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THAT "FOOL" SKIMPOLE.

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TALE OF
TOM MERRY.

BY
MARTIN
CLIFFORD.

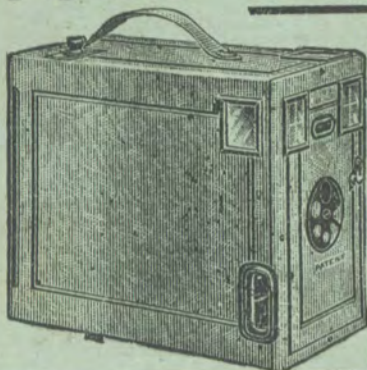


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VOL. 1.

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By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.

Tom Merry Inquires for Skimpole.

"HAVE you seen Skimpole?"

"Skimpole? No. Who wants Skimpole?"

"I do!" growled Tom Merry. "I shouldn't be looking for him if I didn't want him. Have you seen him?"

"No, I haven't," said Gore. "What do you—"

But Tom Merry had walked on. Tom Merry was looking worried, and somewhat wrathful. Gore was the fifth person he had asked about Skimpole, but no one seemed to have seen Skimpole since classes were dismissed that sunny July day.

Skimpole was usually to be found easily enough; in fact, too easily, as a rule. Skimpole was the brainy member of the Shell, and a dreaded bore. No one at St. Jim's was anxious to meet him at any time; but on this particular occasion, when Tom Merry was inquiring for him right and left, he seemed to have vanished into thin air.

"Where can the ass have got to?" muttered Tom Merry. "Blessed if I look for him much longer! Hallo, Blake!"

Jack Blake of the Fourth Form was coming down the passage in white flannels, with his bat under his arm. He stopped as Tom Merry spoke.

"Hallo, kid!"

"Have you seen Skimpole?"

ANOTHER DOUBLE-LENGTH TALE OF TOM MERRY NEXT THURSDAY.
No. 21 (New Series).

"Skimpole? Who wants Skimpole?" asked Blake, unconsciously repeating Gore's question.

"I do."

"What on earth do you want Skimpole for?"

"I want to speak to the beast. Have you seen him?"

"Yes."

"Where is he?"

"Blessed if I know!"

"You said you had seen him!"

"So I did, but it was this morning as he was going into the Shell class-room."

"Oh, don't be funny!" said Tom Merry. "I can't stand it in this hot weather. Do you know where the ass is?"

"No, I don't."

"I've been looking for him all through the house!" growled Tom Merry. "He can't be found anywhere."

"Then I should say you were in luck!" grinned Blake. "Skimpole is generally harder to get away from than to get hold of."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Well, I'm not looking for him for the pleasure of his conversation," he remarked. "It's a matter of business. I've promised him half a column in this week's number of the 'Weekly,' and it goes down to the printer's this afternoon, and Skimpole hasn't sent in his copy."

"Leave him out, then," was Blake's practical suggestion.

The youthful editor of "Tom Merry's Weekly" shook his head.

"Well, I promised him; and, besides, I should have to fill up the space, and I'm not looking for any more literary work just now. Weather's too hot."

"Oh, I don't mind coming to the rescue, in a case like that," said Blake generously. "I have some conundrums on hand that I was going to send in. I can look them out, and you can shove them in instead of Skimpole's article, if you like."

"Thank you very much, Blake, but I'm afraid the readers would get their backs up—"

"Eh?"

"I mean," said Tom Merry hastily—"I mean, there isn't a demand for conundrums just now, and—"

"There's always a demand for the right sort of conundrums, or anything else," said Blake. "Give your readers good quality, and they're satisfied, and my conundrums are quite up to the mark. If that's all you're worrying about, you can set your mind at rest. I'll fetch them—"

"Thanks awfully, Blake, but I promised Skimpole that half-column—"

"If I were editor of a paper, I'm blessed if I would go hunting round after contributions!" said Blake. "I'd make the beggars keep up to time."

"Well, you see—"

"Yes, I see that the staff of the 'Weekly' made a great mistake in making you editor," said Blake. "I don't see what you want to let Skimpole's piffle into the paper at all for. It's bound to be some rot about Socialism, or Determinism, or something—"

"Well, I've told him that I shall cut out all the words of more than three syllables," said Tom Merry. "I gave him a fair warning, and if he puts 'em in, he's only got himself to blame."

Blake grinned.

"Well, the article will be funny, at all events, on those lines. Of course, you'd do better to leave Skimpole out, as a lesson to him in punctuality, and you could have my conundrums—"

"I think I'd better give Skimmy a chance—"

"Then go and look for him, or go and eat coke, or go to Jericho!" said Blake; and he tucked his cricket-bat under his arm and walked off.

Tom Merry resumed his quest. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, Blake's chum in Study No. 6, was the next junior he met, and he stopped to inquire of him. D'Arcy was looking out of the hall window at the sunny quadrangle, apparently in a thoughtful mood. The swell of the School House was dressed with more than usual elegance.

Tom Merry gave him a smack on the shoulder, to attract his attention, and Arthur Augustus turned round with a startled exclamation.

"Bai Jove!"

"I say, Gussy—"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, I wish you would nt gweet me in such an extremely wuff way!" said D'Arcy. "You have quite put me into a fluttah!"

"Have you seen Skimpole?"

"No, I have not seen Skimpole, and I wish you would be a little more careful. It wuffles my jacket to have it thumped in that wuffianly mannah."

"Wherefore this splendour?" asked Tom Merry, looking over the elegant swell of the School House attentively.

"That's a new waistcoat?"

"Yaas, wathah! It's wathah a nobby thing, don't you think so, deah boy?"

"Oh, stunning! And that tie—"

"It's the latest thing in ties. I have given them instructions in Bond Street to send me down the latest things in ties."

"Anything on?"

"Nothin' in particulah," said D'Arcy. "A chap likes to look respectable. I suppose you know my cousin Ethel is stayin' with Mrs. Holmes here?"

"Oh, I see!"

"Cousin Ethel saw me dwessed up in a widiculous fashion last evenin'," said D'Arcy. "You wemembah we had been playin' Wed Indians. I don't know whethah I can quite forgive Blake for placin' me in such a widiculous posish. I have been wathah careful in my dwess to-day."

"Yes, I see you have!"

"Do you think I look pretty well, Tom Mewwy?"

"That's according to what you're trying to look like," said Tom Merry. "If you're setting up as a tailor's dummy, you'll do rippingly!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"But I say, I'm looking for Skimpole. Do you know what's become of him? There's half a column in the 'Weekly' for him to fill, and it's got to go down to the printer's in Rycombe."

"Oh, if that's all the twouble, you have come to the wight quartah!" said D'Arcy. "I have nothin' particular to do just now, and I should be vewy pleased to wite you an article on fashionable waistcoats—"

"Thank you, Gussy, but—"

"I would do up a weally wippin' article, intewestin' and instnctive—"

"I've promised Skimpole the space, you see. Otherwise, of course, I should jump at your offer—I don't think!"

And Tom Merry walked on. D'Arcy screwed his eyeglass into his eye and looked after him.

"Weally, that last remark of Tom Mewwy's savahed of wudeness," he murmured. "I should be stwongly tempted to give him a feahful thwashin' if the weathah was not so beastly warm!"

Tom Merry walked out of the School House. Kildare of the Sixth, the captain of St. Jim's, nodded genially to him as he came down the steps.

"Not at the cricket, Merry?" he remarked.

"I'm doing up the copy for the junior rag," explained Tom Merry. "It's got to go down to the printer's this afternoon, or we sha'n't get it in time. The fellows rag a chap so when the number's late, and if a week's number is missed I never hear the end of it."

Kildare laughed.

"Have you seen Skimpole?" asked Tom Merry. "I've got all the copy in except his beastly article."

"Yes, I saw him in the Close about half an hour ago."

"Thank you, Kildare!"

Tom Merry hurried on, and nearly ran into Figgins & Co., of the New House—the rival house at St. Jim's. Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn stopped, and stared at the hero of the Shell.

"Whither bound in such a hurry?" asked Figgins. "Is there a fire, or a feed, or is a prefect after you to make you put on a clean collar?"

"Have you seen Skimpole?"

"Skimpole? Yes. Who wants Skimpole?"

"I do. I want his copy for the 'Weekly.' It's got to go off this afternoon."

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"TOM AT THE FRANCO-BRITISH."



"In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love," murmured Skimpole.

"Oh, that's all right," said Figgins. "I'll do you an article on cricket—"

"Don't trouble! The cricket article is written, and I've written it."

"I could do you a sonnet, if you like," said Fatty Wynn. "I've often thought I could write a really poetical sonnet on the subject of steak-and-kidney pies."

"You can keep your steak-and-kidney pie sonnets!"

"I'll do you a mathematical article, if you like," said Kerr. "It would give the paper a scientific tone."

"And the readers a headache."

"I've thought of the first line," said Fatty Wynn. "Oh, pie so brown in dish so white! What do you think of that, Tom Merry?"

"Rotten!" said Tom Merry, with editorial frankness.

"Look here, Tom Merry—"

"Have you seen Skimpole?"

"Yes," said Figgins; "he was mooning along under the trees a while back with a book under his arm. He's gone into some nice quiet corner to have a good read on the subject of Determinism, or something equally thrilling."

Kerr shook his head.

"Wrong, Figg. I saw the book he had—it was a volume of Tennyson's poetry."

"My only hat!" said Tom Merry. "Skimpole has taken up Socialism, and then he started as an amateur detective. Is he going in for poetry next?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" cackled Figgins. "Skimpole as a poet would be great. Is it a poem he's writing you for the mag., Merry?"

"No; I understood that it was an article on Socialism," said Tom Merry. "I'd rather have a poem, or anything, but I didn't like to keep on refusing Skimpole. He's a decent sort of ass. Where did you see him last?"

"He went mooning along past the chapel, so I dare say you'll find him there," said Figgins.

"Thanks, Figg!"

And the editor of "Tom Merry's Weekly" hurried on into the quiet, beech-shaded spot behind the chapel, and there he found the amateur Socialist of St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 2.

Something New from Skimpole.

SKIMPOLE was sitting on one of the old benches by the chapel-rails, under the shade of a big beech-tree.

He had been reading, but his book lay open on his knees now, and Skimpole was staring straight before him. Tom Merry followed the direction of his glance, but there was nothing in direct view but an ivy-clad wall. He walked up to the amateur Socialist. It was clear that Skimpole was in a deep reverie, and did not observe his approach.

"Skimpole!"

The amateur Socialist made no reply, and did not even turn his head. Tom Merry put a hand upon his shoulder and shook him. Skimpole started as if out of a dream.

"In the spring a livelier iris changes on the burnished dove," he murmured.

Tom Merry stared.

"Eh—what's that?"

"In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love," murmured Skimpole.

Tom Merry glanced at the book Skimpole had been reading.

It was a volume of Tennyson, and it was open at "Locksley Hall." Skimpole was evidently dreaming—or mooning, as Figgins elegantly termed it—over those beautiful lines.

Tom Merry shook him again.

"Hallo, Skimpole!"

"Hallo!" said Skimpole. "Who's that? Tom Merry! What are you shaking me for?"

"To wake you up."

"I wasn't asleep."

"What are you mooning about for, then?"

Skimpole blinked indignantly at the hero of the Shell. He evidently did not like to hear his poetic reveries described as mooning.

"Look here, Tom Merry—"

"I'm looking at you, aesi! What are you mooning about?"

"I was sunk in a poetic reverie when your approach so rudely disturbed me," said Skimpole.

"Oh, were you?" grunted Tom. "What about the copy for 'Tom Merry's Weekly'?"

"The what?"

"The copy for the 'Weekly,'" bawled Tom Merry.

"Dear me! I had quite forgotten it!"

Tom Merry simply glared.

"You had forgotten that I promised you half a column in the 'Weekly'!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, indeed!" said Skimpole.

"You've been worrying me for weeks to let you shove a rotten article into the paper, and I've given way at last, and now you keep me waiting for the copy, and coolly tell me that you've forgotten all about it," said Tom Merry.

"Yes, let me see—what was the article to be about?" said Skimpole, rubbing his bony, bumpy forehead.

"Socialism, I suppose."

"Ah, yes, Socialism. Do you know, Tom Merry, I am beginning to think that I have devoted too much time to that subject."

"I could have told you that long ago. With your intellect, you ought to be doing the two-times-three-are-two," said Tom Merry.

"Really, Merry—"

"I'm sorry I took the trouble of looking you out. I've had all sorts of offers for that half-column."

"Oh, don't be offended, Merry! It was very kind of you to give me a space in the 'Weekly,' and I am much obliged."

"Well," said Tom Merry, somewhat mollified. "Where's your copy?"

"Upon the whole, Merry, I do not think I shall write an article on Socialism after all. The arrangement about your taking out all the words of more than three syllables would be bound to muck up the article, anyway."

"You can't have it on any other terms," said the editor of "Tom Merry's Weekly," tersely.

"I suppose you would be just as pleased if I did something else instead."

"Oh, yes; more pleased, as a matter of fact."

"Suppose I did a poem—"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"We're crowded with poetry," he said. "There's that poetic serial of Blake's dragging its weary length through number after number. Blake and Digby have both sent in poetry this time, and Fatty Wynn wants to put in an ode to a steak pie, or something of the sort, and I've declined it."

"I could do a really ripping poem," said Skimpole. "I feel in a most poetic mood. I have been reading a lot of poetry lately—"

"And has it got into your head?" said Tom Merry unsympathetically.

"Really, Merry; I wish you would be serious. Have you never, in the spring-time for instance, felt a sort of vague feeling—a sort of something—or—other—"

"Can't say that I have."

"A yearning," said Skimpole—"a yearning, and a sort of—a sort of something, you know—"

"A sort of what?"

"A yearning," said Skimpole—"a yearning, and a sort to fly away on the wings of a dove, so to speak, from the petty cares of this humdrum world—a longing for the unknown and the illimitable?"

Tom Merry looked at him curiously.

"Have you been feeling like that?" he asked.

"Yes."

"At night, or in the daytime?"

"Both," said Skimpole. "At night, when the mantle of darkness has enwrapped the earth, and birds and beasts have retired to their nests—"

"Beasts don't live in nests."

"I am speaking in a poetical sense. At night, when bird and beast are hushed in repose, and only the night winds wake the faint echoes of the forest—"

"What forest?"

"Any forest. At such times, I have felt this indescribable feeling I am describing to you—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I really fail to see why you should receive the outpourings of a heart with ribald laughter, Tom Merry."

"Well, it struck me as comical that you should describe the indescribable," said Tom Merry. "But I suppose that is poet's licence. You say you felt like this at night?"

"Yes; gazing on the myriad stars spangling the deep vault of the firmament—"

"What had you been eating for supper?"

"Really, Tom Merry—"

"It must have been indigestion," said Tom Merry gravely. "I can't imagine anything else that could make a fellow feel like that. Perhaps you want some medicine?"

"If you are going to turn the matter into jest, I shall hold no further converse with you," said Skimpole. "You are gross—exceedingly gross. You do not understand the soarings and outpourings of a poetic soul—" He broke off suddenly, and took out his notebook. "Soarings rhymes with outpourings, now I think of it, and I may as well put it down."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And shall I sing the soul's outpourings,
The wild, untrammelled fancy's soarings."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I can expect nothing but laughter from a fellow who thinks of nothing but cricket on a dreamy, poetical afternoon like this," said Skimpole. "On such a day my whole being is attuned to Nature. My soul rises above its sordid earthly surroundings, far above the grind of class-rooms and dull Latin exercises, and soars in the empyrean—"

"In the what?"

"The empyrean. My soul soars in the empyrean, and my mind wanders—"

"Ha, ha, ha! I've noticed that!"

"And shall I gaze upon her face?
This lovely maid of noble race?"

"Eh?"

"Or will the beauteous maid remain,
The vision of a poet's brain?"

"Did you make up that stuff?"

"Yes. I have written hundreds of lines like that," said Skimpole. "I am idealising the ideal—"

"You are whetting the what?"

"Idealising the ideal. If those words are above your comprehension, I am sorry. It is a continual trouble to me to bring my soaring mind down to the level of the dull intellects among which I live. And shall I see the beauteous maid? Oh, why, why is that joy delayed?"

"What beauteous maid are you speaking of?"

"The realisation of the ideal."

"The what?"

"Oh, pray go!" said Skimpole, with a wave of the hand.

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"TOM AT THE FRANCO-BRITISH."

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of Tom Merry.

"You can never understand the mysterious workings of a poet's soul; the wild and romantic outpourings of a poet's heart. How should you?"

"Am I to have your copy for the 'Weekly,' or am I not?"

"Certainly! I will look over my poetry, and put together a few hundred lines——"

"A dozen will be quite enough."

"It would be impossible to express the fervid soarings and outpourings of my breast in the space of a dozen lines."

"Then you will have to express the soarings without the outpourings, or else the outpourings without the soarings," said Tom Merry. "Anyway, you will have to shove it all into a dozen lines. And if I don't have the stuff within an hour it can't go in. I'd rather put in Blake's conundrums than have the number late."

And Tom Merry walked off.

"Ha!" murmured Skimpole. "They can never understand me. It is impossible. Why was I born superior in intellect to all my contemporaries? It is not a comfort to me. What is this feeling that comes over me—this vague vision of floating beauty, like clouds in a summer sky, that wraps my mind and enthralms my vision in dreamy contemplation of the ineffable? Is it merely the spirit of the poet that moves me—am I in love? Ha, I am perhaps in love with the ideal! What I feel—good, feel rhymes with ideal! I must make a note of that!"

CHAPTER 3.

Skimpole's Ideal.

"FOUND the ass?"
Monty Lowther asked that question, as Tom Merry came into the School House. Lowther and Manners had finished their work upon the number of the "Weekly," and come down from the study to look for their chum.

Tom Merry laughed.

"Yes."

"Is his article ready?"

"No. He's not going to write one."

Manners and Lowther stared.

"Why, what's the matter?" asked Monty Lowther. "He has been bothering us almost ever since the paper started to put in one of his rotten Socialistic articles."

"And now——" said Manners.

"Now he's got new ideas in his head," chuckled Tom Merry. "He's taken up poetry. We never know what to expect from Skimpole, but I confess I should never have dreamed of Skimpole as a poet."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He's mooning about a great deal, as D'Arcy did, when he was in love," said Tom Merry, laughing.

"Perhaps he is in love," suggested Monty Lowther.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Tom Merry, "I shouldn't be surprised. He was gassing a lot of piffle about the ideal and something or other. He says he feels a sort of indescribable something comes over him when he's looking at the stars, or something of the sort."

"That's a sure sign," said Lowther eagerly, "he must be in love. My only hat! I can see some fun in this."

"Yes, rather," agreed Manners. "We must know who it is, too. My aunt! Fancy Skimpole in love! I can imagine him making tender speeches in words of five or six syllables."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You know how a chap gets when he falls in love," said Lowther sagely. "He doesn't care, particularly, what girl it is, so long as he has someone to idealise, someone to listen to him patiently while he talks about himself and his feelings, and all that. That's just Skimpole's mark. He was always a funny merchant; but if he's in love, he'll be a gold mine to us for fun."

"Hallo, what's all that cackling about?" asked Blake, coming in, red and warm, from the cricket-field. "Anything on?"

"Yes. Skimpole's in love."

"Eh! What?"

"Well, it looks like it," said Tom Merry.

Blake roared.

"Bai Jove, Blake, deah boy, what's the joke, you know?" drawled Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, coming up with Digby and Herries.

"Skimpole's in love."

"Bai Jove! Ha, ha, ha! I wegard that as wathah funny, you know."

"What's the joke?" asked a dozen voices, as the laughter of the group of juniors attracted fellows from all sides.

"Skimpole's in love."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Here he comes," exclaimed Mellish, of the Fourth, who was looking out of the door into the sunny quadrangle.

There was a rush of the juniors to the door, to see the object of their interest.

Skimpole was coming towards the School House, with a book under his arm, and a far-away look upon his face.

"My hat!" gasped Gore. "Get back, and let him come in, and we'll chip him, and make him tell us all about it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors crowded back.

Skimpole came up to the School House steps, all unconscious of the reception waiting for him just inside.

He walked into the hall, and stopped in surprise at the sight of the crowd of juniors.

"Hullo," said Gore. "Who is it, Skimmy?"

"I do not think I quite understand you, Gore," said Skimpole, blinking through his spectacles. "Who is whom?"

"She!"

"Is it Mary, the housemaid?" asked Mellish.

"Or the girl in the draper's shop, in Rylcombe?" chuckled Lowther. "If it is, you had better look out for D'Arcy——"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

Skimpole blinked in amazement at the grinning juniors. "I really do not understand you," he exclaimed.

"What is her name?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Whose?"

"Hers!"

"Really, Lowther, you are labouring under an error. There is no her—that is to say, there is no she—I mean, no girl in the case."

"Rats!"

"Really——"

"Yes, rats," said Gore. "We know all about it, Skimpole, and now we want to know who it is. Is your passion reciprocated? If so, I suppose it's a blind girl."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You are quite mistaken," said Skimpole loftily. "I suppose a fellow can adore the ineffability of the inexplicable without being in love."

"The what—of the what?"

"Did you look those words out in the dictionary?"

"I did not look those words out in the dictionary, Mellish. If you do not know what they mean, I will explain them to you."

"Well, what do they mean?" asked Tom Merry.

"Why, they mean—er—that is to say—the meaning is——"

"Bosh," said Lowther.

"No, Lowther, the meaning is not bosh. But I cannot expect your common intellects to understand the thoughts that pass through a brain like mine, and so it really would be useless to explain."

Skimpole passed on, followed by a yell of laughter. In spite of the amateur Socialist's explanation, the juniors were fully convinced that Skimpole was in love, and they were all eager to discover whom the object of his affections might be. Skimpole went into his study, and closed the door.

"How their rude mirth breaks in upon the repose of a truly poetic mind," he murmured. "Where shall I find peace and repose? Good, find rhymes with mind, I must make a note of that. Peace and repose where shall I find, this noise doth vex the poet's mind."

Skimpole looked out of the window. He could see the cricket field from the study window, but the sight of that did not appeal to him. He gazed at the sky, and then at the thick foliage of the old elms.

"In the spring, a livelier iris changes on the burnished dove," he murmured. "In the spring, a young man's fancy lightly turns to thought of love."

Skimpole heaved a deep sigh.

An ideal was an ideal; but, after all, there was something rather cold and lifeless about merely an ideal. Skimpole sighed again. A graceful figure was crossing the quadrangle towards the Head's house, from the direction of the gates.

Skimpole gave a start.

He had seen that graceful, girlish form before, and he knew that it was Cousin Ethel—Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's cousin, who was staying with Mrs. Holmes. But, now, Skimpole more particularly noted Cousin Ethel. He was too short-sighted to be well acquainted with her features, but he knew that she was considered very pretty. Had he found the realisation of the ideal at last?

Skimpole sighed again.

The girl, all unconscious of the commotion excited in the junior's breast, passed on out of sight, and Skimpole gazed after her for about a quarter of an hour after she had disappeared. Gore came into the study, and interrupted his reverie, or he might have stood there for hours. Gore shared that study with Skimpole.

"Hullo," grinned Gore, "still mooning?"

"Eh?" said Skimpole, starting out of his daydreams.

"What is she like?" chuckled Gore.

"Like? She has golden hair," said Skimpole dreamily, "and I think her eyes are blue, but I am not sure."
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Gore, you offend me with your ribald laughter."
 "You had the cheek to say you weren't in love, and now you say she has golden eyes and blue hair."
 "Golden hair and blue eyes."
 "Yes, and what's her name?"
 "I am not likely to take so ribald a person as you, Gore, into my most sacred confidences," said Skimpole. "I refuse to impart to you any further information."
 And Skimpole left the study, leaving Gore cackling like a lunatic.

CHAPTER 4.

D'Arcy Receives Some Kind Offers.

"D'ARCY!"
 It was Skimpole's voice at the door, but Arthur Augustus D'Arcy did not even look round.
 The swell of the School House was standing before the tall glass which had been rigged up in Study No. 6 at his own expense, carefully surveying his reflection through the gold-rimmed monocle that was screwed in his right eye.
 D'Arcy was looking really nice.
 He had clad himself in white flannels, and donned a panama hat, and now seemed to be undecided about the exact tilt he should give to the brim.
 "D'Arcy!"
 "Yaas, deah boy," said D'Arcy, without looking round.
 "Don't bothah me now."
 "I say, D'Arcy—"
 "Pway don't intewwupt me, deah boy. I am solvin' a most important pwoblem, and time is gettin' short."
 "I wanted to speak—"
 "You genewally do, Skimpole. I don't think I've evah seen you when you didn't want to speak, deah boy. But, pway don't speak now. I am dwessin' for a wathah important occasion, and I weally cannot be intewwupted."
 "But—"
 "I am not quite sure whethah to turn the bwim up, or to have it down ovah my face," said D'Arcy reflectively. "I asked Blake, and weceived a wibald weply. He said the more I covered up my face the nicah it would be. Pewwaps, howevah, I had bettah turn it down. It looks more finished."
 "I say—"
 "What do you think yourself?" asked D'Arcy, turning round and facing Skimpole, looking a really very elegant and handsome figure. "What is your twue and candid opinion, Skimpole? Shall I turn the bwim up or down?"
 "Really—"
 "I don't want you to flattah me, or to weply without thinkin'. Which, upon calm weflection, would you considah the best?"
 "Really, I haven't thought about it—"
 "Then think about it now, deah boy."
 "I was thinking—"
 "It's a most important mattah," said D'Arcy. "I am takin' Cousin Ethel on the wivah this aftahnoon."
 Skimpole started.
 "You are taking Cousin Ethel on the river?"
 "Yaas, wathah!"
 "Would you like me to steer for you, D'Arcy?"
 D'Arcy turned his monocle upon Skimpole with a freezing glare.
 "Would I like you to steer for me?" he repeated. "Did I understand you to ask if I would like you to steer for me when I am takin' Cousin Ethel on the wivah?"
 "Yes, certainly!"
 "Cousin Ethel will steer, deah boy; and I assure you I don't want any twange dogs in the kennel, to use a wathah coarse expression I have picked up fwom Blake. No, Skimpole, thank you all the same, but I don't want you to steer for me."
 "I should like to come."
 "I dare say you would. So would a good many othah wottahs, I daresay. When it gets out that I am goin' to take Cousin Ethel on the wivah, I expect I shall weceive a good many offers fwom wawious quartahs."
 "I can steer jolly well—"
 "Wats!"
 "And while floating down the calm of the river," said Skimpole, falling into his dreamy, poetic mood—"while floating on calm waters, when myriad stars spangle the blue vault—"
 "We are goin' out in the daylight, ass!"
 "I mean when the glorious sun is pouring his vivifying rays from the zenith—"
 "If you knew anythin' about astwonomy, Skimpole, you

would know that the sun passes the zenith long before four o'clock in the aftahnoon."
 "I was speaking poetically."
 "Wot! You haven't answered my question yet, and I must be off soon. Do you think I look more wippin' with the bwim of the panamah hat turned up, or with the bwim turned down?"
 "It looks all right either way, as far as I can see," said Skimpole. "I can't see that it matters much any way."
 D'Arcy glared.
 "I wegard it as a most important mattah," he exclaimed. "But, of course, I can't expect a wotten Socialist to understand mattahs of elegant dwess."
 "Really, D'Arcy—"
 "Oh, don't bothah, deah boy! I think, upon the whole, I will turn the bwim up. Yaas, wathah! The effect is weally good," murmured D'Arcy, surveying it in the glass. "I certainly think this get-up is a success." And he turned to the door.
 "I say, if you'd like me to steer for you—" said Skimpole.
 "I would not like you to steer for me, Skimpole."
 "But—"
 "Oh, pway twavel along and don't wowwy!"
 And Skimpole disconsolately travelled along. As he went down the passage, apparently revolving some matter in his mind, from the thoughtful wrinkles on his enormous forehead, Blake came upstairs, and met D'Arcy at the door of the study.
 Jack Blake glanced at the elegant swell of the School House, and assumed an expression of great admiration.
 "I say, that's ripping, Gussy!"
 Arthur Augustus looked pleased.
 "Do you weally think so, Blake?"
 "Yes, rather! The panamah hat suits your style of beauty, too. A fellow with your tall and elegant figure always looks ripping in a panamah."
 "Oh, weally, Blake, you flattah me, though, of course, what you say is quite cowwect!"
 "You're going on the river, I hear, with Cousin Ethel?"
 "That's wight!"
 "You'll find it a bit of a fag to row in this hot weather," said Blake.
 "Yaas, wathah! But the pleasure is worth the beastly work, you know."
 "Well, I don't like to think of you fagging yourself out," said Blake. "I don't mind if I come and row for you, D'Arcy."
 "But I do!" said D'Arcy grimly. "I am not takin' anybody along this time, thank you."
 "I thought I could save you fag."
 "Thank you vewy much, Blake, but I am quite pwepared for it."
 "I shouldn't mind rowing a bit."
 "Don't twouble."
 "Look here, Gussy, I'd like to come."
 "I dare say you would."
 "You young rotter! You think you are going to keep Cousin Ethel all to yourself this afternoon, do you?" growled Blake.
 "Yaas, wathah!"
 "I'll row or steer, just as you like, Gussy."
 "Wats!"
 "You—you—you—"
 "Oh, pway don't be wude, Blake! I should have to ovahlook it, as it is too hot to thwash you. I was goin' to consult you about this tag again. Do you weally think it looks better with the bwim turned up or down?"
 "It doesn't look much anyway on a chivvy like yours," said Blake.
 "Weally, Blake—"
 "The way you'd look best would be with it pinned across your face."
 "I wefuse to listen to these wude wemarks," said D'Arcy, with a great deal of dignity, and he walked towards the stairs, leaving Blake chuckling.
 Digby and Herries were on the stairs. They seemed to be waiting there for Arthur Augustus to come down, for they tackled him at once.
 "By Jove, you do look ripping!" said Digby.
 "Do I weally, Dig?"
 "Yes, I should sav so! Doesn't he, Herries?"
 "Right-ho!" said Herries. "A regular scorcher. I say, Gussy—"
 "Yaas, deah boy?"
 "Would you like me to steer for you?"
 "We were thinking we'd come, and do the rowing and steering, so that you could have a really good time," explained Digby.
 D'Arcy chuckled.
 "What are you cackling about, you image?"



It was possible that Cousin Ethel only wanted to keep Skimpole occupied, so that he would not become too poetical.

"Oh, nothin', deah boy, but I don't want any assistance, thank you. I am quite able to look aftah Cousin Ethel alone."

"But it will be a fag to you."

"I weally don't mind."

"You ought to take care of your health, Gussy."

"My health is all wight, Dig. I must be off."

"You must be," growled Dig—"off your silly rocker!"

D'Arcy chuckled, and went out into the sunny quadrangle. The Terrible Three were chatting in the shade of the elms, and they looked up at once at the sight of the resplendent swell of the School House.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Manners. "Wherefore this thussness?"

"My hat, doesn't he look gorgeous!" exclaimed Monty Lowther. "The sight of him is enough to make the housemaid's heart wobble."

"This is really complimentary of you, Gussy," said Tom Merry, "to dress yourself up like this just to come out and have a chat with us."

Lowther and Manners giggled. D'Arcy turned his monocle from one to the other of the Terrible Three.

"Weally, you are labouwin' undah a gweat mistake, Tom Mewwy," he replied. "I haven't dwessed myself like this to come and chat with you at all."

"Then what's in the wind?"

"I am goin' to take Cousin Ethel on the wivah."

The Terrible Three looked keenly interested at once. Cousin Ethel was as popular with the chums of the Shell as in Study No. 6.

"Good!" exclaimed Tom Merry heartily. "And you want us to come with you? Very good."

"Yes, rather," said Lowther; "I don't mind taking an oar."

"I'll steer with pleasure," said Manners.

D'Arcy smiled.

"I don't think you'll steer my boat," he replied. "I have weceived enough offahs already. Thank you vewy much, but I don't want any help."

"Look here," said Tom Merry, "you can't be allowed to take Cousin Ethel out and drown her, you know."

"Certainly not!" said Manners. "You know you're not safe on the water, Gussy."

"From a sense of duty, alone, we shall have to come with you," Lowther remarked. "It's impossible for us to allow a lady to run such fearful risks."

"Wats!"

"Eh?"

"Wats!" repeated D'Arcy. "I wefuse to take any boundahs with me. That ass Skimpole actually offahed to come and steer, and Blake and Hewwies and Dig all want to come. I should want a Noah's Ark instead of a skiff to take everybody who wants to bore me this afternoon."

"Well, I can't blame you for not taking Skimpole or those Fourth Form kids," said Lowther. "With us it's different. We—"

"Oh, wats!" said D'Arcy. "I'm not takin' anybody. I should like to consult you fellows about one thing—"

"Oh, go on!"

"Would you wecommend me to wear the bwim of this hat turned up or turned down?"

The Terrible Three looked at one another in disgust.

"You utter ass," said Lowther, "wear it how you like. Tie it round your face with a bit of string, and cover up your chivvy."

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"If you'd like me to steer—"

"Wats!" And Arthur Augustus walked on loftily towards the Head's house, where he expected to find Cousin Ethel. The Terrible Three looked after him.

"Young rotter!" said Monty Lowther. "I wish Ethel was my cousin instead of his. I'd show him!"

NEXT
THURSDAY:

"TOM AT THE FRANCO-BRITISH."

A Double-Length Tale
of Tom Merry.

Arthur Augustus knocked at the Head's door. He was admitted, and he asked to see Miss Cleveland.

"Miss Cleveland is not at home, sir," said the maid-servant, with the faintest glimmering of a smile upon her face.

D'Arcy started. That had not occurred to his mind. He had been thinking only of the appearance he would make on the river.

"Not at home!" he ejaculated. "Are you sure?"

"Certainly, sir; she has gone on the river with Master Figgins."

D'Arcy's eyeglass dropped from his eye with the shock.

"She has gone on the wivah with Figgins?" he murmured dazedly.

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you!" said D'Arcy. "Thank you vewy much!" And he drifted out of the house, still looking dazed.

CHAPTER 5.

Figgins Has Bad Luck!

"DEAR me! It is Figgins and Miss Ethel!"

Skimpole was seated on the bank of the river, with a big book on his knees, when the splash of an oar made him look up.

The amateur poet had walked down the river for a good distance from St. Jim's, to be alone with his poetic thoughts. The spot was a very solitary one, a couple of miles from the school by water, though there was a short cut through the woods across country. The Ryll wound on a serpentine course through the fair countryside.

"Figgins!" repeated Skimpole, blinking through his spectacles. "I certainly understood D'Arcy to say that he was taking Cousin Ethel on the river this afternoon."

It was certainly Figgins.

The long-limbed chief of the New House juniors was pulling the boat downstream with a pair of oars, looking very red and ruddy in his flannels, and Cousin Ethel sat on the cushions in the stern, steering, with a sunshade over her head. It was a pretty picture.

Figgins was working hard in the sun, but Figgins was athletic, and hard work was nothing to him. He was evidently enjoying himself, and there was a pleased smile upon the face of Cousin Ethel.

Skimpole blinked at them from the bank.

"Dear me, how very sweet Miss Ethel looks! I think I could write a poem on the subject of golden eyes and blue hair—I mean golden hair and blue eyes. I think I will request permission to enter the boat. It seems to be coming ashore. I am sure that Miss Ethel will be pleased with my conversation after the dulness of Figgins. He is a fellow with absolutely no ideas at all. He can only talk about cricket and athletics, and has never even heard of the higher philosophy."

The boat was bumping into the reeds.

"This is a jolly spot for landing," said Figgins. "Cool and shady under the trees, Cousin Ethel."

Cousin Ethel smiled brightly.

"It is very pleasant, Figgins. How lonely it seems!"

"Yes; it's a nice solitary spot, and no danger of any of the noisy fellows from St. Jim's bumping in here."

"I think I can see someone on the bank," said Miss Cleveland, as Figgins reached for a straggling willow root with his boathook.

"Can you?" said Figgins. "By Jove, it's Skimpole! We'll go further on."

"Not at all!" said Miss Ethel. "I should love to land here!"

"But that chap will collar us at once," said Figgins anxiously.

"Never mind."

"He's a fearful bore! He talks Socialism and Determinism and Schopenhauerism, and all sorts of isms—"

Cousin Ethel laughed.

"I do not mind."

"But I do!" murmured Figgins.

"Did you speak, Figgins?"

"It's exactly as you like," said Figgins. "We'll get ashore here. If he talks too much I'll brain him with the boathook!"

Skimpole laid down his book and rose to his feet. He raised his straw hat to Miss Cleveland.

"Here, lend a hand!" bawled Figgins. "Can't you help a chap to get a boat in?"

"Yes, certainly!" said Skimpole. "I shall be most pleased to lend a hand, Figgins. What can I do?"

"You can help, duffer, instead of blinking there like an owl!"

"I will do my best!"

"Oh, rats!"

Skimpole grasped the bows of the skiff, and pulled her on through the clinging reeds and trailing willows. The jerk he gave was a sudden one, and Figgins, who was standing up, lost his balance, and sat down—over the side!

He sat in the water with a mighty splash, and disappeared.

Cousin Ethel started up, with an exclamation.

Skimpole rubbed his bumpy forehead.

"Dear me, Figgins appears to have fallen into the water!" he murmured. "I wonder why he fell into the water?"

Figgins came up in a second. His red and wrathful face appeared from the surface of the river, and he scrambled through the reeds to the shore.

"You—you utter idiot!" he panted.

Skimpole stared.

"Are you referring to me, Figgins?"

"Yes, you lunatic!"

"I fail to see the justice of blaming me for your own clumsiness," said Skimpole. "You fell into the water—"

"You jerked me over!"

"You asked me to help you!"

"You—you— Oh, if we were alone here, I'd drown you!" muttered Figgins. "You ought to be drowned, or boiled, or something, in the interests of humanity!"

He controlled himself with an effort, and turned towards Cousin Ethel with the sweetest smile he could contrive. The girl was looking very concerned.

"You must be soaked, Figgins!" she exclaimed.

Figgins grinned.

"Well, yes," he replied. "It's rather wet in the water, you know. It was all that duffer's fault, jerking me over. Let me help you ashore."

Miss Cleveland landed. Figgins wrung some of the water out of his clothes. His afternoon's excursion was "mucked up" with a vengeance. His nice white flannels were hanging round his long limbs in limp wetness.

"You will catch your death of cold, Figgins," said Cousin Ethel, with real concern.

"Oh, I'm all right!" said Figgins.

Miss Cleveland smiled.

"You cannot remain here like that, Figgins."

"But—"

"You would catch pneumonia or rheumatic fever."

"I don't mind."

"But I do, Figgins. You must return to the school at once and change your things."

"Oh, really—"

"There is a short cut through the woods," said Skimpole. "If Figgins runs all the way, he can get to St. Jim's in a quarter of an hour."

"I could do it in ten minutes, sprinting," said Figgins disdainfully.

"Then that would be much quicker than pulling back in the boat up-stream," said Miss Cleveland.

"But—"

"You must go, Figgins!"

"But you—"

"I will wait here till you return, and look after the boat, and then you can pull me back to the school—if you wish."

"If I wish!" said Figgins reproachfully.

Cousin Ethel laughed.

"Well, I will wait for you. Skimpole will stay with me to keep me from being lonely, I am sure."

"I should esteem it an honour and a pleasure," said Skimpole, blinking, "so much so, that I cannot really regard Figgins's clumsiness as an unfortunate occurrence. I should be very pleased to pull you back to St. Jim's in the boat, Miss Cleveland, if you wished."

"Not at all."

"For goodness' sake don't venture on the water with Skimpole!" said Figgins anxiously. "He's about as safe as a dangerous maniac in a boat."

"Really, Figgins—"

"I'll buzz off, as you think it best, Cousin Ethel. I'll be back under the half-hour!"

"Very good!"

"Let me rig up the cushions under the trees first."

"Oh, no! I am afraid you will catch cold!"

"I will look after Miss Ethel's comfort, Figgins," blinked Skimpole. "You may safely leave her in my charge."

Figgins looked daggers at the amateur poet.

"You—you—there isn't a word for you, Skimpole!"

"Do hurry, Figgins. I am so afraid for you!"

"I'll go at once, then!"

"Yes, please do; and come back as soon as you can."

"You may rely on that," said Figgins.

"Hurry, then."

"I'm off!"

And Figgins unwillingly plunged into the wood and disappeared. He sprinted towards the school along the shady footpath as he had seldom sprinted before.

CHAPTER 6.

Skimpole's Chance.

SKIMPOLE was beaming. The accident to Figgins had been brought about by his clumsiness, but if he had planned it, it could not have turned out more satisfactory for him.

He was with Miss Ethel, the charming girl upon whom he had lately bestowed the treasures of his idealistic adoration. Fortune had indeed favoured him!

Figgins could not possibly be back under the half-hour, if by then. There was plenty of time for Skimpole to make his way in Cousin Ethel's estimation.

Skimpole picked up his book.

"Are you interested in Schopenhauer, Miss Cleveland?" he asked.

Miss Cleveland made a grimace.

"Immensely," she replied. "But just at the present moment I am more interested in getting a shelter from the sun."

"This tree is most shady."

"It is very pleasant here, if I had the cushions from the boat."

"Oh, pray excuse me!" said the absent-minded Skimpole.

He brought the cushions from the boat, and arranged them for Miss Cleveland. Then he took up the book again.

"My sunshade," said Cousin Ethel.

"Oh, yes; of course!"

The sunshade was opened and set up. Cousin Ethel sat on the cushions, and leaned back against the mossy trunk of the tree. A very pretty picture she made as she sat there, and she probably knew it. Skimpole blinked through his spectacles with delight. He was near enough now to the object of his adoration to see that Cousin Ethel was indeed very pretty.

"I am reading this volume for the first time," said Skimpole. "I wish my German were a little better. I must study more, as Schopenhauer is difficult to read in the original with an inadequate knowledge of the language."

The girl smiled.

"I should imagine so."

"You are probably acquainted with this volume," said Skimpole, "'Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung?'"

"Is it a pretty story?" asked Cousin Ethel.

Skimpole nearly collapsed. He closed the book, laid it on the grass, and sat on it. It was pretty clear that Schopenhauer was quite useless as a topic for discussion with Cousin Ethel.

"N-no," said Skimpole. "And, really, upon a glorious summer afternoon like this, more suitable subjects can be found than pessimistic philosophy."

"I should think so," assented Cousin Ethel.

"In the spring," said Skimpole, "a livelier iris changes on the burnished dove."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; and in the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love."

"Does it really?"

"The poet's soul soars out into the blue depths of the empyrean," said Skimpole. "It there seeks its mate—the realisation of the ideal. Have you ever had an ideal, Miss Ethel?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Have you ever encountered the realisation of the ideal? Through the vague cloudiness of the poetic vision, has there ever beamed upon you the—"

"No, I think not," said Cousin Ethel gravely.

"That moment has come to me," said Skimpole. "The vague ideal has taken actual shape, and my adoration is no longer confined to the airy ineffable—"

"The what?"

"The airy ineffable—"

"Dear me!"

"The airy ineffable. I have beheld a being far removed from common mortals—one raised far above common wants and failings—one who seems to float like the—the—the fleecy clouds above the commonplace earth—"

"How interesting!" said Cousin Ethel. "Would you mind getting the lunch-basket out of the boat, Skimpole?"

Skimpole fell from the skies, as it were, and blinked.

"The—the what, Miss Ethel?"

"The lunch-basket."

"The lunch-basket?"

"Yes; I am hungry."

"You—you are hungry?"

"Yes," said Cousin Ethel calmly. "Don't you ever get hungry, Skimpole?"

"Ye-e-es," murmured Skimpole.

"Well, you may have some of the cake."

"The cake?"

"Yes, there is a nice cake in the lunch-basket."

"The scent of daffodils, the breath of the zephyr, are sufficient nourishment for the poet," murmured Skimpole. "Are they really? Then I am glad I am not a poet," said Cousin Ethel. "Figgins has put a really nice cake in the basket. Mrs. Kenwigg made it herself for Figgins to take out this afternoon."

Skimpole mechanically brought the lunch-basket, and opened it. Upon reflection, he realised that even the most fairy-like of live girls could not possibly live without eating, and it was quite natural for Miss Ethel to be hungry. Yet it was a shock to his ideal. He had never thought of Cousin Ethel in connection with eating at all.

"You may cut the cake," said Cousin Ethel.

"Ye-es, certainly!"

"How long do you think Figgins has been gone?"

"I—I really haven't noticed."

"About a quarter of an hour, I suppose?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Will you have a little of the cake?"

"The cake? Oh, yes, thank you!" said Skimpole. The cake was certainly a very nice one, and it dawned upon him that he was hungry when he came to think about it.

"Yes, I will certainly have some cake."

"Do you know how to open a bottle of lemonade?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Then open a bottle, please."

"Certainly. I was saying that I had met the realisation of the ideal—"

"Yes, but I am thirsty."

It was possible that Cousin Ethel only wanted to keep Skimpole occupied, so that he would not become too poetical, for she hardly nibbled her cake, and only sipped the lemonade. There was a footstep in the wood, and Cousin Ethel looked round, expecting to see Figgins. But it was not Figgins!

CHAPTER 7.

The Terrible Three Take a Hand.

PATTER—patter—patter! Tom Merry heard the sound of running feet, and looked lazily up. The chums of the Shell had been at practice at the nets, and now they were lying on the grass in the shade of a tree, in their flannels, the picture of lazy comfort.

It was the only way to spend a blazing July afternoon. Manners opined, and there were times when the most energetic of fellows felt that they must slack a little.

"Who on earth is that running in this sun?" murmured Lowther, without raising his head. "Somebody in want of something to do, I should think."

"It's Figgins," said Tom Merry.

"Figgins? The ass!"

"He's running as if for a wager!" said Tom Merry, sitting up in the grass, and watching with interest the figure of the New House junior, who had just come in at the gates, and was still on the run.

Lowther and Manners sat up, too. They stared at Figgins. It was certainly a singular time to choose for running, and they were interested. Figgins had to pass within a few paces of the tree to get to the New House, and he came dashing by like a deer.

"I say, hold on!" called out Tom Merry. "What's the trouble?"

Figgins panted.

"Can't stop!"

"What's the matter? The Grammar cads after you?"

"No."

"What is it, then?"

"Can't stop!"

"Aren't you thirsty?" asked Lowther, holding up to view a glass of lemon-squash which had been standing by his elbow.

Figgins halted.

"Yes, by Jove, I am!" he exclaimed. "I'm as dry inside as a limekiln. I've been running ten minutes on end."

"My hat! In this weather!"

"Well, they wouldn't alter the weather to suit me," said Figgins. "Hand over that squash, Lowther. You're a Briton!"

"Here you are."

"Thanks!"

Figgins took a deep, deep draught of the lemon-squash. It was a home-made one, and very pleasant and cool to drink.

"That's good!" gasped Figgins.

"Finish it," said Lowther, "and tell us what's the matter. Your flannels look soaked."

"They are soaked," said Figgins. "I've been in the water. I was done in by one of you School House chumps!"

"Eh?"

"It was Skimpole. He jerked the boat, and sent me into

the water, and Cousin Ethel insisted upon my coming back and changing, in case I caught cold."

"Cousin Ethel?"

"Yes," said Figgins. "We've been on the river."

"I thought D'Arcy said she was going with him?"

"D'Arcy was talking out of his hat, as usual," said Figgins. "I took Cousin Ethel for a pull down the river, and I'm going to fetch her back when I've changed my things. Thanks for the squash, Lowther! Awfully obliged! I was dying for a drink. I must be off now."

"Just a second!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Where did you leave Cousin Ethel?"

Figgins chuckled.

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Oh, if you're going to keep it a secret——"

"And I jolly well am!" said Figgins. "Catch me telling you bouders, and having you go there with some yarn to get Cousin Ethel away——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, I'm up to snuff!" said Figgins. "You won't take me in so easily. So-long! I'm in a hurry."

And Figgins ran on, and disappeared into the New House.

Tom Merry looked at his chums. The three were sitting up in the grass without any thought of lying down again. There was no idea in any of their minds about slacking now. There was a chance of a joke up against the New House dimly in three minds, and clearest in Tom Merry's.

"What do you think, kids?" murmured Tom Merry. "Figgins has stolen a march on us this time, and carried off Cousin Ethel. We thought she was with D'Arcy. That would be bad enough; but, after all, Gussy is a School House chap. But we can't be done like this by a New House bouncer."

"Rather not!"

"Figgins has gone into the New House to change his things," said Tom Merry. "There's not another soul in the House. Kerr and Wynn are gone to Ryecombe, and everybody else is out in this glorious weather."

"That's so?"

"If we followed Figgins in, I dare say we could make it possible to contrive that he didn't come out again in a hurry."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry rose to his feet.

"It seems to me a good idea," he remarked. "We're not going to be done by a New House bouncer."

"Certainly not!" said Lowther.

"But I say," said Manners, "we might fix Figgins up, but how are we going to find out where Cousin Ethel is? He was too deep to tell us."

Tom Merry laughed.

"That's easy enough."

"How so?"

"You remember Figgins mentioned Skimpole. I know where Skimpole is gone. He told me he was going there. That makes it easy enough, I think."

"My hat, rather!"

"Let's go and interview the great Figgins in his baronial hall," said Lowther, jumping up. "No time to lose. He won't lose any."

"Quite right. Come along!"

The chums of the Shell hurried towards the New House. They entered it without encountering a soul. It was, as Tom Merry had expected, quite deserted on that sultry July afternoon. There was nothing to keep anyone indoors, and even the house-dame's tabby cat was sunning himself in the porch.

The Terrible Three quietly ascended the stairs. They did not know exactly where Figgins was, but they expected to find him in the Fourth Form dormitory.

But Figgins had been swift. He had not been in the House many minutes, but he had already changed into clean flannels, and was now in his study giving himself a final touch before the glass.

The chums of the Shell heard him moving there, and Tom Merry peeped in at the half-open door to make sure. There was Figgins, busy and quite unsuspecting. Tom Merry reached round to the inside of the door, and jerked out the key. The noise caught Figgins's ear, and he looked round.

"Hallo, there! What——"

The door was jerked shut. Figgins made a jump towards it. Lowther and Manners held the handle, while Tom Merry inserted the key in the outside, and turned it. The next second Figgins was dragging madly at the door inside.

"Unlock this door!" he roared.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Open this door!"

"Rats!"

"I'll break your necks!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Don't be cads! I've got to get back to Cousin Ethel!"

"She'll be just as pleased if we come instead——"

"You—you—you——"

"This is where we smile!" chuckled Monty Lowther.

"Hear us smile! Ha, ha, ha!"

"You School House beasts——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Open this beastly door!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'll get out of the window with a rope!"

"No, you won't!" chuckled Tom Merry. "We happen to know that your giddy prefect Monteith has confiscated that rope!"

"You beasts!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'll—I'll—I'll——"

"Give us a message for Miss Cleveland, Figgyl!"

"I'll give you a thick ear when I get at you!" roared Figgins, thumping on the door furiously. "I'll wipe up the floor with you!"

"Not just yet, though, unless you can thump a hole in thick oak," laughed Tom Merry.

"School House rotter!"

"New House ass! Are you going to give us a message to Miss Cleveland that you cannot come, and ask us to take her lack instead?"

"No!" yelled Figgins.

"In that case she will keep on waiting for you!"

"Open the door!"

"Not half!"

"You can't keep her waiting!"

"We don't intend to, Figgyl. We're going up the river."

"You don't know where she is!"

"Oh, yes we do! We know where Skimpole is, you see!"

"Rotters!"

"Rats! It will make things pleasanter if you give us a message saying you can't come. Then we can bring the boat back without any bother."

"I won't!"

"Very well. We'll explain that you're detained, and she'll think you're a pig not to send an excuse when you knew we were going."

Figgins thumped fiercely at the door.

"Just you wait till I get within hitting distance of your chivvy, Tom Merry!"

"All right, I'll wait! What about that message, though?"

"I won't give you one!"

"Good! We're off! Good-bye!"

"Hold on a minute!"

"Well, what is it?"

"Tell Cousin Ethel I'm sorry I'm detained by——by a set of rotten cads!"

"Ha, ha, ha! We can't give her a message like that!"

"Tell her I'm sorry!"

"Certainly."

"Say I'm detained by——by an unexpected occurrence, then, and——and asked you to bring her home in the boat," said Figgins. "Oh, won't I make you sit up for this!"

"Perhaps! Good-bye!"

"Beast!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The laughter of the Terrible Three died away. They were gone, leaving Figgins a good deal like a caged tiger in the locked study.

CHAPTER 8.

No Chance for Figgins.

TOM MERRY laughed gaily as the chums quitted the New House. The merry click of bat and ball was still sounding from the cricket-field, but the Terrible Three had no eyes for that.

"We've done the New House this time," chuckled Monty Lowther. "I wonder what Kerr and Wynn will say when they come back and find the great Figgins raging in the study?"

"I wonder!" grinned Tom Merry.

"Hallo, there's Gussy!" said Manners. "Wandering about like the ghost of Hamlet's father, and looking about as cheerful."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was, indeed, looking somewhat disconsolate. He had dressed himself with especial care to take Cousin Ethel on the river that afternoon, and he had never quite recovered from the shock of learning that she had gone boating up the Ryll with Figgins, of the New House.

D'Arcy couldn't understand it!

Ethel might have known—probably did know—that he was going to call for her that beautiful July afternoon. Yet



"Bai Jove, Blake, deah boy, what's the joke, you know?"
drawled Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Skimpole's in love."

she had gone on the river with Figgins—a fact quite inexplicable to the swell of the School House.

"Hallo, Gussy!" said Tom Merry, greeting the elegant youth with a hearty slap on the shoulder. "Have you lost sixpence and found a threepenny-bit, or has an order gone forth that high collars shall be barred by Fourth Form kids, or what's the matter?"

D'Arcy wriggled, and smoothed out a crease in his flannels.

"Pway don't be so beastly wuff, Tom Mewwy."

"Wherefore this pensive brow?" asked Monty Lowther. "When all the world is smiling, why does our one and only Gus look so sad?"

"Oh, don't wot, Lowthah!"

"But wherefore is this thushness that we behold?" exclaimed Manners. "I understood that you were going on the river."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"But here you are——"

"I have had a beastly disappointment, deah boys. Ethel must have forgotten me!"

"Impossible!"

"Yaas, wathah, it does seem imposs.," assented D'Arcy thoughtfully. "But see how the beastly case stands, you know. Of course, I hadn't an actual appointment on the mattah, but I think she might have guessed that I was callin' for her, don't you think so?"

"Certainly," said Lowther. "Perhaps she did guess, and that was the reason she went out before you called."

D'Arcy gave the humorous Lowther a withering glare.

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"So you haven't been on the river?" said Tom Merry.

"No. Cousin Ethel had gone out with that boundah Figgins before I called. It was wathah thoughtless, and I am sowwy for her sake, as she is, of course, depwived of the pleasant time she might have had."

"Hard cheese!" said Tom Merry sympathetically. "Still, I hope she will have a nice time on the river. We are going to do our best."

D'Arcy screwed his monocle into his eye, and surveyed Tom Merry in amazement.

"What's that, Tom Mewwy? What have you boundahs got to do with it?"

"Oh, we're going to take Cousin Ethel on the river, that's all."

"Eh?"

"Good-bye!"

"Hold on a minute, Tom Mewwy! Do I understand you cownectly?"

"I really don't know, Gussy. You must work that out in your head," said Tom Merry gravely.

"But Figgins has——"

"Exactly. Good-bye!"

"But——"

But the chums of the Shell hurried on. D'Arcy stared after them in blank amazement. They passed out of the gates, leaving him still staring.

"I weally do not understand this," murmured Arthur Augustus. "Cousin Ethel has gone with Figgins, I know. Is it poss. that they have got some wheezo for gettin' wid of Figgins? Bai Jove, I shouldn't wondah!"

It was a new idea, and D'Arcy thought it out. He strolled on to think it out, and a voice in the distance suddenly broke upon his meditations. He looked up with a start. The voice came from the window of Figgins's study in the New House, and to D'Arcy's amazement, the face of Figgins was visible there. The chief of the New House juniors was leaning out of the window, shouting.

"D'Arcy! D'Arcy!"

"Hallo, deah boy!" called out Arthur Augustus.

"Will you do me a favour?"

"That depends," said Arthur Augustus. "Aftah the wascally way in which you cawwied off my cousin this aftahnoon, Figgins, I weally think it is like your cheek to ask me to do anythin' of the sort."

"Oh, don't be a cad, Gussy! It's not much."

"Well, what is it, deah boy?"

"Just run up into the House and unlock my door."

D'Arcy stared blankly up at Figgins.

"Unlock your door, Figgins!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. Hurry up."

"But if the door of your study is locked, deah boy, why don't you unlock it yourself?" demanded D'Arcy. "And how could I get into the study anyway if the beastly door is locked, you know?"

"Ass! It's locked on the outside, of course!"

"I wefuse to be addressed as an ass."

"The door is locked on the outside."

"You have called me an ass, Figgins. Unless you withdraw that extremely obnoxious expression, I am afraid it will be impos. for me to hold any furthah conversation with you."

"You young——"

"Eh?"

"I mean I'm sorry I allowed that obnoxious expression to escape me, D'Arcy. I withdraw the word ass."

"That is satisfactory, so far," said D'Arcy. "Unless I am tweated with pwopah respect, I wefuse to remain here."

"Will you come up and unlock the door, old chap?"

"I am not at all sure about it, Figgins. I must become bettah acquainted with the circs. first. How did you come to be locked up in your beastly study?"

"Tom Merry caught me napping."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Why, what are you cackling at, you silly image?"

"I wefuse to be called a silly image."

"I say, come and let me out, there's a good chap!"

"You have addressed me as a silly image!"

"I withdraw it," said Figgins, between his teeth, and mentally promising D'Arcy all sorts of things when the door was once unlocked. "Do come up and let me out, old chap."

"Why did Tom Merry lock you up?"

"I had a ducking, and had to come back and change," explained Figgins. "The beasts have locked me up, and have gone to bring back Cousin Ethel in the boat."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You cackling dummy!"

"I must certainly wefuse to let out any person who chawactewises me as a cacklin' dummy," said Arthur Augustus, with a great deal of dignity.

"I withdraw it," said the unhappy Figgins. "I withdraw anything, if you'll only come and open the door."

"Do you apologise for the use of the expression?"

"Yes, yes!"

"You are sowwy?"

"Yes."

"Awfully, feahfully sowwy?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Vewy well, I will ovahlook the expression, then, Figgins. I am sowwy, howevah, that I shall not be able to let you out of the study."

"I say, Gussy!"

"Undah the circs., I think that study is about the most pwopah place for you," said D'Arcy. "You would only make twouble if I let you out. I am goin' to set my bwains to work to circumvent those boundahs——"

"I'll help you if you'll only come and let me out," said Figgins eagerly.

D'Arcy shook his head.

"I am afraid that undah the circs. it is not poss., deah boy. You are weally much safah where you are, considerin' everythin'."

And Arthur Augustus turned to walk away. Figgins gave a yell.

"You young beast——"

"Weally, Figgins——"

"If you don't come up and unlock the door, I'll lick you to a jelly the next time I come across you!" roared the New House junior.

"Weally, Figgins, you are quite welcome to twy," said D'Arcy. "If you should pwocced to violence, I should have no alternative but to administrah a feahful thwashin'!"

"Come and let me——"

"I am sowwy, but it is not poss.," said D'Arcy, with a shake of the head. "I should wecommend you to do your pweparation now, Figgins. It will save you time in the evenin', you know. Good-bye, deah boy!"

And D'Arcy walked off, leaving Figgins raving.

But D'Arcy did not care!

The voice of the New House junior died away, and when D'Arcy glanced round for the last time, Figgins was silently and furiously shaking his fist from the window. And the swell of the School House chuckled.

Arthur Augustus quickened his pace as he went towards the gates. The thought had crossed his mind that he might get on the track of the Terrible Three, who could not have gone far yet. Then, even if he could not get the better of

his rivals in any way, he could at least join the party on equal terms. They would not venture to have an explanation of what had really happened to detain Figgins, and that would be a trump card in D'Arcy's hand. Arthur Augustus chuckled as he thought of it, and he broke into a run, and went out of the ancient gateway of St. Jim's at a good speed—and then there was a yell, and he reeled back from an impact with a junior who was walking in.

"Bai Jove!"

D'Arcy gasped for breath as he reeled. The junior he had collided with, who happened to be his chum Jack Blake, sat down in the dusty road with a grunt. He jumped up with vengeance in his face, but unclenched his fists as soon as he saw that it was Arthur Augustus who had knocked him down.

"You utter duffer!" said Blake. "What do you mean by bolting out of the gate like that, without looking where you were going?"

"I am extremely sowwy, deah boy!" gasped D'Arcy. "I am in a feahful huwky——"

"What is it?" asked Blake, dusting down his clothes.

"What's on?"

D'Arcy gasped out an explanation.

Blake's eyes twinkled. He gave Arthur Augustus an approving slap on the shoulder that made him reel against the gate again.

"Good egg, Gussy! I'm on this!"

"You needn't dislocate my beastly shouldah and wumple my flannels, all the same," gasped D'Arcy. "I weally wish you would not be so wuff!"

"Herries! Dig!" called out Blake.

Herries and Digby were sitting on the wall across the lane, eating cherries. Jack Blake hurried across the lane to them as he called, followed by the breathless swell of the School House.

"Anything on?" asked Digby languidly. "Don't say you want us to help you in a wheeze this afternoon, Blake. It's too hot."

"Much too hot," said Herries. "Can't be did! Have some of these cherries, Blake, old son? They're better than your best wheezes."

"Blow the cherries! I——"

"Have some, Gussy?"

"I should like come vewy much, deah boy, but I am afraid of stainin' my fingahs——"

"Ha, ha! Good old ass!"

"I object to bein' called an ass——"

"Look here, chaps," said Blake quickly, "no rotting now. It's up against Tom Merry and Figgins, and that ought to be enough for you."

"So it is," said Digby, slipping from the wall. "What's the jape? I'm on if it's anything good and worth the trouble."

Blake explained about the catching of Figgins. The chums laughed till the tears ran down their cheeks.

"Gussy had sense enough not to go and let him out," said Blake. "You wouldn't have expected it of Gussy, but he has streaks of sense sometimes."

"Oh, weally, Blake——"

"We're on in this scene," said Blake. "Do you know which way Tom Merry went, Gussy?"

"I did not see him aftah he left the gates——"

"Trust you to forget something——"

"But, weally, I——"

"Never mind. I know Figgins went down the river when he went out, so we shall find Cousin Ethel down the river. I dare say we can do it quicker by water than Tom Merry can by land."

"Pewwaps he went by boat——"

"Perhaps he didn't! I've just come up from the boat-house, and I should have seen him if he had been there. He's gone through the woods."

"Then let's buck up and get a boat out!" exclaimed Digby. "Four oars pulling down stream will soon get over the distance."

"Three oars, you mean, Dig. I think I had bettah steer, as I find wovin' wathah fatiguin' in this weathah!"

"You'll take your turn at the oar, or be chucked overboard," said Blake. "Come on, and we'll have the boat out in a jiffy!"

The chums of Study No. 6 hurried down to the river. In-side five minutes they had a boat in the water, and were pulling away with the current for all they were worth.

ANSWERS

NEXT
THURSDAY:

"TOM AT THE FRANCO-BRITISH."

A Double-Length Tale
of Tom Merry.

CHAPTER 9.

Blake Scores.

"TOM MERRY!"

It was Skimpole who uttered the exclamation, as he and Cousin Ethel looked up from the lunch-basket.

Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther came out of the wood, and joined them under the tree by the shining river. Cousin Ethel gave the juniors a bright smile.

"I am glad to see you," she said. "Will you have some cake?"

"Thank you!" said Tom Merry. "We will. That cake looks nice."

"It is nice. Cut the cake for them, will you, Skimpole?"

"Ye-es, certainly," said Skimpole. The amateur poet did not seem so pleased by the invasion as Cousin Ethel did. He cut the cake, and handed it round, and the three chums sat down under the tree while he was so engaged, leaving Skimpole rather out of it.

"Have you seen Figgins?" asked Cousin Ethel. "I was expecting to see him when you came."

"He's detained at the school," said Tom Merry gravely. "He's sent a message by us to you. He's sorry he couldn't get back."

"Very sorry," said Lowther. "Awfully sorry," said Manners.

Cousin Ethel looked concerned. "I hope he has not caught cold," she exclaimed. "I was afraid he would, after getting wet through in the river."

"Oh, no," said Tom Merry hastily, "he hasn't caught cold. He said it was an unexpected happening that detained him, but he thought you would excuse him if we came instead to take the boat back to the school. Figgins was awfully cut up at not being able to get back."

"He was making a fearful fuss about it, too," said Lowther.

There was a curious glimmer for a moment in the eyes of Cousin Ethel. Perhaps she suspected something. She did not pursue the topic, however.

"It was very kind of you to come," she said. "I don't know how the boat would have been got back to the school otherwise."

"Oh, that's right enough!" said Skimpole. "I should have rowed you back, of course, Miss Cleveland."

"Cousin Ethel isn't tired of life yet, Skimmy," said Lowther.

"Really, Lowther—"

"Cut Tom Merry some more cake, Skimpole, will you?"

"Certainly, Miss Ethel."

"And open the other bottle of lemonade."

"Certainly."

Whether Miss Cleveland wished to punish Skimpole for the ducking he had given Figgins, or for the boredom he had inflicted upon her for half an hour, we cannot say, but certainly she kept him pretty busy waiting upon the Terrible Three.

As for Tom Merry & Co., they were enjoying themselves. Figgins had well stocked the lunch-basket, and the Terrible Three did full justice to the contents, and Skimpole had a nibble here and there.

The time passed by pleasantly enough, and the sun sank lower in the red west, warning the campers at last that it was near time for them to think of returning to St. Jim's.

Cousin Ethel looked at her little watch.

"Dear me, it is getting quite late!" she exclaimed.

Tom Merry rose to his feet.

"I suppose we had better be getting back," he remarked.

"Oh, yes, we must return now!"

"Where did Figgins put the boat?" asked Monty Lowther, looking round.

The tree under which they were picnicking was a little way back from the bank, and a belt of willows interposed, and shut off the view of the spot where Figgins had moored his skiff.

Cousin Ethel nodded towards the willows.

"The boat is there."

Tom Merry ran down to the bank. He looked through the willows, and he looked up and down the water-side, but he could see no sign of the boat.

"Was it moored, Cousin Ethel?" he called out.

"Yes; Figgins tied the painter to the root of one of the willows."

"That's curious. It's not here now."

"Not there!"

"No. Do you know where it is, Skimpole?"

"It is there, Merry, moored to the willows."

"It isn't, I tell you."

"You must be mistaken," said Skimpole. "It was there when I got the things out of it. You must certainly be mistaken."

Tom Merry seized Skimpole by the back of the neck and ran him through the willows.

"There, ass!" he said. "Look for yourself!"

Skimpole blinked round.

"Dear me! The boat certainly seems to be gone!" he exclaimed. "Unless someone has come along and stolen it, it must have drifted away."

"Nobody could have come along without us seeing their boat," said Manners.

"Unless they crept along close inshore, under cover of the willows," said Monty Lowther.

"By Jove, yes! Well, the boat's gone, whether it's drifted away or been taken. I can't see a sign of it—or of any other."

Tom Merry looked up and down the river. Cousin Ethel was looking concerned. No one of the campers had heard a sound on the river, or seen anything to hint that prowlers were purloining the boat from its mooring-place behind the willows. But the boat was gone, and the party were faced with the pleasant prospect of a long walk back to St. Jim's.

"Hallo, there's a boat!" exclaimed Lowther.

Across the glimmering river a boat pulled out from the thickets which grew down to the water on the opposite bank.

Tom Merry clicked his teeth hard together.

There were four juniors in the boat. One, in a panama hat and spotless flannels, was steering. The other three were rowing. It did not need a second glance to show that the four were the chums of Study No. 6 in the School House at St. Jim's.

"Blake and Co!"

The Terrible Three uttered the exclamation simultaneously.

"The—the rotters!" muttered Tom Merry. "We know, now, who's taken the boat away."

"The wasters!"

"The boasters!"

These compliments were muttered so that Cousin Ethel should not hear them. The girl looked relieved at the sight of the boat. She waved her hand to Blake, and D'Arcy waved his in return.

"Hallo!" called out Tom Merry.

"Hallo!" called back Blake.

"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy. "Fancy meetin' you here, you know! This is wathah an unexpected pleasure, Tom Mewwy!"

"Bring that boat over here, will you?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The boat glided towards the bank, but stopped with a dozen feet of shining water intervening between it and the willows, too far off for any attempt on the part of the Terrible Three to jump into it.

The Fourth-Formers raised their caps to Miss Cleveland.

"So glad to meet you," said Blake. "Would you care for a lift back to St. Jim's, Cousin Ethel?"

Cousin Ethel laughed.

"Yes, I think I should."

"Good! Gussy, get out of that seat!"

"Certainly, deah boy!"

"Some rotten duffer has taken our boat away," said Tom Merry, looking daggers at the juniors. "Did you happen to see it, Blake?"

"I haven't seen any rotten duffers, that I remember, till just now, when you called to me," replied Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha! I wegard that as wathah funnny!"

"Look here," began Manners hotly. "Our boat has been taken."

"Did you come here by boat?" asked Blake innocently.

"Well, no, it was Figgins's boat, really—"

"Where is Figgins, then? I don't see him with you?"

"He's been detained, and we came here to bring the boat back for him."

"And now you look like being detained, too!" grinned Blake.

"Oh, you are going to take us in!"

"We've taken you in already!" murmured Digby. And he jerked his thumb across the river, a gesture which the Terrible Three understood perfectly well. It meant that the purloined boat was hidden in the willows on the other side, and that they could swim for it when Cousin Ethel was gone.

Blake shook his head decidedly.

"No room for four fellows your size in this boat," he replied.

"Oh, it doesn't matter about Skimpole!" explained Lowther. "He can walk back."

"Really, Lowther—"

"So can you," said Blake, grinning. "We can't load our boat up with a lot of rubbish. There's comfy room for Miss Ethel. Bring the boat in shore, chaps!"

The boat came in. The Terrible Three looked very much inclined to make a rush for it. But the presence of Cousin Ethel restrained them. They could not enter into a scrimmage

with the girl looking on. Besides, the Fourth-Formers had the oars ready to drive them back if they made the rush.

Blake jumped into the reeds.

"Let me help you in, Cousin Ethel!"

Cousin Ethel glanced at Tom Merry.

"Oh, please go in the boat!" said Tom Merry, interpreting her dubious look at once. "We can walk back all right, but it would be a long walk for you."

"I think I had better accept Blake's offer, then."

"Oh, yes, please do!"

"Thank you very much, Blake!"

"Not at all," said Blake. "The pleasure is ours."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Blake handed Cousin Ethel into the boat. The Fourth-Formers pushed off. The lunch-basket and cushions were thrown in. D'Arcy arranged the latter for Cousin Ethel in the stern of the boat.

"That is wathah comfy, I think," he remarked. "There is another cushion there in the gwass, Tom Mewwy. Pway throw it to me!"

Monty Lowther picked up the cushion and threw it. It smote Arthur Augustus upon the chest, and he sat down upon the gunwale of the boat, making it rock violently.

"Sorry!" exclaimed Lowther.

Arthur Augustus saved himself with a great effort from going into the water. He stood up unsteadily, and glared at Lowther.

"Lowthah, you clumsy ass—"

"Sit down," said Blake, grinning.

"I wufuse to sit down till I have told Lowthah what I think of him—"

"Sit down!"

Blake gave D'Arcy a gentle tap on the chest, and he sat down suddenly. The boat pushed out into the stream. The Terrible Three watched the Fourth-Formers pull away up the river. Cousin Ethel waved her hand, and the chums of the Shell stood, cap in hand, as the boat glided away. D'Arcy could be seen making excited gestures for some time, apparently still in a state of indignation.

"The rotters!" grunted Manners.

"The beasts!" said Lowther.

Tom Merry laughed.

"No good growling!" he exclaimed. "We did Figgins, and they've done us, and there's no getting out of it. One of us has got to swim over for the boat. They've hidden it in the willows over there."

"It was really inconsiderate of them to put us to this trouble," said Skimpole, "and I regard it as especially selfish of them to leave me here. I wanted particularly to return with Miss Ethel."

Lowther stared at him.

"Why?" he demanded.

"Oh, I know!" chuckled Tom Merry. "In the spring a livelier iris changes on the burnished dove. In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love."

"It isn't spring, now," said Manners. "Do you call July spring?"

"It's all the same to a poet."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You are very ribald on this subject," said Skimpole.

"You would perhaps be brought to a better frame of mind if I were to read to you some verses from my poem."

"Don't bother!"

"I have for the present given up my book, and am writing a long poem instead. There are some stanzas in the fifty-seventh canto that—"

"Let 'em stay there."

"I should not mind reciting you the whole poem—"

"But we should," said Tom Merry promptly. "If you start on that you shan't come in the boat, I warn you."

"I shall certainly not waste my high and fervid thoughts upon such base and commonplace minds as yours," said the amateur poet, loftily.

"Good! Mind you don't, that's all!"

Tom Merry swam for the boat. It was twenty minutes or so before the chums of the Shell were rowing back to St. Jim's in Figgins's skiff. Skimpole was steering, and he was also gazing at the sky. His lips moved sometimes, and it was evident that he was at work upon the fifty-eighth canto of his great poem.

CHAPTER 10.

The Sonnet.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY came along the passage upon which the Shell studies opened, with an extremely determined expression upon his aristocratic face. It was evening at St. Jim's—a hot July evening. Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther, were chatting in the doorway of their study, as the swell of the School House came along, and D'Arcy eyed them rather warily.

"Here's one of the rotters," said Lowther.

D'Arcy adjusted his eyeglass, and stared haughtily at Lowther.

"May I trouble you to wepeat that wemark, Lowthah?" he asked.

"Certainly!" said Lowther politely. "It wasn't addressed to you, but I don't mind repeating it. I said, here comes one of the rotters."

"I wufuse to be alluded to as a wottah," said D'Arcy. "I should be sowwy to have to thwash you, now, Lowthah, as I have somethin' else to attend to; but—"

"You would be sorrier still when you started," said Lowther.

"Peace, my children!" said Tom Merry, with a wave of the hand. "The kids did us this afternoon, but we don't bear any malice. Let dogs delight to bark and bite, let Blake and Digby growl and fight; but, Monty, you should never let such angry passions rise, your little fists were never meant to dot Augustus's eyes!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"What is the animal doing in this passage, anyway?" said Lowther. "The next passage belongs to those Fourth-Form kids."

"I am goin' to see Skimpole," said D'Arcy. "I have somethin' wathah important to say to Skimpole, and I shall probably give him a feahful thwashin'."

"Hallo, Gussy's on the warpath!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"What has Skimpole been doing?" asked Tom Merry curiously. "What are you going to slay him for? He seems to me to be a harmless ass enough."

"Has he been talking Socialism again?" asked Lowther. "Is he going to confiscate your paternal estates when Socialism comes in, and abolish the House of Lords before you have a chance to distinguish yourself there?"

"Pway don't wot, Lowthah!"

"Then what is the matter?"

"It's his feahful cheek!" explained D'Arcy. "At pwesent I can see nothin' for it but to give him a feahful thwashin', but if you can suggest any alternative I shall be gwateful, as it is wathah hot weathah to thwash anybody."

"I should think so, to say nothing of the possibility that he might thrash you," remarked Manners.

"I wufuse to admit any such possibility. When my tempah is woused I am wathah a tough customah to tackle, I think," said D'Arcy. "I shall just wush upon him and give him a thwashin'—"

"But what has he been doing?"

"It's his feahful impertinence. The cheeky wottah has had the awful nerve to fall in love with my cousin Ethel."

"But you've done that yourself in your time."

"That is quite a different mattah," said D'Arcy, with dignity. "The silly ass has been witin' a sonnet!"

"A what?" exclaimed three voices in unison.

"A sonnet!"

"My only panama hat!"

"Cousin Ethel found it slipped under her door," said D'Arcy indignantly. "She gave it to me, and asked me to find out who had sent it, and to tell him not to be silly."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yaas, it's all vewy well to laugh, Tom Mewwy, but I wegard it as a feahful cheek. I knew Skimpole's handwitin' at once, you know, and so I've come here to speak to him about it, and I think I ought to give him a feahful thwashin, too. What is your opinion, deah boy?"

"We ought to see the sonnet first," said Tom Merry gravely.

"I've got the wotten thing here," said D'Arcy, fumbling in his pocket. "Yaas, here it is! Wead the silly wot out, Tom Mewwy."

Tom Merry took the sheet of paper D'Arcy handed to him. It was a gilt-edged, scented sheet, but the great sprawling writing upon it was not very elegant. Tom Merry, amid chuckles from his chums, read out the following sonnet:

"I gaze upon the midnight skies at night,
And in the stars see Ethel's eyes the while;
I gaze upon the sun at noon so bright,
And see the splendour of my Ethel's smile.
I listen to the summer breezes light,
And seem to hear her voice so sweet beguile.
Oh, nothing but the grave and cold grim Death'll
Make me forget the love I feel for Ethel."

Monty Lowther shrieked. Manners gasped. Tom Merry leaned against the door and sobbed. D'Arcy frowned.

"What do you think of that, deah boys?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Lowther.

"My only aunt!" groaned Manners.

"Oh dear, oh dear!" murmured Tom Merry. "It's—it's ripping, especially the last lines. I particularly admire the last lines."



"Cousin Ethel saw me dressed up in a ridiculous fashion last evening," said D'Arcy. "Don't you think this is better, bai jove?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Don't you think he ought to have a fearful thwashin' for his cheek?"

"I don't know about that, but he ought to have one for his rhymes."

"A thrashing won't meet the case!" gurgled Lowther.

"What he really wants is something with boiling oil in it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You chaps can come with me, if you like," said D'Arcy.

"You can see me make an example of the fearful ass."

"Come on, kids," said Lowther. "Lead on, Macduff!"

D'Arcy marched on to the door of Skimpole's study, and knocked. However terrific a temper he might be in, the polite swell of the School House could never have forgotten to knock before entering. He pushed open the door, and entered, the Terrible Three bringing up the rear.

Skimpole was alone in the study. He had a mass of foolscap upon the table before him, and was writing and erasing alternately. He did not look up, apparently not having heard the knock or the opening of the door.

"Skimpole!"

The amateur poet took no notice. His pen scratched away for some seconds, and then he leaned his chin on his hand.

"I must have a rhyme for despair?" he murmured

"Hair—I wonder if that would do? 'I gaze upon your golden hair, and feel the pangs of dark despair.' 'I gaze upon your face so fair, and feel the pangs of dark despair.' That is better, or—'I think for me you do not care, so feel the pangs of dark despair.' H'm! 'It is a pain I cannot bear, to feel the pangs of dark despair.' No, that is not so good. 'Like wounded lion in his lair, I feel the pangs of dark despair.' Good!"

Apparently satisfied, Skimpole began to write again.

"You uttah ass!" said Arthur Augustus.

Skimpole finished the line, and looked up.

"Is that you, D'Arcy?"

"Yes, you silly ass!"

"Please, don't interrupt me now. I am composing a sonnet—"

"You composed this one, didn't you?" said D'Arcy, flinging Skimpole's effusion on the table.

Skimpole started.

"How did you get that, D'Arcy?"

"My cousin gave it me."

Skimpole smiled blissfully.

"Ah, she has sent you with a message to me! She has sent a reply? Dear one, tell me her message—quick!"

"She says you're not to be a silly ass!"

"Eh!"

"Well, to be exact, she said you were not to be silly."

"Silly!"

"Yes, and I have somethin' to say about it myself. Ethel is my cousin—"

"Oh, would she were mine!"

"Yours? You uttah idiot!"

"I mean, would she were my cousin."

"I don't care what you mean. You w'ote this feahful wot and slipped it undah her door. It was like your feahful impertinence! As Ethel's cousin I am bound to pwotect her fwom a wavin' maniac."

"Away, base varlet!"

"What?"

"I love Ophelia," said Skimpole, quoting from Hamlet — "I love Ophelia! Forty thousand brothers could not, with all their quantity of love, make up my sum." The same thing applies to cousins."

"You uttah ass—"

"I refuse to discuss the question with you. I think you must have misrepresented Miss Ethel's message to me."

"If you doubt my honah, Skimpole, I shall have no alternative but to wipe up the floor of the study with you."

"Oh, I don't suppose you would deliberately misrepresent," said Skimpole. "But with your low order of intellect, you would naturally not understand matters of this kind."

"Bai Jove!"

"A commonplace person has no right to interfere with a genius. I request you to retire in order that I may finish this sonnet."

"Wot!"

"Pray go. 'I gaze upon your hair so fair'—I mean, 'I feel a pain I cannot bear, and fair the pangs of dark despair'—Dear me! You are confusing me, and I am getting mixed. Will you retire from the study?"

"Wathah not."

"You are interrupting me."

"I am not goin'," said Arthur Augustus, "until you have pwomised me, honah bwright, to dwop all this silly wot."

"I can promise nothing of the kind."

"Then I shall give you a feahful thwashin'!"

"You do not comprehend these matters. I adore the realisation of the ideal—the incarnation of the ineffable—"

"I don't believe for one moment that you know what one of those words means," said D'Arcy. "I am sure I don't. So don't spout them at me."

"The ineffable is—"

"Wats! Will you pwomise to dwop this wot, or shall I thwash you? I shall be sowwy to have to thwash you on such a sultry evenin', but if you persist in actin' the giddy goat, I shall have no alternative."

"I refuse to discuss the matter," said the amateur poet loftily.

"Then look out, you uttah duffah! Tom Mewwy, what do you think of the mattah? Can I allow this feahful ass to go on plasterin' my cousin with silly sonnets?"

"Certainly not!" said Tom Merry promptly.

"What do you think, Lowthah?"

"I think a feahful thwashin' would about meet the case."

"So do I," said Manners. "Make him eat all his poetry, and swear never to write any more. It ought to be stopped, if only as cruelty to animals."

"You hear that, Skimpole?"

"I am not listening to your absurd remarks," said Skimpole. "'Like wounded lion in his lair, I feel the pangs of golden hair'—I mean, 'dark despair'—"

"Take off your jacket!"

"Please don't interrupt me."

"Are you going to make that pwomise?"

"Certainly not."

"Are you goin' to stop w'itin' this silly wot?"

"You are quite mistaken. It is not silly rot, but first-class poetry, and worth a guinea a box—I mean, a guinea a line."

"Are you goin' to stop w'itin' it?"

"It is impossible for the outpourings of genius to be checked at the bidding of a representative of the extremely commonplace."

"Then I shall have to deal with you wathah severely," said D'Arcy. "In the first place, I will destroy this silly piffle."

The swell of the School House picked up the inkpot, and inverted it over Skimpole's poem. The outpourings of genius were immediately blotted out of view by an outpouring of ink.

Skimpole gave a yell, and jumped up. He went for D'Arcy like a thunderbolt, and the School House swell had only just time to drop the inkpot and put up his fists.

"Goth! Vandal! Hun!" hooted Skimpole.

"Silly duffah!" retorted Arthur Augustus.

"You have spoiled my poem!"

"I am goin' to spoil your face!"

"Go it!" shouted Monty Lowther encouragingly. "Go it!"

And D'Arcy and Skimpole, locked in a deadly embrace, reeled to and fro in the study. The Terrible Three looked on laughing and cheering.

CHAPTER 11. Skimpole is Obstinate.

"H A, ha, ha!"

The loud laughter from the study door was not long in attracting attention. Several fellows belonging to the Shell came out of their studies to look on, and Fourth-Formers came from the next passage. Blake & Co. were among the first to arrive. They had known of D'Arcy's intended visit to Skimpole's quarters, and they guessed what the uproar meant when they heard it.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Blake, pushing his way forward.

"What's the trouble?"

"Gussy is giving Skimpole a feahful thwashin'," said Tom Merry. "Don't stop the fun. This is as good as any circus."

"Better," grinned Blake. "Go it, Gussy!"

"I am goin' it, deah boy," panted the swell of St. Jim's.

"I am goin' to make a tewwible example of this silly duffah. Skimpole, you ass, if you twead on my feet I shall giva you—"

"Leggo my neck!"

"I wefuse to let go your neck! I—"

"Gr-r-r-r-oooo!"

"I am twyin' to get his head into chancewy!" panted D'Arcy. "But the obstinate bwute is stwugglin' so much."

"Go it, Gussy!"

"Buck up, Skimmy!"

The crowd thickened in the corridor. Fellows came from all sides to look on, and giggle and cheer. The uproar was terrific, but no one cared for that. Skimpole and D'Arcy reeled to and fro.

D'Arcy did not succeed in getting Skimpole's head into chancewy. But the amateur poet was getting some punishment. His spectacles had fallen off, and Tom Merry had picked them up and put them on the mantelpiece for safety. D'Arcy's eyeglass was dangling at the end of its cord. His clothes were getting terribly rumpled, but in the excitement of the moment he had forgotten even that.

"You howwid wottah! I will make you w'iggle!" gasped D'Arcy.

"You unpoetical rotter! I'll make you sit up!"

"Go it!"

"Buck up!"

"Play up there!"

The combatants reeled heavily against the table. Study tables were not built to stand that sort of thing. It went over with a crash, and books and papers and ink were mingled in a heap on the floor.

"Oh!" gasped Skimpole. "My poem!"

The next moment he was over, sprawling upon ink and poem, with the swell of the School House sprawling across him.

"Ow! My poem is ruined!"

"All the bettah."

"Beast!"

"Ass!"

D'Arcy sat astride of the chest of his vanquished opponent. He felt for his eyeglass and jammed it into his eye.

"Now, then, Skimpole; are you goin' to pwomise to dwop this nonsense?"

"Never!"

"Then I will wub the ink into your hair and ovah your silly face!"

"Ow! Help!"

"Look out!" shouted a voice from the passage. "Cave!"

It was the warning of a master's approach, but D'Arcy was too excited to heed it. The juniors at the door scattered, and Mr. Railton, the housemaster of the School House, looked in the study, with a frown on his face.

"D'Arcy! Skimpole!"

"Bai Jove! Mr. Wailton!"

"Get up at once!"

Arthur Augustus unwillingly rose to his feet. A little more ink, and Skimpole would probably have made the required promise. The swell of St. Jim's looked decidedly ruffled and rumpled as he stood up. Skimpole sat up in the midst of his wrecked manuscript and blinked. The housemaster looked at them sternly.

"What is all this about?"

"We were havin' a little argument about poetwy, sir," said D'Arcy, after a moment's reflection.

The housemaster could not restrain a smile.

"Is that the way you conduct an argument upon the subject of poetry?" he asked.

"Yaas, sir; undah the peculiar cires. of the case——"

"Then you must learn to argue more quietly," said Mr. Railton. "You will take two hundred lines each."

"Oh, weally, Mr. Wailton!"

"You hear me, D'Arcy? You will return immediately to your own study. If you enter this study again you will be caned."

"But undah the cires.——"

"Go at once!"

"Yaas, certainly, sir, if you insist."

D'Arcy left the study. Mr. Railton looked severely at Skimpole.

"And you had better go and get yourself cleaned, Skimpole," he said.

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Railton walked away. But Skimpole did not go to get himself cleaned. He devoted his attention first to collecting up his wrecked poem. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy returned to Study No. 6, where he found his chums having tea. They had left tea to come and see the row, as a matter of fact.

"Hallo, you do look a sight!" said Blake, glancing at the swell of St. Jim's. "I don't see how we can admit this disreputable-looking bounder into the study!"

"Certainly not," said Digby. "We can't allow D'Arcy to get this study a name for slovenliness."

"Oh, pway don't wot!" said D'Arcy. "I have had a most excitin' time, and it has thwown me into quite a fluttah. My clothes will want pwessin', and I had these same things pwessed only last week. I wegard Skimpole as a beast. Still, I have given him a fearful thwashin'!"

"Is he going to give up writing the sonnets?"

"No, he wefused to do so; but I think I should have brough him to terms if Mr. Wailton hadn't come in at the w'ong moment," said Arthur Augustus.

"Ha, ha, ha! That's the worst of having masters in a school," said Blake gravely; "they're always coming along at the wrong moment!"

"It was weally most exaspewatin'! I shall have to deal with Skimpole again, as it is impos. to allow him to go on actin' in this widiculous mannah. Of course, I know he doesn't mean any harm; but it is widiculous, and I don't want Ethel's name to become a joke, you know."

"You are quite right," Blake said seriously. "You are an ass as a rule, but you're right in this case. Skimpole has got to be stopped."

"If you fellows will back me up——"

"Rather!"

"We could put him through it to-mowwow," said D'Arcy. "We could make him wegarly sit up, you know, and make him sick of the subject. A fwog's-march wound the quadwangle, and a duckin' in the fountain, would make him see weason, pewwaps."

Blake wrinkled his brows in thought.

"Skimpole is an ass," he remarked, "and we ought to be able to jape him out of it. It's no good licking him, Gussy; that will only make him more obstinate. He must be put through it."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We must put our heads together over it," said Blake. "Suppose we have a jaw with Tom Merry after tea, and see if we can think of a really ripping wheeze between us? Entre nous, you know, that chap Merry does have good ideas sometimes."

"Yaas, that's wathah a good plan."

"Then it's settled."

And after tea the chums of Study No. 6 consulted with the Terrible Three, and a plot was plotted for the discomfiture of the amateur poet of the School House.

CHAPTER 12.

A Letter for Skimpole.

"**D**EAR me!" said Skimpole. "That is for me, I suppose."

The Socialist of St. Jim's had just come into his study, after tea. Skimpole usually had tea in the hall with the Form, as his funds did not run to tea in the study. Not that he was shorter of pocket-money than most of the Shell boys, but as a sincere Socialist he was bound to help the needy, and there were always some needy fellows who were ready to borrow of Skimpole when he was flush, and to forget to repay the loans when he was stony. But, as Skimpole put it himself, great men always have to suffer for their principles.

Skimpole had had tea in the hall, and had then sat in the quadrangle in the dusk composing the fifty-eighth canto of his great poem. Now he had come in, looking very thoughtful—or, as Lowther described it, "moony"—and as

he entered the study, a note stuck in the corner of the looking-glass caught his eye.

The envelope was an ordinary square one, and upon it, in a somewhat large hand, was written "Herbert Skimpole, Esq." Skimpole blinked at it a moment before taking it down.

"That must be for me," he murmured. "But I really wonder who has taken the trouble to leave a note for me, instead of speaking to me?"

"That's not for you," said Gore, entering the study as Skimpole murmured the words aloud, and taking down the letter; "it is for me."

"You are quite mistaken, Gore," said the amateur Socialist mildly; "it is addressed to me."

"That makes no difference. The word 'Esquire' shows that it can't be for you," grinned Gore. "As a sincere Socialist, you are bound to ignore absurd distinctions of that sort."

"Yes, but——"

"As the note can't be for you, it must be for me, as I share this study," said Gore, slitting the envelope open with his finger.

"Gore, you must not open my letter!"

"It isn't your letter."

"Give it to me."

"Sha'n't!"

"As a sincere Socialist, I am opposed to violence in every shape and form," said Skimpole, "but if you do not hand over my letter, Gore, I shall be compelled to strike you."

"You'll be ready for a funeral the next minute, then," said Gore. "This letter can't be for you; it's in a girl's hand, and what girl could possibly write to you?"

Skimpole started.

"Are you sure?" he exclaimed.

"Of course I am! You see, it must be for me."

"On the contrary, that circumstance makes it certain that the letter is for me," said Skimpole. "Besides, it is addressed to me!"

"Well, I'm going to read it."

"You're not."

"We'll see," said Gore, taking the letter out of the envelope. "My hat; this will be ripping fun! I knew our champion ass was in love, and there will be some further information in this letter!"

"Give it to me!"

"Rats!"

Tom Merry looked in at the door. He stepped forward and grasped Gore's wrist just as the bully of the Shell was unfolding the letter. Gore looked up with a start and an angry scowl.

"Let go my wrist, Tom Merry!"

Tom Merry's eyes flashed with scorn.

"You are not going to read Skimpole's letter, Gore."

"It is nothing to do with you!"

"Give Skimpole his letter."

"Sha'n't!"

Tom Merry pushed back his cuffs. Gore quailed before the gleam in his eyes, and with a forced laugh flung the letter on the table.

"Of course, I was only joking," he said.

"Of course," assented Tom Merry. "But the joke has gone quite far enough. You'd better take your letter away, Skimpole, or Gore will start joking again when my back is turned!"

"If you think I'm afraid of you, Tom Merry——"

"Oh, shut up, Gore! We all know how brave you are—towards small boys and weedy specimens like Skimmy."

"Really, Merry——"

"Oh, cut along, Skimmy! If you did a little more cricket and a little less sonneting, you wouldn't be so weedy."

"I am much obliged to you for your interfering, Tom Merry. Although I am vastly Gore's superior intellectually, he is physically stronger than I am. I am very much obliged to you."

And Skimpole took his letter, and scuttled away with it. Tom Merry followed, and closed the door of the study. Then he entered his own, in which Lowther and Manners, Blake and D'Arcy were waiting.

Tom Merry shut the door and then burst into a chuckle. Blake looked up inquiringly from the draught-table, where he was playing with Manners.

"Hallo! What are you cackling about, Merry?"

"Skimpole's got the letter!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It was lucky I was on the watch, too! Gore nearly had it from him, and that would have spoiled the fun!"

"Good!" said Lowther. "Now we've only got to await developments!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Meanwhile, Skimpole had hurried out of the School House. He had the letter tightly gripped in his hand, and his heart was beating violently. Gore's statement that it was in a feminine hand had thrown him into a flutter. Was it an answer to his touching sonnet from Cousin Ethel?

It seemed impossible to Skimpole that anybody could read his sonnet without being touched and moved, and naturally the object of his adoration must have a tender heart. It was evident that his love was reciprocated!

He hurried into a lonely spot in the quadrangle, and opened the letter in the light of the moon, just showing in a silver crescent over the corner of the gymnasium roof. The hand was a large one, and looked like that of a school-girl. But Skimpole was unacquainted with Cousin Ethel's writing, so that was no clue to him.

"Dear me," murmured Skimpole, adjusting his spectacles. "I am greatly excited! Is it possible that the object of my adoration is equally permeated with a yearning for the ineffable? Is it possible that during our conversation by the river to-day my intellectual powers struck her and awoke her admiration? She seemed pleased when Tom Merry came, and yet girls are so clever at disguising their feelings. Yes, it must be so!"

And he read the letter. It ran as follows:

"If the writer of the sonnet is in earnest, will he come to the wood-shed at eleven o'clock to-night, to meet one who is also a yearner after the ineffability of the inexplicable? One who amid the giddy throng pines for a kindred soul with whom to exchange elevated thoughts and poetic outpourings and soarings?"

There was no signature. But Skimpole did not need that. The reference to the sonnet was evidence enough as to whom the writer was.

"Dear me!" murmured Skimpole. "It is indeed as I thought—how utterly absurd it was, when you come to think of it, for either Figgins or Tom Merry to enter into competition with me! What is Figgins's athleticism, or Tom Merry's good looks, compared with the vast intellectual endowments I can put against them! I shall certainly keep this appointment, and exchange thoughts and poetic outpourings with the dear girl."

And Skimpole kissed the letter.

"And she returned my sonnet by D'Arcy, in order to throw him off the track," murmured Skimpole. "It was very clever. D'Arcy has not the faintest suspicion that I have cut him out. I am sorry for D'Arcy, and I must be careful not to show any exultation or triumph in my manner to wound him."

Skimpole read the letter through again and put it into his pocket. He slowly took his way back to the School House, his brows corrugated with thought.

"I shall certainly keep the appointment," he murmured. "But when I come to think of it, eleven o'clock at night is an awkward hour. I wish it were possible to see the dear girl and fix an earlier time. The whole place will be in bed, and the doors locked up."

Skimpole started out of his reverie as he felt a slap on the shoulder. Tom Merry stood before him.

"Hallo!" said Tom genially. "Wherefore that wrinkled brow? Are you composing the hundred-and-seventy-seventh canto of a poem?"

"No," said Skimpole; "at the present moment I am not composing my poem. But if you like I will read you some of the stanzas I have already composed. I cannot read you the whole poem, as D'Arcy has brutally destroyed the manuscript—"

"Don't bother!" said Tom Merry hastily. "I'll hear it another time. I—"

"It would be no trouble—"

"I've sent in your poem with the copy for the 'Weekly,'" said Tom Merry, changing the subject. "I had to cut out six lines to make it go in. That doesn't matter, does it?"

Skimpole blinked.

"I am afraid it will alter the sense of it, Merry."

"Well, I couldn't find any sense in it," said the editor of "Tom Merry's Weekly." "I read it through before and after altering, and there didn't seem to be less meaning than before. By the way, it was meant to mean something, I suppose?"

"Certainly!"

"What did it imply, then?"

"The fervid outpourings of a soaring soul—"

"Oh, I see! Well, I expect it will be all right with a few lines cut out. It will make it more like modern poetry, too, if you have to guess what it means. I say, Skimmy, are you game for a lark to-night?"

"A lark!" said Skimpole. "What sort of a lark?"

"How do you like the idea of raiding the Fourth-Form dormitory about eleven o'clock?" asked Tom Merry.

Skimpole started.

At eleven o'clock he had to be in the woodshed, exchanging elevated thoughts and poetic outpourings with his charmer. It would be distinctly annoying if the Shell were awake and on the warpath at that hour. His excursion to the woodshed could hardly be kept a secret.

"I say, Merry, I—I—I wish—"

"You wish to join in the raid? Good!"

"No; I don't mean that. I wish you'd put off the raid till another night, and then I'd join you with pleasure."

"Why not to-night, Skimmy?"

"I—I've got an engagement."

"Oh, I mean after lights out!"

"But my engagement is after lights out," said Skimpole; "in fact, I was thinking of taking you into my confidence over the matter."

"Thank you!" said Tom Merry.

"Not at all. I want you to help me. I have to leave the School House shortly before eleven o'clock to—keep an appointment—"

"My only hat!"

"I have never broken bounds by night before," said Skimpole. "As a sincere Socialist, I am bound to obey all laws and rules until they are proved to be wrong, and so I have always endeavoured to keep the college rules. I believe that you have been out of the house after lights out, though."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Yes, I think so, Skimmy—only for fun, of course."

"Yes, of course. You are not the kind of fellow to break bounds, like Gore, for instance, for evil purposes," said Skimpole. "As you know how to get out of the house after it is locked up, however, I should like to have your assistance in this matter. Under a better system of school government, I should acquaint the housemaster with my desire to go out to-night, and ask him to lend me a latch-key, but under the present circumstances, that is scarcely feasible."

"Well, you could do it," said Tom Merry. "Only you'd be more likely to get a licking than a latch-key, that's all."

"I fear so. The liberty due to every junior is not considered at all in making the rules of a school—"

"Hard cheese, isn't it? But if you want to get out, you've come to the right person for help. What's the matter with being lowered on a rope from the window of the Shell dormitory?"

Skimpole looked dubious.

"Would it be safe?"

"Well, I've done it, and I'm no cleverer or pluckier than you are, Skimmy, and I haven't your great intellectual powers, either."

"That is true. I suppose I can venture to be lowered on a rope from the dormitory-window," said Skimpole. "You alone could not manage it, though."

"Oh, Manners and Lowther will help, of course!"

"What about the raid you were speaking of—"

"That can be left over till another time."

"I am really very much obliged to you, Merry. You have got me out of what might have proved a serious difficulty."

"Hold on," said Tom Merry. "I'm willing to help you to get out of the dormitory-window, understand. I'm not responsible for anything that follows."

"Oh, exactly! I should not be so unjust as to hold you responsible for anything that followed, Merry."

"I don't know. You might change your views about that when the time came."

"Oh, not at all!"

"Then that's arranged," said Tom Merry. "At eleven o'clock to-night we shift you out of the window of the Shell dormitory."

"Not at eleven, Merry. I have to be at the woodshed by eleven—I mean, have to keep my appointment at eleven o'clock. I think a quarter to eleven is better."

"Very good—make it a quarter to eleven."

And Skimpole went on his way rejoicing. Tom Merry also went on his way rejoicing; and when he told his chums of that chat with Skimpole, they rejoiced also.

CHAPTER 13.

Skimpole keeps the Appointment.

DAKNESS and silence enwrapped the ancient buildings of St. Jim's. The quarter to the hour had chimed out from the tower, and silence had fallen again, broken only by the distant noise of a dog howling at the moon. Over the old school the moon floated in a mass of clouds, shedding a dim light on the quadrangle. There was at least one person in the Shell dormitory in the School House who was wide awake, and he started up from bed as the quarter struck.



"What is your true and candid opinion, Skimpole?" inquired D'Arcy. "Shall I turn the brim of my panama up—or down?"

It was Skimpole.

Skimpole's heart was beating. He was excited. It was his first appointment of this kind, and though he wished it had been made at a more seasonable hour, he was looking forward to it very much. To exchange poetic soarings and outpourings in the woodshed with a charming girl who knew how to prize intellect above mere good looks, was an attractive prospect to the amateur poet.

"Tom Merry!"

Skimpole whispered the name, fully expecting the hero of the Shell to be as wide awake as he was himself. There was no reply.

"Tom Merry!"

Still silence.

"Dear me!" murmured Skimpole. "He has actually forgotten, and gone to sleep! Dear me—that is very thoughtless and careless of Tom Merry. I suppose I had better shake him. I cannot be late for my appointment."

He crossed to Tom Merry's bed and shook him by the shoulder. Tom Merry started out of slumber and hit out

with his right. Skimpole received it on his nose and sat down on the floor with a gasp.

"Hallo!" said Tom Merry, sitting up in bed.

"Really, you—you—ow, my nose!"

"I'm sorry! Did I hit you?"

"Yes, Merry, you certainly did, and with considerable force, too, upon the end of my nose, and—"

"I was startled. I was dreaming about a scrap with the New House kids!" explained Tom Merry. "Sorry! Is it time yet?"

"Yes," said Skimpole, rising, and rubbing his nose ruefully. "It is turned the quarter to eleven, Merry."

"Wake up Manners and Lowther, then."

That was not needed. Skimpole's bump on the floor had awakened the chums of the Shell. Manners and Lowther were already getting out of bed.

"We're all ready," said Lowther. "I hope you didn't forget the rope, Tom."

"I've got it under my bolster."

NEXT
THURSDAY:

"TOM AT THE FRANCO-BRITISH."

A Double-Length Tale
of Tom Merry.

"Pray let us lose no time," said Skimpole. "It would be inexcusable to be late for the appointment."

"Oh, horrid!" said Lowther. "You must never keep a lady waiting, especially in a woodshed—"

"Shut up, Monty!" said Tom Merry warningly. "Open the window, and don't jaw!"

"Right you are!"

The window was opened. It was a sultry July night, and the chums of the Shell did not feel cold in their pyjamas at the open window. Skimpole had hastily bundled on his clothes. It did not make much difference to Skimpole's appearance if he dressed in haste. He never looked tidy.

"Are you ready, Skimmy?"

"Yes, I am quite ready, Tom Merry. I suppose it will be necessary to attach the rope to my person—"

"Yes, it's safest to tie it round your neck," said Lowther.

"Really, Lowther—"

"You can either have it tied round you, or you can hang on the end," said Tom Merry. "It's just as you please, Skimpole."

"I—I think I'd rather have it tied round me," said Skimpole, gazing, with some misgiving, from the window into the dim quadrangle. The window was high up in the wall, and the chums had wheeled a bed there to stand upon. Skimpole adjusted his spectacles, and blinked into the starlight. The closer he came to the task, the less he liked it. But there was no turning back now.

"Right-ho!" said Tom Merry. "I'll tie it under your arms. Shove this blanket round you first, so that the rope won't hurt you."

"That is very thoughtful of you, Merry."

"Yes, I'm an awfully thoughtful chap when I start thinking. You had better jump out of the window, and we'll hold the rope."

"It might slip through your fingers."

"Well, that's hardly likely to happen."

Skimpole shivered.

"If you don't mind, I'd rather lower myself slowly from the sill," he said. "I should feel more easy in my mind that way."

"Oh, just as you please. You would show more nerve by jumping out."

"I—I don't particularly want to show any nerve."

"Very well. Out you go."

The rope was secured round Skimpole. Tom Merry was very careful to make it safe. He didn't want any accident to happen to Skimpole. The amateur poet slid out of the window to the sill, and sat there for some moments blinking.

"Well, are you going?" asked Tom Merry.

"Ye-es, Merry, I am certainly going."

"Why don't you go, then?"

"I—I should like to get my breath first."

"Oh, take your own time," said Tom Merry. "It's four minutes to eleven, that's all. But please yourself."

"Dear me, I think I had better go."

"If you don't like taking the plunge, I don't mind shoving you off the window-sill," said Monty Lowther.

"P-p-please don't trouble, Lowther. I—I'd rather not. I—I think I can go now. I—I—I'm g-g-g-g-going."

Skimpole hung on the sill with his fingers. He let go, and swung gasping on the rope. The Terrible Three commenced to lower him. They did not do it in the most comforting way. The rope ran out slowly for a few feet, and then with a sudden jerk, then another pause, and another jerk! Skimpole swung round dizzily, wondering whether he was on his head or his heels, awake or dreaming.

"D-d-d-don't be so-so-so sudden," he gasped. "Really—oh!"

His feet touched the ground.

"Are you all right?" Tom Merry called out softly.

"N-n-n-o, ye-e-e-es," stammered Skimpole. "I—I feel very shaken. I wish you had not jerked the rope so."

"Unfasten it, and we'll pull it up, and let it down for you when you come back."

"I shall be a long time."

"Never mind; we'll wait."

"That is really very kind of you, Tom Merry. Please don't jerk the rope like that. I find it very difficult to get the knot undone, and it is quite impossible so long as the rope is in motion. That is better."

Skimpole detached the rope. It whisked up into the air, and disappeared into the window of the Shell dormitory. The hour struck from the clock tower.

"Dear me, I shall be late."

Skimpole ran off at top speed in the direction of the woodshed. The Terrible Three chuckled at the window of the Shell dormitory. They did not believe that Skimpole would be gone so long as he imagined.

Skimpole reached the door of the woodshed. It was unfastened and ajar, showing that someone had arrived and entered. The amateur poet opened it wider.

"Are you there?"

He whispered the words in trembling tones. His heart was beating like a hammer now between shyness and excitement.

"Are you there?"

An unexpected voice replied from the dense darkness of the interior of the shed:

"Yaas, wathah!"

Skimpole staggered back in amazement.

It was the voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and it flashed into his brain, as he heard it, that he was the victim of a practical joke.

But it was too late to retreat!

Even as he gasped with amazement, unseen hands gripped him in the darkness, and he was hauled into the woodshed, and flattened on the ground, and a knee was planted on his chest.

"Got the beastly wottah," said the voice of the hidden D'Arcy. "Bwing that pail of tar, deah boys!"

CHAPTER 14.

Skimpole falls out of love.

SKIMPOLE struggled desperately.

"Leggo! Lemme gerrup! Beast! Yow!"

"The wottah is stwugglin' feahfully," said D'Arcy. "Lend me a hand with him, Blake. Twamp on his legs, Dig. Sit on his fat head, Hewwies."

"Certainly," said three voices together.

"I say," exclaimed Skimpole, "don't! Please don't be so rough! I really wish you would let me get up, and would take yourselves off. I am expecting a lady here."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It is no laughing matter. She is coming; in fact, should be here by now. She will be frightened if she sees—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I consider this most ungentlemanly. I—"

"You uttah wottah."

"Let me rise! I must—"

"You silly ass," said Blake. "We've got a pail of tar here, and we're going to anoint you with it, unless—"

"Ow! Yow! Help!"

"I'll put some in your mouth if you don't shut up. Look here, we've laid this little ambush to give you a lesson."

"How did you know—"

"Oh, we knew that letter would fetch you," grinned Blake. "I copied my sister's handwriting to make it look like a girl's."

"Eh?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If the writer of the sonnet is in earnest," chuckled Digby, "will he come to the woodshed at eleven o'clock to-night?"

"To meet one," continued Herries, "who is also a yearner after the ineffability of the inexplicable."

"One," said Blake, "who, amid the giddy throng, pines for a kindred spirit with whom to exchange elevated thoughts and poetic outpouring and soarings."

"Yaas, wathah."

Skimpole could only gasp. The letter was safe in his pocket, and he knew that the chums could have had no opportunity of seeing it since he received it. The whole plot was clear to him now.

"You—you wrote the letter, Blake!" he gasped.

"Certainly."

"You made me think that Cousin Ethel—"

"If you hadn't been a silly, conceited ass you wouldn't have thought anything of the kind."

"Oh, really."

"You've got to stop this rot, Skimpole."

"Yaas, wathah. We insist upon your stoppin' this wot, Skimpole, deah boy. You are not to wite any more sonnets, never to see or speak to my Cousin Ethel again, and to immediately fall out of love."

"Impossible."

"Then you can be tarred all ovah for a start, and if that doesn't cure you, deah boy, we'll feathah you into the bargain."

"Really, I—I—listen to me."

"I'm afwaid we haven't time to listen to your wavings, deah boy. Pway bwing that pail of tar here, Hewwies, old man."

"Here it is."

"Good. Is the bwush in it?"

"Yes. Here—"

"Ow! I didn't tell you to shove it into my face, you silly ass."

"Well, I thought you couldn't see it."

"You have smothahed my face with beastly tar."

"Never mind. Don't waste time growling over trifles. Give Skimpole a dose."

"Don't!" gasped Skimpole. "Please, don't! Why, it

would take hours to get it off! I object most strongly

"That won't make any difference, Skimpole. You have got to undertake to do as I have told you, or else you are in for it. Now, yes or no?"

"No," exclaimed Skimpole. "Certainly not. I—ow—yow—yow!"

D'Arcy was in deadly earnest. He commenced to paint the face of the helpless poet with the tarbrush. Skimpole struggled and writhed desperately. He opened his mouth to yell, and received a dab of the tarbrush that made him close it again.

"Ow-w-w-wow!"

"Have you had enough, deah boy?"

"Oh! Oh! Oo-oh! Gr-r-r-r!"

"Have some more, then."

D'Arcy plunged the brush into the tar-bucket, and brought it out thick with tar. He dabbed it on Skimpole's face, and painted away.

"Don't! Ow! Wow! Help! Stop him!"

D'Arcy considerably ceased his operations.

"Are you goin' to listen to weason, Skimpole?"

"No—yes! Yes."

"Will you give up w'tin' poetwy to Cousin Ethel, and never let her have the faintest idea that you are such a silly ass as you weally are?"

"No—yes!"

"Will you pwomise, honah bwright, to fall out of love immediately?"

This was rather a hard demand, but Skimpole was in no position to refuse. He gasped out an assent.

"Good!" said D'Arcy. "Then I think we may be satisfied, deah boys. I wegard Skimpole as a feahful ass, but I believe he has pwinciple, and will keep his word."

"As a sincere Socialist, it is impossible for me to break my word."

"Vewy good; I will twust you. I am sowwy to have to use you wuffly, deah boy, as I disapprove of wuffness on pwinciple. I often find the wuffness of these boundahs vewy twyin'. But you leave me no alternative when you persist in actin' the giddy ox. I hope I have cured you completely

"It is impossible to part with the ideal of the ineffable."

"That is all wight, so long as you keep to ideals," said Arthur Augustus; "it is when you come down to the weal that you become an insuffeable twouble to ewevybody. I cannot allow my cousin to be bothahed by a silly ass."

"Certainly not!" said Blake. "But Skimmy will keep his word. I'll say that for him, though he's a raving maniac on most points. He can go back to Socialism, or become an amateur detective again, if he likes."

"Yaas, wathah!"

The knee was removed from Skimpole's chest; there was a sound of retreating footsteps; the chums of Study No. 6 were gone.

Skimpole slowly rose to his feet.

"Dear me," he murmured, "I have been used very roughly. And the letter was not written by Ethel, after all. That is very unpleasant. It is possible that, after all, she does not reciprocate my attachment. She may even be annoyed by it. That is very unpleasant. Upon the whole, I think I acted rather hastily in coming down from the ideal to the real. I think I should have done better to allow my poetic spirit still to soar in the blue depths of the empyrean,

insetad of descending to the common things of earthly life. I think— Dear me, how ever shall I get all this tar off my face?"

The amateur poet ruefully took his way back to the School House. Blake & Co. had disappeared, and were doubtless in their dormitory by this time. Skimpole arrived under his window, and found three grinning faces looking down at him in the starlight. Blake had evidently given the chums of the Shell a word of information as he went in.

"Are you there, Tom Merry? Pray let down the rope."

"I'm waiting for that fool Skimpole."

"I am Skimpole."

"You're not! You're a giddy nigger! Skimpole was a blonde when he went out, and it's a moral impossibility for him to come back such a pronounced brunette."

"Really, Tom Merry, this is no time for joking! I have been taken in in a most outrageous way, and smothered with tar in the woodshed."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Please let down the rope."

The rope came whisking down so suddenly that Skimpole jumped as it dropped on his head.

"Really, you know, I—"

"Oh, catch hold! We want to go to bed."

"Certainly, but—"

"Buck up!"

Skimpole fastened the rope under his armpits, and was drawn up to the window of the Shell dormitory. A closer view of his face sent the chums of the Shell almost into convulsions. They dragged the amateur poet into the room, and landed him gasping on the floor, and untied the rope.

"My only hat!" gasped Tom Merry. "You look ripping, Skimmy, you do really!"

"Black, but comely," grinned Monty Lowther.

"I have had a most unpleasant time," said Skimpole.

"If any of you fellows would oblige me by scrubbing my face—"

"Can't be did! If you go about recklessly falling in love and making appointments in woodsheds, you must take the consequences."

"Let me explain—"

"My dear chap, we know more about it than you do. You thought you were going for some poetic, souful outpourings; we thought you were going for a tarring, and we were right. I hope it will be a lesson to you, Skimmy, not to be such a howling ass."

"Really, Tom Merry—"

"Good-night!"

And the Terrible Three went to bed. Skimpole went to his washstand, and began to wash. But tar was not easily removed. He scrubbed and scrubbed till the skin was red and raw, but the tar did not all come off. Tom Merry awoke for a moment an hour later, and looked drowsily out of bed. Skimpole was still standing at his washstand, patiently scrubbing away. Tom Merry gave a sleepy chuckle and closed his eyes again.

Skimpole presented a sleepy and somewhat piebald appearance in the morning. But he had benefited by his experience. He confided to Tom Merry, later in the day, that upon reflection he had resolved to stick to the ideal, and leave the real alone. Cousin Ethel received no more sonnets, but she long remained Skimpole's ideal.

THE END.

(An extra long complete tale of Tom Merry and Co., next Thursday, entitled "Tom at the Franco-British," by Martin Clifford.)

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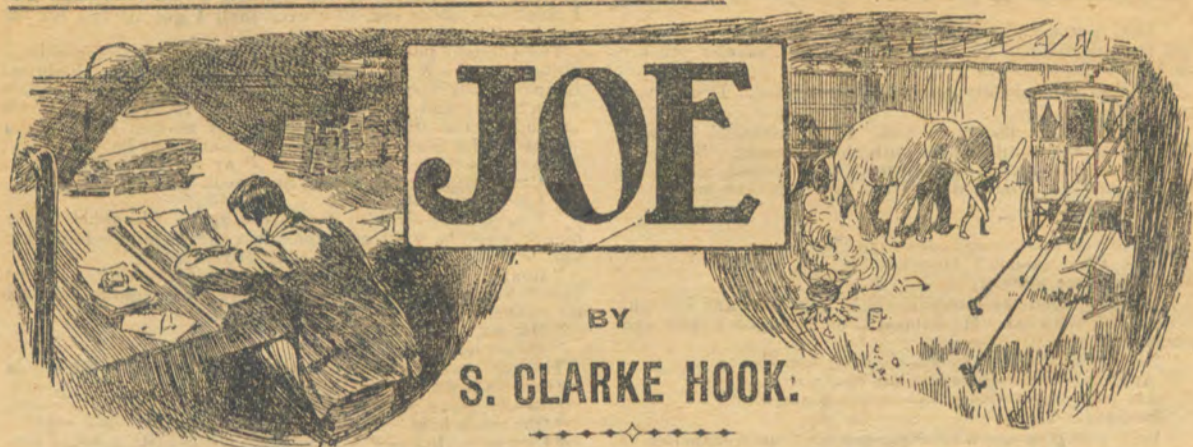
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NEXT THURSDAY:

"TOM AT THE FRANCO-BRITISH."

A Double-Length Tale of Tom Merry.

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. From motives of revenge, Muerte bribes Luigi, Ruabino's former lion-tamer, to let loose his one-time charges. While searching for the escaped lions in Sir Henry Timkins' woods, Rubby and Joe encounter a gamekeeper, who, hearing a roar, takes refuge in a tree. "How do you suppose I am going to stop here all night?" he demands indignantly.

(Now go on with the story.)

The Recapture of the Runaways.

"Well," said Rubby, "if you prefer to descend, of course you are at liberty to do so. Some men are not frightened of lions, and I really don't believe that they are very dangerous. If you want to come down and get your gun, you can do so without the slightest difficulty."

Another fierce roar quite decided the matter. That gamekeeper would have tackled any poacher. He had badly shot two in his time, and landed a good many others in prison; but it is one thing to tackle a poacher, and quite another to face two roaming lions. Pheasants he understood; lions he did not, and, as he did not want to learn anything about them, he decided to remain up that tree until the lions were captured, or until hunger drove him down.

Joe wished him good-night, and then he and Rubby went in the direction from whence the roars appeared to have come. It is no easy matter to catch a pair of lions in a coppice, and Rubby and Joe found it downright difficult.

Rubby did not like the work at all, but Joe searched in a most reckless manner. Then it commenced to rain, and the night grew very dark, but still they continued their search.

There were no more roars to guide them, and when at last day dawned, they found themselves almost at the same spot from which they had started, while the unfortunate gamekeeper was still up the tree. His shouts for help guided them in that direction.

"Still here, dear boy?" inquired Rubby.

The question was quite superfluous, because in the dawning light they could see him, and he looked very much up a tree.

"Of course I'm here, bust you! Where's the lions?"

"I don't expect that they are very far," answered Rubby. "We heard a rustling in the bushes several times during the night, but we did not see the lions. Then our lantern burnt out, and we had to search for the brutes in the dark. I tell you what it is, old chap, lion-hunting doesn't suit me at all. I'm as tired as a winter dormouse, and as hungry as a pug puppy. Suppose you lead us to your hut, and give us a meal of some sort. I will pay for the damage, especially if you can give me a cup of coffee."

"But what about the lions?"

"Oh, we will chance them. What is your name?"

"Bill!"

"Well, look here, Bill, if you will give us a breakfast—if it is only bread-and-butter and coffee—I will stand you five bob!"

"Will you guarantee me agin the lions?"

"Joe is the lad to do that. He makes them perform. I have no more control over the lions than I have over Henry."

"You are perfectly safe!" declared Joe. "The lions won't attack you, unless they happen to be hungry, and I don't think they will be. You might give them bread-and-butter and coffee at half-a-crown a head, if they are hungry."

Bill did not appreciate this chaff; but he descended, and then led the way towards his hut. He went at a quick walk, but when he was nearing his destination, and a mighty roar burst forth, echoing through the coppice, he went at a far quicker run.

Rubby was in a panting condition when they reached the hut, and he had smashed his tall hat against the bough of a tree; but, having lions on the brain, the damaged hat on his brain did not trouble him.

Bill allowed his guests to enter his little hut, and then he locked and bolted the door.

"Now, mates," he panted, "I can give you eggs and bacon and nice fresh butter. Light up that stove, my lad. There's plenty of wood in the corner. Mind, five bob has been promised!"

"With coffee?" said Rubby.

"Yes. I've got condensed milk here, lump sugar— Oh, I can set you up all right!"

"Then there are your five shillings, old chap," said Rubby, handing him the coins. "Joe will light the fire all right. The only thing that worries me now is the loose lions."

"They are far more likely to worry the people they meet," observed Joe, getting the fire alight.

Bill filled the kettle, and then, having prepared the breakfast, they commenced to enjoy it.

Bill had got an appetite quite twice as large as his paying-guests, and he kept pressing them to take more. Bill was a very decent fellow, and before that meal was finished he became quite friendly with his guests.

"Now, dear boy," exclaimed Rubby, offering him a cigar, "what would you do if you were in my place?"

"Bolt! I would, straight! I wouldn't go lion-hunting for a pension! I can't abear the brutes."

"But I can't leave my lions at large."

"Well, you was only asking me what I would do in my case, and I was telling you straight. I suppose the proper course is to catch the lions, though how you are going to do it, be shot if I know. I wouldn't care for the job, and I shouldn't know how to set about it."

Neither did Rubby, but they once more started out, and Bill declared that he had got some guns to clean, and that after he had finished them he intended to have a sleep, as he had been on duty all night.

"This reminds you of looking for a needle in a haystack, except that it is far more dangerous," observed Rubby. "I suppose the brutes haven't taken it into their silly heads to go home?"

"I don't think there is the slightest chance of that," answered Joe. "We heard one of them roar not so very long ago. It is possible that they may have found some place to sleep in for the day. They will be getting hungry presently."

"Dear boy, that is exactly what is worrying me. I don't know when I felt my ample allowance of flesh such a burden as I do now. I feel sure that a lion of ordinary intelligence, if it were anything like hungry, would use me for the purpose of cat's-meat, and it hurts my feelings. I can't think why I was ever so stupid as to keep lions. It is a strange thing that the public want to be amused by seeing other

NEXT
THURSDAY:

"TOM AT THE FRANCO-BRITISH."

A Double-Length Tale
of Tom Merry.

people risk their lives. It would be quite useless to train—say, a pair of white mice to jump through paper hoops. That would not take with the public at all. They must have an element of danger about these performances."

"Well, Rubby, it's no good blaming the public," laughed Joe. "You take their money, when you can get it, and it stands to reason that they deserve to get their share of enjoyment out of your shows. All we have got to do is to catch the lions. Look here, we are coming to the end of the copse. Suppose we have a look round to see if the lions are in the open."

"I don't think the brutes would be likely to go into the open," answered Rubby.

"They would if a flock of sheep happened to be in the field," answered Joe. "You see, a couple of plump sheep would form a very nice breakfast for them. I don't suppose that would cost you more than six or seven pounds."

"It is too horrible to contemplate!" groaned Rubby. "I should be completely ruined in a few days' time if my lions fed off such expensive food as that. However, let's get into the open and see if they are there."

Now, when they reached the outskirts of the copse they had a fine view of the mansion where Sir Henry Timkins lived.

It was a grand old place, surrounded by well-kept grounds. Timkins was great on flowers—in fact, they were his hobby. He would potter about all the morning trying to get an old geranium to grow, and he really thought he was doing good. Of course, his gardeners knew better, but then they did not let him know that.

He had plenty of conservatories, and one large house where he grew nothing but palms. Some of his palm-trees were as thick as a man's body, and his pride in that place could only be equalled by that of a young mother in her first baby.

He always declared there was no other palm-house in England to equal his, and his gardeners declared that it was a fact. They also let him fondly imagine that he attended entirely to the place, and that the luxuriance of the palms was due to his consummate skill. This pleased him greatly, and as it did not hurt them, all were satisfied.

They drew their wages, and an occasional tip for any little extra praise, and they did the work, while Timkins took the credit.

On that eventful morning he had an hour to spare before breakfast, as he was an early riser, and as was his custom, he decided to spend that hour in his palm-house.

It was really a most charming place, and Timkins had just spent his hour in it, when he heard the breakfast gong, and being a most punctual man where meals were concerned, he straightened his back, and was just about to leave the place, when suddenly there was the most awful crash.

Splinters of glass and wood flew around in all directions, and that crash was followed by two awful roars, which, in their turn, were followed by two lions of great size, and apparently of greater ferocity.

Perhaps they thought that palm-house was their native home, though even in that case they might have entered it through the door, instead of dashing through its glass side.

The smaller palms were scattered in all directions—so was Timkins. He was not accustomed to lions, and the manner in which those two roared at him was certainly alarming.

There would have been no time for him to get out of the door; in fact, to do so he would have been compelled to pass the lions.

There was only one possible way of escaping, and that he immediately took.

He shinned up the trunk of a huge palm with an agility that would have done credit to a boy of fourteen or a monkey of four, then he got his leg over one of the branches, and sat there howling for help at the top of his voice.

One of his servants heard those howls, and rushed out, but when she saw her master up a tree, and two enormous lions waiting for him to come down, she commenced to scream on her own account, and, rushing into the house, slammed and bolted the front door.

The servants held a hurried council of war, and they came to the conclusion that if their master had to die, it would be far better to let him be the only one. As the cook pointed out, he was a bachelor, and no one would miss him much, while the footman hinted that he would miss the cook if she went out to set her master at liberty.

The pageboy suggested that they should lower a rope from the top of the house and haul him up; but the footman declared that their master was much too fat for any rope they had to bear the strain.

The cook suggested fetching the police, but as there was no one who would venture out, this proposal was not adopted.

How the matter would have ended it is hard to say, but it so happened that Joe, during his search, struck the lions' trail.

"Dear boy," gasped Rubby, "it appears to lead direct to Henry's mansion! There will be trouble about this. It is one of those things that makes me ask again why was I ever born?"

"I'll give it up, Rubby," said Joe. "Our first consideration is to catch those lions, and we appear to be on their track at last. I say, have you good eyesight?"

"Can you see them?" inquired Rubby, stopping suddenly.

"Ha, ha, ha! No! But do you see that conservatory?"

"Quite plainly."

"Well, there's a mighty big hole in the glass and frame-work. Ha, ha, ha! I do believe Ajax and Vulcan have jumped through."

"What should they do that for?"

"Perhaps they thought it was their paper hoop, and that it was their duty to leap through it."

"In that case I am inclined to think that Henry will imagine that it is my duty to mend it."

"Hark! I can hear someone howling. Quick, Rubby! We have no time to lose."

"Neither has the man who is howling," groaned Rubby, following Joe down the slope at a run. He could not keep pace with Joe, neither did he want to do, for that matter; but he was determined not to leave the lad in the lurch, however great the danger.

Joe did not stop until he reached the palm-house, then he burst into roars of laughter.

The unfortunate Timkins was still seated up the palm-tree, and he was howling for help as loudly as he possibly could, while the lions were amusing themselves by making leaps at him.

"Don't laugh at the idiot!" murmured Rubby. "Let me talk to him, and pacify him somewhat. Good-morning, Henry! You are what we might say 'up a tree,' are you not? Don't come down, or else those lions will consume you!"

"You insolent villain!" howled Timkins, recognising his old foe. "I'll put you in prison for this. Take those lions away."

"Dear boy, how do you suppose I am going to do that? I expect they imagine they are in a tropical forest. You have a fine palm-house here, too. Well, there's one thing, if you are kept a prisoner for long, it will be in very comfortable quarters. I tell you what I will do with you, Henry. I will make you a present of those lions, and that will be a set-off against any damage they have done."

"Take them away, you villain! I am falling."

"Not you, dear boy. There is not the slightest chance of your falling with a couple of lions beneath. I don't see how we are going to get the man down, do you, Joe?"

"No. We shall have to feed him with buns on the end of a pole, like they feed the climbing bears."

"Your attitude is funny, Henry," said Rubby. "It is really. You look like one of those monkeys on a stick that you buy for a penny, all highly-coloured. You see, you have to thank Muerte and his lion-tamer for this. The villain came into my show and let my lions loose, and we have been hunting for them all through the night. Now, as you will be aware, there is considerable risk in capturing those lions."

"If you get them away I will not prosecute you for the damage they have done," cried Timkins.

"Well, as I have already told you, the fault was not mine. Luigi, the lion-tamer, entered my place, and let my lions loose."

"You are answerable."

"I don't see that, dear boy. If a man broke into your house and let you loose, and you bit me, and I went mad through the bite, I should not consider that you were responsible. Now, those lions are nothing like mad, and if they bite you there won't be the slightest chance of your catching hydrophobia or anything like that."

"Are you going to take those lions away?"

"Well, we have come here for that purpose," answered Rubby, "but how it is going to be managed I know no more than the man in the moon."

"If I take them away, do you pledge your word not to hold Rubby answerable for the damage they have done?" inquired Joe.

"Yes. I will agree to anything if you take them away."

Joe entered the place by the door, and both of the brutes growled at him, but they at once recognised his voice.

"Lie down, there!" he cried. "Do you hear me, Ajax? You will have to obey. I'm ashamed of you frightening Sir Henry in this manner. Don't you understand that he is a titled man, and that you are not entitled to frighten him? That's right! I'm not going to hurt you. Only take you for a walk. Don't come too close, Rubby. They don't know you."

"Dear boy, I don't want to come too close. I believe I am quite as frightened as Henry is, only I don't show it

as much. I wouldn't put that rope round the brutes' necks for a pension!"

"Make haste and get the brutes out!" snarled Timkins.

"You can think yourself very lucky if we get them out at all," retorted Rubby. "Never mind about the haste. You see, dear boy, a lion won't be hurried against his will. You leave Joe to manage them in his own way, and if we get them back into their cage without their doing any damage, I shall be very thankful."

"Look at the damage they have already done to my palm-house, you insolent rascal!"

"Well, that doesn't matter, because you say that you are going to bear the brunt of that."

Timkins was quite determined to do nothing of the sort, but he thought it advisable to say nothing. His first consideration was to get rid of the lions.

"You can come down now," cried Joe, when he had got the rope round their necks. "I don't think that they will hurt you."

"Take them away, you young idiot," snarled Timkins, who had no intention of chancing whether they would hurt him. It was his fixed determination not to descend that palm-tree until the lions were well off his premises.

"I am going to take them away directly they will come; but, you see, I think they are hungry, and that makes them cross, and I thought if you came down you could fetch them a joint or so of beef, or a leg of mutton."

"Be off with you, I say! I shall not come down!"

"Isn't his obstinacy shocking?" observed Rubby, fighting shy of those lions.

"Lamentable!" admitted Joe. "I want something to entice them along. Would you like to walk ahead of them, Rubby?"

"Dear boy, I would not! I would as soon think of sending a nurse and a perambulator to entice them along. No; they must either go of their own accord or remain here."

"You senseless villain!" snarled Timkins. "How can they remain here? They would eat me."

"My dear fellow, don't you see that, however sorry I might be if my lions ate you, I should be infinitely more sorry if they ate me. I fear you are rather a selfish man. But try to get them along, Joe, and be particularly careful that they do not eat you."

"I don't think they are likely to do that," said Joe. "They seem to be pretty friendly. Now then, Ajax! Come, Vulcan! This way for your breakfasts, and you shall have a jolly good one if you will only behave yourselves like respectable lions."

Needless to say that walk was a very perilous one, but the two lions behaved remarkably well. Joe kept speaking to them and giving them orders; nor did he appear to feel the slightest fear.

Rubby, on the other hand, did not like that walk at all.

Crossing the field, they met a milkmaid with a pail of milk poised on her head. She no sooner caught sight of the lions than she uttered wild shrieks, flung the pail of milk to the ground, and fled as fast as her legs would carry her.

"People don't appear to like our lions," observed Rubby, "and I must say I don't blame them for that. It is to be hoped that we do not meet any more people. I don't want any actions for leading dangerous animals through the country."

"We are not likely to meet anyone now," said Joe. "We are nearly there. How would it be for you to go on and tell the people to keep out of the way."

"Dear boy, I don't want to get in front of those lions. You may be perfectly sure that the people will keep out of the way directly they see them coming. Get the brutes into their cage as quickly as you can, and then I shall be able to breathe more freely. If this night's work hasn't turned my hair grey I shall be surprised."

Joe declared that there was no particular danger with lions, and it would really seem as though he were right, for he got both of the great brutes into their cage, and having unfastened their cord, gave them a big meal; then he went in search of Rubby, and found that worthy looking very sleepy.

"Dear boy," exclaimed Rubby, "I have passed the most terrible night of my life! If ever a man was in an abject state of terror, I am he!"

"Ha, ha, ha! What about Henry?"

"Yes, he suffered, too; and between ourselves, Joe, I don't believe that I have heard the last of it. There was a considerable amount of damage done."

"So there was, but he promised not to make you pay for it."

"Quite so; but that was when he was up a tree. He will think differently when he comes down. When a man gets into danger he suddenly becomes remarkably good, but when he gets over the danger his goodness evaporates. On the

same lines Timkins made me that promise so that he might be let down. Now, I don't consider that I ought to be made to pay for the damage, and if I could only prove that Muerte was a party to the villainy, why, I would make him pay for it. See here! What did I tell you?"

It was a pageboy from Sir Henry, and he brought a letter, which Rubby glanced at.

"Tell the dear fellow that I will consider the matter, and see him concerning it in the course of a few hours," exclaimed Rubby.

"He claims fifty pounds damages," said Rubby, as the boy hurried away. He appeared to have an idea that lions might be roaming about. "Now, there couldn't have been twenty pounds worth of damage, but Henry means to make a profit. He says that if the money is not paid to-day, he will issue a writ, and that means another ten pounds or so on the top of it. Well, I am not going to pay it. Muerte will have to stump up. At any rate, I am going to get some sleep now, and I would advise you to do the same, then I will decide how to act."

Joe, who was very tired, gladly followed this advice, and it seemed to him that he had not been asleep for more than an hour when he received a message that Rubby wanted to see him at once.

Hurrying to the caravan, he found Bill and another keeper there.

"Now then, Bill," exclaimed Rubby, "fire ahead!"

"You tell all about it, Tom," he said, turning to the under-keeper.

"Why, it was this way. Me and my missus was at your show last night, and we was sitting behind a foreign-looking chap with a big moustache. There was another fellow sitting next to him, and they was talking in lowered voices. Now and then we heard 'em say they would have vengeance on you."

"When all the people was cheering about the lions, both me and my missus heard one of the chaps say to the other as he would give him a sovereign if he let 'em loose, and the other chap says, 'I'll do it, Muerte!'"

"Well, at the time we didn't take it that they meant to let the lions loose; but when I met Bill this morning, and he told me all that had happened, putting two and two together, I'm downright sure they was talking about the lions; and Bill says as we would come here and tell you all about it."

"Right, dear boys!" exclaimed Rubby. "You sha'n't lose by this! Leave the rest to me. And, see here, just you slip into my sleeping-den behind that curtain. You go, too, Joe. I will send for Muerte and Luigi. I think the message I send will induce him to come. I want you to listen to every word of the conversation, and then we will spring a surprise on them."

What Rubby's message was Joe never knew; but in about ten minutes both Muerte and Luigi entered the place.

"Well, what is this important matter of life and death?" demanded Muerte. "You need not expect any help from me if you want money."

"Sit down, dear boys. Bygones should be bygones, you know. Shut the door, and don't talk too loudly. Try a cigar, Muerte?"

"I don't need your cigars."

"Good again! I shall have all the more for myself. Have you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"About the lions you and Luigi let loose."

"You lie, you hound!"

"Well, I can't vouch for the number of deaths, and as I have got the brutes caged again, there can't be any more deaths; but you see, Muerte, this is a hanging matter for you and Luigi. There is no doubt that your action was a murderous one."

"I tell you we had nothing to do with it!"

"Yes, yes; I quite understand that! You naturally would say so. That is where you are likely to suffer, Luigi. He will let you bear all the blame, and if you were to ask my opinion, I should say the sovereign he boasts of having given you—"

"What!" cried Luigi fiercely. "You say you gave me a sovereign?"

"Hush, Luigi! Not so loud!" exclaimed Rubby. He knew that he was dealing with a pair of thorough scoundrels, and had not the slightest compunction about leading them into a trap.

"I never said any such thing!" declared Muerte, fixing his eyes on his accomplice.

"Well, it doesn't matter. Jupiter may have been wrong," continued Rubby. "Of course, you will know, Luigi, whether he told or not, by the fact of his having given you a sovereign or otherwise. If he did give you a sovereign for the work, I must say it was a curish thing to go and tell about it. It seems to me that it will be throwing all the

blame for the crime on your shoulders, and where you are at a disadvantage is that you cannot prove he incited you. However, that does not matter a bit, because, in any case, you will have to answer for your crime."

"I tell you I know nothing about it!" declared Luigi.

"Of course, you say that, and no doubt you will tell the judge and jury the same. Whether they believe you or not, is another matter. However, that does not affect me at all. What worries me is, that they were my lions that were let loose, and although I am not answerable in any way, I would have preferred the matter remaining quiet. You follow me, Muerte? Of course, I know that you will escape free, and that Luigi will be hanged; but that doesn't matter a bit so far—"

"Don't it, though!" cried Luigi. "I know one thing. If I come in for anything of this, Muerte shall!"

"That's merely vindictive," said Rubby. "Two men being hanged won't make your hanging any easier."

"Take no heed of the fool!" snarled Muerte. "He knows nothing, and is only making wild guesses. Of course, you never let the lions loose!"

"Well, you may be able to prove an alibi," observed Rubby. "But what about Jupiter and the pipe?"

"What is that?" demanded Muerte.

"You see how it is," said Rubby. "Muerte has deceived you by telling about the sovereign he gave you for the vile work, and you have deceived him by not telling him that you were caught in the act by my man."

"I wasn't. I only went for a pipe, and told Jupiter so."

"You didn't tell Muerte that you were caught. Now, it is pretty evident that you did not intend the lions should attack anyone, much less kill a man—"

"I tell you we know nothing about the matter!"

"No; you are not at all likely to do so, because I have only lately received the facts of the case. I must protect myself, and so my only way of doing so will be to give you both in custody."

"You must be mad!" cried Muerte—"stark, staring mad! You have not the slightest proof of your assertion, and—"

"You are in error, dear boy. Luigi will convict you, and you will convict him; besides, I have sufficient evidence to give you both in custody. Keep your hand out of your pocket, Muerte; I have a revolver here."

"Well, what do you want with me?"

"Only to give you in custody. You are both guilty, and I can prove it."

"You know that you can do no such thing!"

"Then how is it that you are afraid? Your face is yellow with terror, and Luigi looks about as frightened as he can be. I have plenty of witnesses to prove your guilt."

"That you have not!" cried Muerte. "It is all false, and I don't believe a man has been killed!"

"That does not matter at all."

"Not matter, you mad villain!"

"Well, I don't mean as far as the poor fellow is concerned, but as far as you are concerned. You see, I shall merely give you in custody for having set my lions loose. That is a criminal act, and the police will take you in charge, especially as they know about the man. I might, of course, be able to settle the matter for a consideration, but you would have to pay the whole damage caused by the lions, and that is fifty pounds."

"I don't want any trouble about the matter," said Muerte, "and it might suit my purpose to pay a small sum—"

"Fifty pounds is the amount you would have to pay. Of course, if you prefer to have Luigi hanged, and take the risk of his incriminating you—personally, I don't really think he would act so meanly, because—"

"Wouldn't I?" cried Luigi. "If there's any bother—"

"That is enough!" cried Muerte.

"Oh, no, it ain't! You have got to take your share!"

"You must be mad to talk like that!" cried Muerte. "I tell you this fellow knows nothing, and that he has no witnesses!"

"He says he's going to give us in custody unless you pay fifty pounds damages."

"No one has been killed! It is false!"

"Assuming, for the sake of argument, that no one has been killed," said Rubby. "If I can prove that you incited Luigi to let the lions loose, you must know as well as I that you would not only be liable for the damage done, but would also both be sent to prison. Now, Muerte, if it suits you better to serve a year's imprisonment or so, all well and good. I don't care. But I do know this, that if you do not pay fifty pounds before you leave this caravan, you will leave it in custody of a constable. You can take your choice as to how you will act; the matter is immaterial to me."

"No one has been killed, and no damage has been done."

"Read that letter," said Rubby, handing the one he had received from Sir Henry Timkins to him.

Muerte did so, and looked as though he did not like it.

Rubby watched him closely.

"You see Muerte, how your villainous plot has failed," he said. "I can ease your mind to a certain extent by telling you that no one has been injured, and, fortunately, Joe captured the lions before they did more than injury to the property of the old chap. He had a narrow escape, and had to climb one of his palm-trees to get out of the way."

"Then you have no evidence on which you could possibly give me in custody."

"I have sufficient evidence to give you both in custody, and that is how I shall act unless you pay those fifty pounds' damages. That is to say, I shall make you hand me fifty pounds, and I shall settle with Timkins. To convince you that I am quite in earnest I will presently tell you what evidence I have. In reality, you are being let off very lightly. Fifty pounds is a very small punishment for such a disgraceful action. Luigi will not be punished at all, except, I expect, that you will get rid of the brute."

"What is your evidence?"

"If I convince you that I can convict you, are you prepared to hand me fifty pounds to pay for the damage done?"

"You could not convict me."

"I could convict Luigi. You say he can prove nothing against you, but I think I could. At any rate, you will be given in custody. I shall insist on your handing me fifty sovereigns before you leave this caravan, or you will be given in custody."

"Even if I were willing to do so, do you suppose that I carry fifty sovereigns in my pocket?"

"No; but you are sure to have an account with the local bank, and I will take your cheque for fifty pounds, and send one of my people to clear it. You two will remain here until the messenger returns with the money; then I shall let you go free, and give no further information, unless compelled by law to do so. As a matter of fact, I do not suppose you will hear any more about the matter. Timkins will be satisfied, so will the witnesses I have."

"You have no witnesses. How could you have? You are trying to rob me of fifty pounds—at least, you will compromise the damages—"

"That has nothing to do with you. The only question is this. Will it be worth your while to be given in custody? If you were innocent, doubtless it would be, and I should have to bear the cost. If you are guilty, it would not be. Now, you know whether you are innocent or guilty, and so do I. What are you going to do?"

"If you had spoken the truth in saying that you have evidence that would enable you to give me in custody, naturally I should pay the fifty pounds' damage rather than have any bother. Of course—"

"Draw back that curtain, Muerte."

"Perdition!" cried Muerte, springing to the curtain. Then he staggered back.

"Just tell these men what you and your wife heard last night, Tom," said Rubby.

Tom told his story much as he had done before, and Muerte looked very scared as he listened.

He hesitated for a moment, and then, taking a cheque-book from his pocket, drew a cheque for fifty pounds, and handed it to Rubby. It was made to order, and that worthy coolly endorsed it; then handed it to Joe.

"Run to the bank, dear boy, and bring that back in sovereigns. Sit down, Muerte, you will not leave until Joe returns. The same remarks apply to you, Luigi. And just tell Jupiter I want him, Joe. He may as well be here, in case there is any attempt at an escape, and that will enable Bill and Tom to go. Look here, Bill, directly I get that money I shall see Sir Henry, then I shall call at your hut, and I want Tom to be there as well. You have done me a good turn, and I hope to be able to do you one."

Muerte looked extremely foolish as he sat there waiting for Joe's return. Rubby puffed at his cigar, and chatted with Jupiter, but he did not speak of the affair again.

In about half an hour Joe returned with the money, and Rubby put the bag in his pocket without counting it. He never checked Joe, in whom he had entire confidence.

"You can go, Muerte and Luigi," said Rubby. "I fear your punishment has not been as severe as you deserve. However, the matter will probably end there. Next time you feel vindictively disposed towards me, you Spanish tinker, meet me honestly, or you will surely go to the wall. I have nothing to say to you, Luigi, except that you are a brute beast, and very nearly as bad as your master. You both deserve to be horsewhipped and ducked in the nearest pond. Go!"

Muerte never said a word, but he glared at Rubby in a manner that would have startled some men. It had not the slightest effect on Rubby, who only smiled amiably as the two miscreants left the caravan.

"Well, that is all settled so far, Joe!" exclaimed Rubby. "We have now to settle with Henry; but there won't be any difficulty there. At least, I presume there will be none. We will pay him a visit and see. We must not forget that

we gave Bill a bad fright, and that he really behaved very well, considering all things; and the same remarks apply to Tom's behaviour. He was a most useful witness; in fact, if it had not been for him, it seems to me that I should have had to pay the fifty pounds instead of Muerte."

"Ha, ha, ha! You have managed it splendidly, Rubby!" declared Joe. "I'll bet Muerte won't get over the loss of fifty pounds for some time to come. The only thing is that Luigi has not been punished."

"He will be; he will be thrown out of employment. And mind you this, Joe, Muerte was the instigator of the abominable plot. He is the one who ought to suffer most, and the loss to him of fifty pounds will be very severe punishment. After all, the fellow is more fool than villain, and that is saying a great deal for him—or, rather, against him. Now let's come and interview Henry."

"Do you want me to come with you, Rubby?" inquired Joe.

"Certainly, dear boy! You can tame wild lions, so may be of the greatest service in taming a man who has made his money and title out of tallow. We will beard the lion in his den, and anything that occurs to you suggest at once. We have a shrewd man to contend with. A fellow who can buy a mansion like that out of farthing dips must be smart."

Joe had an idea that he would be able to make a good suggestion straight away, and that was that Rubby should treat the knight with a little more respect. But then Rubby disliked being treated with respect himself, and he never by any chance showed it to others, so Joe felt that it would be useless to make any suggestion.

Arrived at the mansion, they were shown into the library, where there were about a thousand books, though how many of them the great man had read was another matter.

The room was furnished with a carved oak suite, upholstered in glaring yellow leather.

"Looks like buttercups beneath oak trees," observed Rubby. "Oh, why was I not a candle maker?"

"Don't be jealous, Rubby."

"You can't help it, dear boy. Yet a circus life is a merry one, with its ups and downs—principally downs. He seems to have a fine assortment of books here. Bought them by the yard, I expect. I wonder if he minds smoking? Still, as I like it, and as he is nearly certain to keep us waiting about half an hour, I will have a cigar. Never take to smoking, dear boy."

"Why did you, Rubby?"

"Because I was a young idiot."

"Then why do you continue it?"

"Because I'm an old one. It's a silly habit. The fewer habits you can go through life with, the happier you will be."

Rubby was not far wrong. Sir Henry Timkins kept them waiting three-quarters of an hour, and then he came in, and glared at Rubby, who was in his favourite easy-chair.

"I hope your hair is not greased with pomatum, fellow," snarled the great man. "You will spoil that leather."

"No, dear boy," answered Rubby cheerfully. "I always grease it with candles. How are you? Sit down, and make yourself at home. Now, Henry, I presume you have come to offer Joe a valuable present for saving your life from the lions."

"Understand me, you insolent scoundrel! I can quite understand that your ignorance makes you impertinent."

"I am glad you can understand something, dear boy; but don't get your hair off. By the way, Henry, I believe if you had followed my example and used dips for your hair, you wouldn't be bald now. Look what a fine crop tallow has given me. Now, you say there was some damage from my lions, and I want to act fairly with you; at the same time, I want to deal fairly with others. You must remember that Joe risked his life to save yours, and that you gave the lad a promise not to claim damages if he got the lions away."

"No such thing!"

"We won't argue. We three know who is lying, but that is apart from the question. You claim fifty pounds damages; probably there has been ten pounds damage done."

"No such thing."

"Well, say five pounds, and perhaps that would be nearer the mark."

"Very well, you refuse to pay my claim of fifty pounds. I have nothing more to say."

"In that case, dear boy, I will wish you good-bye; and as you are going to take proceedings, I will remain in your neighbourhood for a further fortnight, so that you may have time to prosecute me. I shall pay fifty pounds into court, and you will have your own costs to pay, because you can't claim more than fifty pounds. I shall send a man to estimate the damage."

"You appear to forget the valuable palms your lions destroyed."

"Pooh! Say a couple at five shillings."

"At five pounds, you mean."

"For the sake of argument, we will assume that the palms destroyed were worth five pounds. Now, the other damage was not worth more than, say, ten pounds. We get fifteen pounds. Say your loss of time was worth another five pounds. That's liberal, seeing that you are not making candles now. That makes twenty pounds. Well, I am willing to hand you that amount. I have the gold in my pocket."

"I will accept forty pounds"

"Can't be done, dear boy; you will have to sue me."

"I will take twenty pounds cash down, and your cheque for thirty."

"No."

"You can post-date it a month."

"No. Twenty pounds cash down or a lawsuit. Please yourself. There will be no cheques in the matter."

"I will take thirty pounds cash down."

"I will split the difference, and that is my last word. Twenty-five sovereigns; yes or no."

"I will accept twenty-seven pounds ten without prejudice."

"You will have to accept twenty-five without prejudice, dear boy. It's all right, Joe; he is going to take it."

"He's jolly well paid, too."

"Certainly!"

"Shall I draw up the receipt, Sir Henry?" inquired Joe. "I will accept the offer to save me time and trouble," said Timkins. "No receipt is required."

"I'll bet it is given, all the same," said Joe. "That is my suggestion, and I know Rubby will take it, after your broken promise."

"Don't you dare to speak to me like that, boy!"

"That will fix it, I think, Rubby," exclaimed Joe, writing out a receipt for damage done, in full of all demands.

"Yes," answered Rubby, counting out twenty-five pounds, and keeping his hand on the money until Timkins had signed the receipt.

"All in order!" observed Rubby. "Now, Henry, the fault was not mine, and I have not paid that money. I have compromised. There are five pounds for yourself, Joe. It ought to be a little more, but I know you will be satisfied with that. Come along! Good-bye, Henry! You have done all right. There hasn't been ten poundsworth of damage."

Then Rubby left the mansion, and made his way to the gamekeepers' hut, and he handed Bill and Tom ten pounds each, telling Tom that five pounds of it was for his wife; and he made that worthy promise to give it to her.

"That disposes of Muerte's fine," observed Rubby; "now come and let's have a good feed."

They had dinner at an hotel, and Rubby took particular care that it was a good one; then they returned to the circus.

"A showman's life is a merry life!" observed Ruabino, who was seated in his caravan, with his feet on the table, and a big cigar between his teeth. "Here we are to-day, taking things at our leisure; and to-morrow we are travelling on the road to pastures new. Ay, lad, it's an easy, happy sort of life!"

"But look here, Rubby," exclaimed Joe, "it was only the other day, when your lions escaped, that you were bemoaning your lot, and declaring that a showman's life was about as bad as they make them."

"Dear boy, that was when I was in difficulties. They do you good, because when you get over them you feel so happy that you are quite ready for a few more. If life were all plain sailing we would not enjoy it. It would be too monotonous."

"Shall I go and let the lions out again?"

"You'd better try. I like this leisure—"

"So it seems, but—"

"You can't be at business always. You would not be able to overcome difficulties if—"

"Look here, Rubby," interposed Joe, "if you don't get to business pretty quickly, you will be getting into some more difficulties."

"I am not going to do a stroke of work till the show opens."

"All right; only as this is Saturday, and the bank closes at one, if you don't draw a cheque for the wages, and send me off to cash it, you are likely to have a shortage with the screws. The ghost will walk to a certainty."

"Why, you silly worm," roared Rubby, leaping to his feet, "why didn't you remind me before? I had forgotten all about it, and—"

"Rubby," exclaimed Vera, the fair lady rider, "I wish you would let me have my money now. I am going to buy a new hat, and—"

"Be off with you! I haven't got any money! Where's my cheque-book?"

"But, Rubby, I—"

"Bless the girl! Do go away! Where's that cheque-book? It's almost one."

"Do you expect a cheque-book to be two?"

"Oh, go away, girl! Who would be a showman? It's an awful life. Wherever is that cheque-book? Oh, here it is in my pocket! Twenty pounds will do. Gold. I've got enough silver. Hurry up. Take the swiftest horse, and gallop the whole way. I don't want a lot of clamouring idiots bullying me all the afternoon."

"Don't you dare to call me a clamouring idiot, Rubby!" cried Vera.

"I didn't, my dear. You are ten times worse than all the rest put together. If you didn't get your two-three-farthings straw hat, with a few halfpenny flowers splashed in at the cost of a week's screw, you would be so upset that you would be crying over me all the afternoon, and vowing that I was the most heartless wretch on the face of the earth. I pity your husband if you ever get one."

"You are a perfect beast, Rubby. It's a love of a hat, and—"

"Here, be off with you, Joe! Here's the cheque."

"Don't you think it would be better if you signed it?" suggested Joe.

"Rats! Of course it would. Where's my pen? Bother! Have you seen my pen, Vera? I had it a minute ago."

"I want to get that hat before—"

"Fury! What do I care about hats? I want pens—at least, I want one. You must have taken it, you stupid girl!"

"We can't all be as clever as you, Rubby," observed Vera. "You have got your pen behind your ear, and it's no good flinging your papers about like that."

"So I have!" gasped Rubby, dashing his signature on the cheque, then Joe hurried to the stables.

Now, he had the choice of a good many horses, and why he should have selected Buster is rather incomprehensible, except that he was very fast. At the same time he was very furious, and it was not at all certain that he would deign to go in the right direction—or for the matter of that in any direction at all. Nevertheless, Joe got the bridle on, and without troubling himself about a saddle, as the time was really very short, leapt upon the back of the restive horse, who went out of the enclosure at a furious gallop.

Joe's way lay along a country lane, and he went along it at about thirty miles an hour, for there were no half measures with Buster. He either went fast and furiously, or he did not go at all. On this occasion he behaved remarkably well both as regards direction and speed, so Joe let him go, and he only had three kicks at passing carts, but perhaps that was because there were only three to pass.

Arrived at the bank, Joe's first difficulty arose.

He knew that if he got anyone to hold Buster that daring party who undertook the job would certainly get bitten, and if he did not get kicked as well it would be because he was lucky. The only thing that Joe could see to fasten the reins to was the big knob of the bank bell, and this he did, hoping that no one would be passing along the pavement.

"Gold, please, as quick as you can!" cried Joe, while there was a violent clanging at the bank bell, causing the porter to rush out under the erroneous impression that the bank was on fire, or something of that sort.

"I wouldn't touch that horse, if I were you!" bawled Joe.

"Look alive, old chap!"

"Wowhow!" howled the porter, rushing back, and clutching at his left shoulder, while he performed a species of skirt-dance.

"The brute has been and touched me, bust him! He's bit me on the shoulder and arm!"

"Perhaps he thought he was shouldering arms?" suggested Joe. "But it is only his playfulness. I think he has broken the wire of your bell now. I say, old chap, if you don't hurry up with that money, Buster will about kick your bank down."

It is a most unwise thing to rush into a bank in a desperate hurry, and try to get away with the money. It is apt to raise the cashier's suspicions, and it is the last thing on the face of the earth that will cause him to hurry.

Joe had not only succeeded in rousing the cashier's suspicions, but he had also aroused his temper by his familiar style of address.

"Did your master send you with this cheque?" he demanded.

"Naturally! Do you suppose I stole it?"

"I don't recognise this signature. Wait there a minute."

"But while I'm waiting, I don't know what Buster is doing, though I can make a pretty shrewd guess."

"I can't help that. You should not bring such a vicious brute into the village."

The signature had certainly been most carelessly written, for Rubby had done it in a great hurry; but the cashier convinced himself it was all right, and then he handed Joe the money, while that worthy dashed from the bank in a manner that was certainly suspicious.

But Joe was none too soon.

A baker was serving bread at a butcher's shop, and he had left his little handcart standing outside. The barrow could not have been annoying Buster in any way, yet he backed into it, and gave it a kick that sent loaves of bread flying all over the place. One of the loaves hit the butcher in the face, and hurt his nose; it also made him exceedingly cross, and he expressed his displeasure by seizing a meat-hook, and giving Buster a prod with it that caused him to kick worse than an hysterical Suffragette who has had her creation in hats smashed by a ruthless bobby.

Buster kicked fourteen pounds of topside into the butcher's face, then he knocked the unfortunate man down with a fine sirloin of beef; after that, no doubt to show his courage, he kicked about ten pounds of "pluck" into the butcher's face.

To the uninitiated it may be mentioned that pluck is an edible portion of the beast, though it does not look like it; at any rate, before it is cooked. What it looks like cooked we know not. Possibly it is used for soups, or veal-and-ham pies.

At any rate, it is most unpleasant stuff to have kicked into your face, and that butcher seized his knife so menacingly that Joe leapt on Buster's back. He felt far safer there than near the infuriated butcher. Joe felt certain that the man of meat would not come near Buster, and, if he did, would quickly wish he had not.

There were not many people in the street, which was a remarkably fortunate thing for them, because Buster seemed to be trying to perform the skirt-dance to quick time.

The butcher kept in his shop, and the things he said to Joe were shocking. His language might have roasted his meat.

The baker was also wroth, for he was like the cat that ran up the roof of the house. A mass of bullock's liver had been on the show-board, and that is a very nice thing when you have it with a little bacon and a few green peas; but it is decidedly nasty when kicked into your face in its raw state, and that had been the baker's fate.

Both those worthy tradesmen turned their fury on the unlucky Joe, and what they said would certainly have hurt his feelings, had they not already been case-hardened by the treatment of his stepfather, which shows you quite plainly that a boy is all the better for having had to rough it in his youthful days.

The worst of it was, Joe was roughing it now, for Buster was so angered at the prod he had received that he was quite determined to unseat his rider, and finding he could not do so by kicking and plunging, he tried to strike him on the nose with his crest. Added to this was the abuse from the butcher and baker.

However, Joe did not mind the abuse at all. He was quite accustomed to that sort of thing, and merely tried to calm the butcher and the baker—and Buster.

"My dear fellows," exclaimed Joe, speaking much as the Emperor of Germany might have spoken to the Sultan of Turkey, "can't you see that you are entirely in the wrong, and that I am in the right? You prodded my horse, Mister Butcher, and you must take the consequences. You got in the horse's way, Master Baker. It's a stupid thing to get into the way of a horse that wants to kick, and I would advise you to bear that in mind for future guidance. Oh, it's no use howling at me like that. I simply refuse to be responsible for Buster's peculiarities. He has got many, and they are not few and far between. Don't you think you two are exciting yourselves in an extremely stupid manner? It is perfectly useless for you to tell me that Buster has kicked a joint of beef into your face, because I saw it done, and do not dispute it in any way. Pick up the beef, my dear man, dust the sawdust off it, and sell it to the next customer."

"You young varmint," howled the man of meat, "I'll wipe the floor with you!"

"My dear butcher, I am not going to allow you to catch me. You appear to be a very nasty-tempered man, and the baker doesn't appear to be much better. These little accidents will occur in life, and you ought to bear them patiently. It is not as though you were hurt in any way."

"Not hurt, be hung! Do you think having a joint of beef kicked into your face don't hurt you?"

"I couldn't say, never having gone through that little experience; but I should say you would be about the most competent man on the face of the earth to be able to tell whether it hurts or not. However, it is no good bothering about it."

"If you don't clear out of it, I'll brain you!"

"My dear butcher, that is exactly what I want to do; but, unfortunately, this old rocking-horse won't go. He appears to imagine that I want him to do circus work."

"So you belong to the circus, do you, you varmint? All right! I'm a-going to call on your employer, and make him pay for the damage done."

"You will find him an exceedingly nice man, and one with whom it is quite a pleasure to do business. Now I think we are off! Good-afternoon, butcher and baker, and pray don't lose your tempers. Take my advice, and always keep calm."

Then Joe galloped away, Buster becoming tired of his antics.

"There's the money, Rubby," exclaimed Joe, on his return.

"Were you in time?"

"I say, Rubby, how do you suppose I got twenty pounds except from the bank, and how do you suppose I got that money from the bank if I wasn't in time?"

"I don't know."

"Neither do I."

"Then you were in time?"

"It is wonderful how you have guessed that."

"I wish I had a thick stick, my beauty!"

"Never mind, Rubby; you have got a thick head instead."

"All right! I was going to take you for a walk into the country, then have tea at some little inn, and pay the damage."

"Rubby, I believe you have a brain like a member of Parliament."

"You just said I had a thick head."

"Well, so have they. They are about as fatheaded as any race of people on the face of the earth. Hallo, here comes Vera! She evidently wants her wages."

"You know I never pay till after the show on Saturdays, Vera," said Rubby, frowning at her.

"No, Rubby, and sometimes you don't pay then; but I want my money."

"Well, you will have it at the usual time."

"Don't be a beast, Rubby!"

"I know what it means," said Rubby, pretending to look very stern. "If I pay the staff before night, they take too much to drink, and can't perform properly."

"If you dare to talk that nonsense to me you will make me cross."

"Then you had better take your money, and go. I detest wild beasts—especially tigresses. Are you going to smash the hat like you smashed Muerte's?"

"It is a lovely hat."

"So you have said before. His was a lovely hat, and you trampled it to death. Ha, ha, ha! Look here, Vera, I'll pay for that hat; only don't stick it on too thick."

"You are a dear!"

"You told me I was a beast not a minute ago."

"I'll show you the bill—"

"I don't want to see the bill. All I care about is that it doesn't come to too much. How much does the trash come to?"

"Seventeen-and-eleven; and it's worth—"

"Eightpence! There's a sovereign; and you can consider it is for smashing Muerte's hat. If you had smashed the pumpkin that he wears inside it as well, I would have made it another twopence."

"I'll spend the change in gloves, Rubby," said Vera, hurrying away.

"Now, Rubby!" exclaimed Joe. "About that walk! When shall we start?"

"Why, we'll have a snack to eat first. I have got some steak here. Just you cook it. What made you take Buster?"

"I like him."

"Then you have got the funniest taste of any lad I ever came across. How did he behave?"

"Remarkably!"

"He always does; but—"

"There's two parties wants to see you," said one of the men, coming in and handing in two cards.

"What's this?" exclaimed Rubby. "Jube, family butcher. Druce, family baker. Pshaw! Tell them that I have no family, Bill."

"Here, you look after that steak!" exclaimed Rubby, as Joe turned round and gazed blankly at him.

"They say they must see you," said Bill, returning.

"Here they are!"

Then Bill went, and the indignant butcher and baker entered the caravan.

"My good men," exclaimed Rubby, "I have no orders for you, and—"

It was Jube, the butcher, who let himself go. Had Rubby been his customer it would have been a different matter, but Jube knew that he was a customer of his rival—a man whom he hated with a deadly hatred.

"Orders be hung!" he howled. "Do you think I want your orders? Get yer meat from Smith; and if it don't poison you, it will be surprising. I wouldn't put the stuff as he sells into sausages."

"That is an admission," murmured Rubby. "I'm off sausages. It appears to me that the best meat does not go into them. Whatever is the man howling about? I vow I never kicked meat into your faces; and as for scattering loaves about the street, I have never done it in my life. I have scattered gold about various towns in my time, but I have never scattered meat and bread."

"You are the owner of the vicious brute what's done it!" howled the infuriated butcher.

"He must mean Vera. But she's not vicious—except, perhaps, when she is making her horse dance on Muerte's tile, because he said she was over forty. Well, my good men, you had better interview her—when she comes back. I really don't know when it will be, because she has gone to buy a hat, and I know that is a long job with ladies. But if you go outside and wait for three or four hours, I dare say she will be back, and then you can express your feelings to her."

"Thunder! I suppose you are answerable for the doings of your horse—what you call Buster!"

"Rats! I would rather be answerable for wild tigers, or Vera's hat bills. Do you know anything about the row these idiots are kicking up, Joe?"

"Yes!"

"Well, what is it?"

"It's horrid. If I were you, I would put Jupiter on them. I mentioned the matter to you, if you recollect."

"I don't recollect anything of the sort."

"Well, I said Buster's conduct had been remarkable—and so it was."

"Did he kick joints of beef and loaves about?"

"Oh, yes; and he bit the bank-porter, and smashed the bank-bell—at least, I think he did the latter, because it suddenly stopped ringing after I had tied him to it. You will find that steak done to a turn."

"Sit down, dear boy!" exclaimed Rubby, who began to see the hang of things. "Sit down, my dear fellows! I can't ask you to join us, because the steak is not sufficiently large, and it came from Smith's. Now, look here, Jube, I would like to try some of your beef, and—er—mutton. Pshaw! Tough as shoe-leather, isn't it, Joe?"

"I vow it is as tender as chicken!" declared Joe.

"Meat, when it's high, is naturally tender," observed Jube, sniffing.

"Was it only beef my horse kicked at your head?" inquired Rubby.

"Yes—and liver, and pluck."

"Well, I am glad that the horse has the courage of his convictions. Send me a haunch of mutton to-night. The bill with it; and tell the lad to wait for the money, and—"

"That's not necessary, sir."

"I like to pay cash. Now, let me see. Send me—er—three joints of veal on Monday, and three legs of lamb on Tuesday. Mr. Druce—er—was it rolls kicked at your head?"

"No, sir!"

(Another instalment of this splendid serial next week.)

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