it is perfectly true. We are lion hunting, and we cannot find them. Whether those lions will find us or not is another matter, and one that I do not dare to contemplate. Good-night! You run off to your home, and if you meet two male lions, come back and let me know—if they will let you."

"You two will come along with me. You are poaching, and I'm going to take you in charge."

"Joe," exclaimed Rubby, "Fate is against us. We are suspected of poaching for rabbits, when we are trying to catch lions. It is no use fighting against Fate. Personally, I would infinitely prefer coming along with him to continuing our search for the lions, and, as he declares we must do it, and as he is armed with a gun, and so would be able to enforce his orders, why, let us obey them. If people are eaten, we shall have clear consciences. We tried to do our best!"

"Look here, Rubby," exclaimed Joe, "that won't do at all. We must catch those lions—if we can. Let's go for the silly idiot. It's no good arguing with a fellow like that. We can tackle him between us, and then we shall be able to explain why we acted in that manner."

"You will come along with me," declared the keeper.

"Now, look here, old fellow!" exclaimed Joe. "You had better listen to reason. This gentleman is Ruabino, the greatest showman on earth, and—"

"What? Do you mean to say you belong to that circus as has been frightening all our birds away, and kicking up enough din to silence Suffragettes?"

"You are perfectly correct as regards belonging to the circus; though I doubt if the noise caused would be sufficient to frighten Suffragettes. It might, of course, frighten the birds, but I feel quite sure it would not frighten the ladies. Well, we do belong to the circus—at least, I do, and the circus belongs to this gentleman. Two of his lions have escaped, and—That's one of them!"

A mighty roar burst forth, and it was so close that the keeper dropped his gun, bolted for the nearest tree, and swarmed up it in no time.

"Hand me up my gun, mates!" he gasped.

"You won't need it up there," said Joe. "You will be perfectly safe, if you only remain where you are. You see, there are only two lions, and they cannot climb trees—at least, I never heard of one being able to do so. Take my advice. I understand more about lions than you do, though I do not understand very much about the dear beasts."

However, I am perfectly sure that your safest place is where you are, and if you take my advice, you will remain there until the lions are captured. You see, lions do not respect gamekeepers. They would as soon eat one as they would eat Rubby. From a lion's point of view, Rubby would be more palatable, because he is so nice and plump; all the same, a lion will eat stringy meat as well, and I would advise you to stay where you are, and leave well alone!"

"You silly, empty-headed young varmint!" howled the elevated gamekeeper. "How do you suppose that I am going to stop up this tree all night?"

(Another instalment of this splendid serial next week.)

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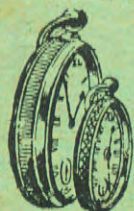
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