

“SKIMPOLE'S AIRSHIP!”

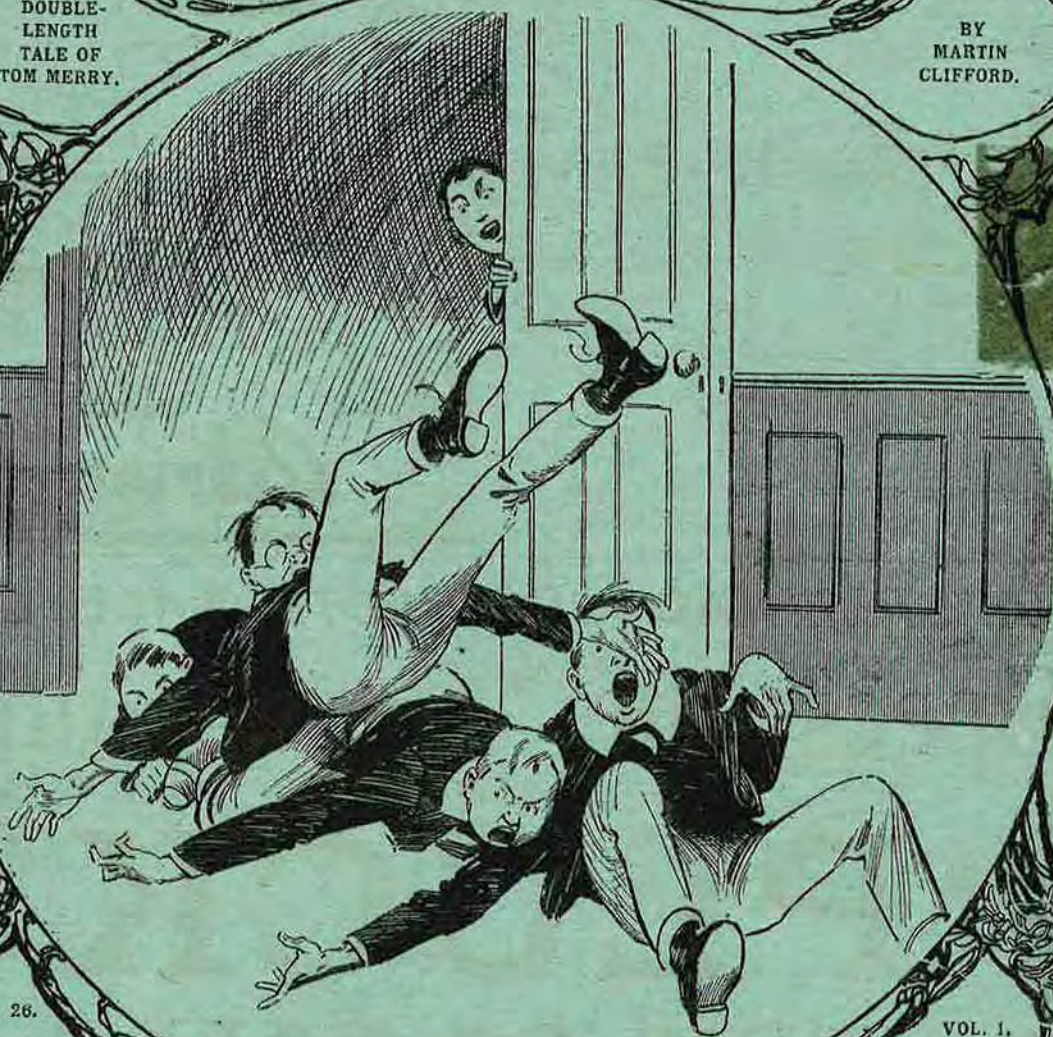
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BY
MARTIN
CLIFFORD.



NO. 26.

VOL. 1.

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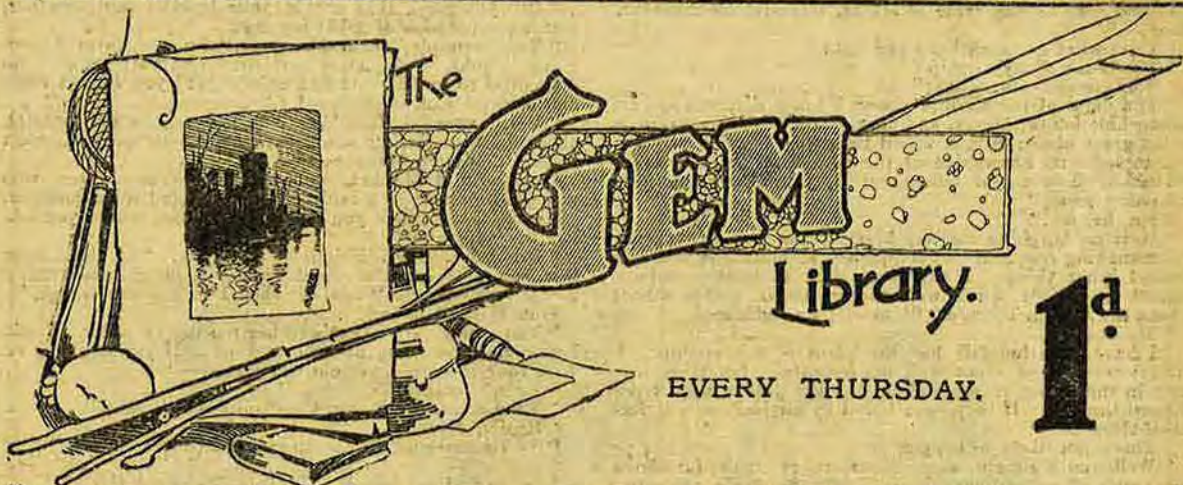
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CHAPTER 1.

Skimpole's Terrible Loss!

SKIMPOLE came down the passage in the School House at St. Jim's with an anxious expression upon his face, and blinking right and left through his spectacles. He was evidently looking for something he had lost, and to judge by his expression it must have been something very valuable.

The quadrangle outside was ablaze with summer sunshine, but the oak-panelled passage was dusky. Skimpole blinked anxiously to and fro. Tom Merry, looking very handsome and fit in his cricketer flannels, came in, with his bat under his arm, and the short-sighted Skimpole walked right into him.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed. "What is that? Is that you, Merry?"

"Yes, ass!" gasped Tom Merry, seizing Skimpole by the shoulders and backing him against the wall, and then prodding him gently with the end of his bat. "What do you mean by marching into me, duffer?"

"I didn't see you, Merry. I was looking——"
"Well, you ought to have seen me. You nearly knocked me over. Have you anything to say before I knock your head against the wall?"

"Yes, certainly, Merry. It would hurt; and, besides, I walked into you quite by accident. I was looking for something. I have had a most serious loss."

"Oh, is that it?" said Tom Merry good-humouredly, releasing the brainy man of the Shell Form and stepping back. "What is it? I'll help you to look for it if you like."

"Thank you, Merry, you are very kind——"

"Well, what is it?"

"As a matter of fact, I shall have to ask you to promise not to look at it if you find it——"

"Eh?"

"That is most important. It is so valuable that——"

Tom Merry glared at him.

"And don't you think you could trust me, you utter ass?"

"Oh, yes, Merry," said Skimpole hastily. "It isn't that. If I had simply lost a gold watch or a purse of money, or a

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No. 28 (New Series).

diamond pin, or any trifle like that, it would be different. But—

"Then what on earth have you lost?"

"The plans of my airship."

"The what of your what?"

"The plans of my airship. Now, I know that you are an honourable fellow, Merry, and not the sort to rob an inventor of his great ideas; still, it would be better in every way for you to have no knowledge of the details of my wonderful invention. You might talk about it, you know, and give the secret away."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It is no laughing matter, Merry. The invention is an epoch-making one, and will completely revolutionise war and several other things. I expect to gain at least a million pounds by it. St. Jim's will become known as the school where the famous inventor, Skimpole, was educated."

"My hat!"

"I have unfortunately lost the plans of my airship. I always carry them about with me for safety, but there is a hole in the lining of my pocket, and the papers must have slipped through. If they were found by anybody who understood them—"

"That's not likely to happen."

"Well, you are right, as my ideas are, as a rule, far above the reach of an ordinary brain," said Skimpole modestly.

"Still, there is danger of the great invention being taken from me if the papers are found by any unscrupulous person. As a matter of fact, I have heard that there is an inventor in Rylcombe who is at work upon an airship. Suppose my plans fell into his hands? However honest he may be, the temptation might prove too great."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I regard your laughter as unfeeling, Merry. I am in a very disturbed state of mind. Since I have taken up inventing I have let other matters slide. As you know, I am a Socialist, and have devoted considerable time to propaganda in this school. I am also a poet. I have given up these pursuits to devote myself to my invention. It would be very hard if the fruit of long pondering and calculation should be filched from me."

"Hard cheese!" said Tom Merry sympathetically.

"Yes, rather," said Monty Lowther, who had just come in with Manners, and was listening with a broad grin. "You know what Shakespeare says on the subject—'Who steals my purse steals trash, but he that filches from me the plans of an airship robs me of that which not enriches him, but leaves me poor indeed.'"

"You are quite mistaken, Lowther," explained Skimpole. "The invention would make anybody very rich. When I have perfected a few details my airship will take the world by storm. In the meantime, the plans are lost, and if you fellows will promise not to look at them if you find them, I should be very glad of your assistance in looking for them."

"Oh, we'll look," said Tom Merry, laughing. "You're a little less of a bore as an inventor than as a Socialist, so you ought to be encouraged."

"That is hardly a polite way of putting it, Merry—"

"Oh, let's look," said Lowther. "It won't take long to hunt up and down the passage, anyway."

The chums of the Shell good-naturedly assisted the anxious Skimpole in his search. They hunted up and down the passage, and looked into other corridors and into empty class-rooms, but there was no trace of the missing plans.

"Well, the papers don't seem to be here," said Manners, stopping at last, very hot and dusty. "I'm sorry, Skimpole, but it's no good looking any further."

"They've been picked up," said Lowther. "Still, you have the consolation of knowing that they weren't of any value, Skimmy."

"Really, Lowther—"

"Are you quite sure you dropped them in the passage?" asked Tom Merry.

"Oh, no, not at all," said Skimpole. "I know I dropped them somewhere, and it was very probably in the passage—"

Monty Lowther seized the cheerful inventor by the throat. "You young villain! You've got us to mooch around this dusty place and fag ourselves out, and you're not sure you dropped the rotten bosh here at all!"

"Please don't be so rough, Lowther—"

"You ought to have your head banged against the wall," said the indignant Lowther. "Anyway, I've had enough of you and your bosh. I'm off!"

"And so am I," said Manners. "Come on, Tom, it's time for tea. Skimpole can go and look for his precious plans, or go and eat coke, or—"

"You might come out in the quadrangle and help me look there," said Skimpole. "I must have dropped them somewhere, you know, if I dropped them at all."

"Did you work that out in your head?" said Lowther, with an expression of great interest.

"Yes, certainly," said Skimpole, who was never known to see a joke. "A simple deduction like that presents no difficulties to an intellect like mine. Will you fellows come and help me look in the quad?"

"Yes," granted Lowther. "I can see myself fagging about in this blazing sun looking for your bosh—I don't think. Come on, Manners."

Lowther and Manners went upstairs. Tom Merry, who was good-natured to a fault, lingered behind for a moment.

"I say, Skimmy, if you had the least idea where you had lost the papers—"

"I haven't," said Skimpole anxiously. "It must have been somewhere in the school, or else in the grounds, unless it was in Rylcombe Wood, or when I was in the village."

Tom Merry laughed.

"You young ass! That's rather too big an order. You'd better give the thing up as a bad job. If you can't go on with your invention without the plans—"

"I can't, really."

"Then you can take up Socialism again instead."

"Really, Merry—"

"Or recommence in the amateur detective line—"

"Really—"

"Or go and eat coke!" said Tom Merry. "I'm off!"

And he followed his chums up to the study. Skimpole blinked after him.

"Really, that is almost rude of Merry," he murmured.

"They seem to attach very little importance to my great invention. But it is ever thus. How can an extraordinary intellect ever be understood by minds of a lower and commoner order? It is impossible. A genius is never understood, and I must be patient! Great inventors are always mocked by the unseeing crowd until their inventions are adopted, and then they become famous. Dear me, I wish I could find those plans!"

And the passage having been drawn blank, Skimpole, the inventor, went slowly out into the sun-blaze of the quadrangle, blinking right and left in search of the missing plans of the airship.

CHAPTER 2.

Fatty Wynn is Disappointed!

"B AI JOVE, deah boys, what's the mattah with Skimpole?"

It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form, who asked the question. He was coming towards the School House with his chums, Blake, Herries, and Digby, when he sighted Skimpole looking round among the old elms. The swell of the School House adjusted his eyeglass, and stared at the brainy member of the Shell.

"He's lookin' for somethin'," said D'Arcy, after a careful survey of the amateur inventor.

Jack Blake looked at his chum admiringly.

"I say, Gus, you must have a powerful brain to guess a thing like that," he remarked. "When you see a chap rooting about like an old porker, and blinking into every corner, it shows a startling amount of brain power to guess that he's looking for something."

"It is Gussy's training as an amateur detective that enables him to do these things," said Digby solemnly.

"Oh, pway don't wot, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus, still fixing the unconscious Skimpole with his eyeglass.

"He's lookin' for somethin'." Skimpole is an ass, and on several occasions has failed to tweet me with pwopah respect. All the same, as he is a short-sighted duffah, it would be only the pwopah thing to go and lend him a hand in lookin' for whatever it is he's lost."

"Better lend him an eye, I should think," Digby remarked. "What's the good of a hand in a case like that?"

"Pway don't be funny in this hot weathah, Dig. It's wathah wuff on us to have to stand Lowthah's wotten jokes, without you startin' in the same line. As a mattah of fact, I regard jokin' as wathah bad form."

"You can always depend upon Gussy to tell you the pwopah thing to do," Blake remarked gravely.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Let's go and help the ass," said the good-natured Herries. "He's blinking about like an owl. I wonder what he's lost?"

"Not money," grinned Dig. "He never has any."

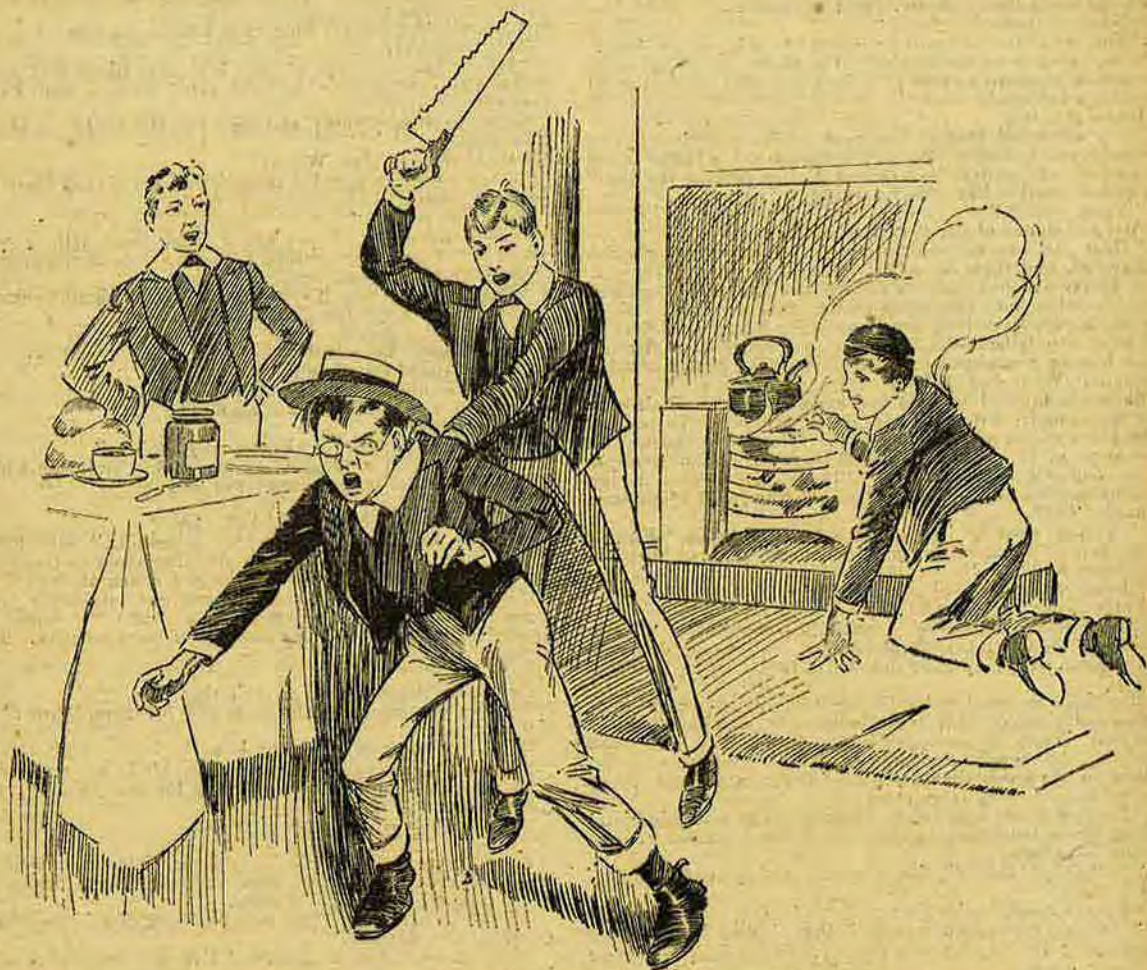
"Pawwaps it's some of his wotten Socialistic articles he wants to have pwinted in the 'Weekly,'" said D'Arcy, as the quartette walked towards the amateur Socialist of St. Jim's.

"If that's the case, we'll stop him lookin' for the bosh."

"Right-ho!" said Herries heartily.

"Skimpole, deah boy!"

Skimpole looked up. He had been hunting for the missing



"Manners wants some wood for the fire," said Lowther, flourishing the saw. "Put your head down, Skimmey."

plans for about half an hour in a blazing sun, and he looked hot and perspiring.

"You look wathah warm, deah boy," said D'Arcy. "Are you lookin' for anythin'?"

"Yes; I am looking for some important documents," said Skimpole. "I—Where are you going?"

"Oh, if it's only some of your wot, we can't help you, deah boy!"

"It is not wot, D'Arcy. It is an important plan——"

"An important what?"

"An important plan!"

"Oh, I see, you've got some plan for taking a rise out of the New House fellows!" said Blake. "Is that it?"

Skimpole sniffed.

"I am hardly likely to waste my time thinking out plans for rows with the New House, Blake. My powerful intellect——"

"Oh, blow your powerful intellect! What is the plan you are talking about, then?"

"The plan—or, rather, plans—of my airship."

"Your what?"

"My airship. I believe I told you before that I was inventing an airship!"

"Yes; I believe you told me some bosh of the sort," assented Blake.

"You are quite mistaken," said Skimpole, in a tone of patient explanation. "It is not bosh. It is simply some defect in your intellect which causes you to regard my ideas as bosh. Bad training in your early youth is probably the cause of the remarkable stupidity I have observed you to display on many occasions."

"It's too hot to lick you, Skimmey."

"I hope you will do nothing so absurd. If you had studied the higher philosophy as attentively as I have, you would

have reflected that it was a mere absurdity to think that you can change a man's opinion by punching his nose. You change nothing but the shape of his nose by such methods. Now, I——"

"Cheese it! I knew he'd start talking if we gave him a chance. Come on, you chaps!"

"I wish you would help me to look for the plans of my airship," said Skimpole. "I have dropped them somewhere, either within the school precincts or outside, I am not at all sure which. There is a man in Rylcombe experimenting in airship building, and if my plans should fall into his hands it would be a terrible loss to me. A rival inventor would probably not be very scrupulous."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My invention was approaching a most interesting point. I had not yet perfected it. I was still in doubt over some details, such as the method of raising the airship from the earth, and of propelling it through the air. Most of the other points, however, are clearly designated in the plans I have lost."

"Bai Joye, it is wathah wuff! Of course, the whole idea is bosh——"

"Really, D'Arcy——"

"And Skimpole is a silly ass. Still, it's wathah wuff, and if it wasn't so hot, and if Skimmey knew where the things had been lost, and if it wasn't tea-time, and if I wasn't exhausted by playin' cwicket, and if it wasn't too much of a beastly fag anyway, I should be inclined to help him look for the missin' documents. Undah the circs., howevah, I think we had better go in and have tea."

"That's the first sensible thing you've said to-day, Gussy," Blake observed. "Let's go in by all means."

"If you would like to help me look for the plans——"

"Too hot!"

"If you found them, I should be willing to reward you with shares in the syndicate," said Skimpole.

"What syndicate?"

"The syndicate that will be formed to take up my invention and place it on the market. The shares would be worth thousands of pounds, and it is really a very easy way of making a fortune."

Blake grinned.

"Oh, we're not greedy!" he said. "We ain't in a hurry to make our fortunes. We'd rather have tea. Better a tin of sardines and contentment therewith than playing the giddy ox in hot weather like this. Nighty-bye!"

"Yass, wathah!"

And the chums of the Fourth walked on.

"Dear me," murmured Skimpole, "I am growing quite exhausted, and there seems to be no sign of the plans yet. Can I have dropped them in the village? Suppose they have already fallen into the hands of the rival inventor? He is almost certain to embody my ideas in his invention. Even if he were strictly honest, he might unconsciously do so, having once become acquainted with my invention. It is a terrible thought! What shall I do?"

Skimpole blinked on. He had looked pretty well all over the quadrangle, but there was no sign of what he sought. The plans of the airship were gone. Three youths stood on the steps of the New House and watched Skimpole as he came towards that building, blinking round him in the blazing sunshine. They were Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn—the famous "Co."

"Skimmy must be in want of something to do," Figgins remarked. "What on earth is he moaning about there in the blaze for?"

"Looking for something," said Kerr.

Fatty Wynn's eyes sparkled.

"Very likely something to eat," he remarked. "I saw Skimpole in the tuckshop just before we went down to the cricket. He may have dropped a bag of tarts, or something."

The three watched Skimpole for some moments. Figgins was leaning against the stone balustrade, and Kerr against the wall. Fatty Wynn looked more active and alert. It was probably the thought of a bag of jam tarts lying about somewhere in the quad. that made him alert. A minute before he had been looking very limp.

"I say, it would only be good-natured to go and help him," Fatty Wynn remarked, looking out of the corner of his eye at the other two.

"Certainly!" said Figgins, lazily stretching his long limbs. "I'll come!"

"I don't mind," said Kerr.

"Oh, don't you two fellows bother!" said Fatty Wynn hastily. "I'll go and help him. You're tired, too, after cricket. I'll go!"

And Fatty Wynn went. Figgins and Kerr chuckled softly. "Looking for anything, Skimpole?" asked Fatty Wynn, tapping the genius of the School House on the shoulder in a very friendly way.

Skimpole blinked at him.

"Yes, Wynn, I am. I wish I could find them."

The word "them" confirmed Fatty Wynn in his theory. It could only apply to tarts or sweets—at least, Fatty thought so. The manner of the Falstaff of the New House grew more and more chummy.

"Where did you lose them, Skimmy?"

"I don't quite know," said Skimpole helplessly. "I really ought to have heard them fall. They made a rather large packet, you know."

Fatty Wynn's eyes gleamed.

"Yes, I suppose so. How many were there?"

"Six or seven."

"Seven for sixpence, of course!" murmured Fatty Wynn.

"Good!"

"Did you speak, Wynn?"

"No. I'll help you to look for them if you like. It would be a great shame for them to be lost."

"It would indeed, Wynn. I think it is very kind of you to take an interest in the matter like this, and to help me look for them."

"Not at all," said Fatty Wynn genially. "I'm only too glad to be able to lend you a hand, Skimmy. Fellows ought to be always willing to help one another in a case like this; and you're shortsighted, too. Have you looked in the School House?"

"Yes; and Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther helped to look."

"Oh, I say, Lowther may have scoffed them!"

"Oh, no; they would have handed them over if they had found them, because Tom Merry said they would. They weren't there. Blake and his friends refused to aid me just now, so I take this as very kind of you, Fatty."

"Not a bit of it! How long ago did you lose them?"

"I can't make that out. You see, they slipped away without my noticing them."

"And you don't know where you were at the time?"

"Unfortunately not."

"H'm! That's rather rotten. It's quite likely that some fellow has picked them up and eaten them," said Fatty Wynn.

Skimpole stopped short, and stared at the fat junior of the New House.

"What did you say, Wynn?"

"I say it's quite possible some fellow has picked them up and eaten them."

"Are you joking?"

"Certainly not! There are a good many fellows who would eat them if they picked them up, without stopping to inquire who the owner was."

"But really, Wynn, it's impossible! Why should anyone, however hungry, eat the plans of my airship?"

Fatty Wynn jumped.

"The what?" he yelled.

"The plans of my airship."

The fat junior looked daggers at Skimpole.

"Is that what you have lost Skimpole?"

"Certainly!"

"Some silly piffle rot about a silly airship?"

"Not at all. The plans of an astounding invention which will revolutionise the science of war and the—"

"Oh, rats!"

"What did you think I had lost, then?"

"A bag of tarts, or sweets, or something," said Fatty Wynn, in utter disgust. "Fancy swotting about in this blazing sun looking for the rotten plans of a rotten airship!"

"Fancy looking for a bag of tarts, you might say with more reason," said Skimpole, with a sniff. "I should be hardly likely to take all this trouble for mere eatables. The plans of my airship—"

"Oh, rats!"

And Fatty Wynn turned away in disgust.

"Aren't you going to help me to look for them, Wynn?"

"No fear!"

"But just now you offered to do so."

"I thought it was grub of some kind, or something valuable, anyway. Catch me looking for any piffle like the plans of a rotten airship."

"My airship will revolutionise—"

"Rats!"

Fatty Wynn stalked away indignantly. Figgins and Kerr, who had overheard it all, were chuckling like a couple of geese. Skimpole blinked at them.

"I say, Figgins, have you seen anything of a large packet of valuable documents?"

"Fraid not," said Figgins. "I've seen something of a howling ass!"

"Really, Figgins, that is almost rude. I have lost the plans of my airship, an invention that will revolutionise warfare and the means of transport. It is most important that they should be found. You remember what the 'Rylcombe Times' said the other day about a local inventor—a Mr. Fish—who was at work upon an airship which he was going to offer to the Government? Suppose my plans were to fall into his hands, and he collared them? My invention—"

"Awful!" said Figgins gravely. "They must be recovered at any cost. Some time ago you were setting up as an amateur detective. Why don't you employ yourself to hunt for the plans, and reward yourself if you find them with a share in the proceeds of invention? That's a really good idea, and would be supporting home industries, as it were. The case of the missing bosh—"

"The case of the purloined piffle," suggested Kerr.

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"This is really a serious matter," said Skimpole mildly. "I would offer a reward for the recovery of the plans, but unfortunately I haven't any money. As a sincere Socialist I am bound to help all who are in need, and so my pocket-money is always borrowed on the day I receive it. If any of you fellows would lend me a couple of pounds, I would—"

"Make it a couple of thousand," suggested Figgins. "The airship is worth it, and we should be just as likely to lend it to you."

"Really, Figgins—"

"I've got a really good suggestion to make," Kerr remarked thoughtfully. "There's the detective chap, who's a friend of Tom Merry's—"

"Ferrers Locke?" said Figgins.

"That's it. When he was down here he was very good-natured, as you remember. Suppose Skimmy asked Tom Merry to write to him, and ask him to take up the case?"

"I have no money to pay his fees."

"That doesn't matter. He might take it on, simply for the honour and glory. He would become known to fame as the detective who recovered the plans of the missing piffle—I mean, the missing airship."

Skimpole blinked thoughtfully.

"There is something in what you suggest, Kerr," he agreed. "At all events, I will speak to Tom Merry on the subject, and ask him to write to Ferrers Locke."

And the genius of the Shell marched off towards the School House, to seek Tom Merry, leaving Figgins & Co. cackling in chorus at the door of the New House.

CHAPTER 3.

Skimpole's Rival.

"Is that kettle boiling yet, Manners?"

"No, it isn't."

"Well, I've got the sardines opened, and the jam in the soap-dish. We're waiting for the tea."

"It's jolly hot!" said Manners, turning a crimson face from the fire-grate, where he had set a mass of sticks ablaze, with the tea-kettle jammed on top of them. "Do you know, I think it's rather a mistake to have tea made in the study this weather."

"Oh, rot! We're not going to start feeding in the hall, I suppose?"

"We'll get a little methylated spirit-stove, then!" panted Manners. "It's too jolly hot to have a fire here! The sticks are burning out, and the beastly kettle isn't boiling!"

"You want some more wood," said Tom Merry.

"I can't see where it's to come from, then."

"Think, dear boy!" said Tom Merry, who was industriously cutting bread-and-butter, standing as near the open window as possible. "It's your turn to boil the kettle, and you must fix it, somehow."

"Use your head, you know," said Lowther, encouragingly.

Manners glared at the humorous Lowther. Monty's remark was capable of a double interpretation, and, taken in one sense, it implied that Manners' head was of the material he required for the fire.

"Oh, don't be funny!" grumbled Manners. "Keep that for the winter. When I hear a chap being funny in August I always want to slay him."

"Is that kettle boiling?"

"No."

"Well, I'm going to start on the sardines," said Lowther. "If you don't jolly well buck up, there won't be any left for you."

"I want some more wood."

"Use your—"

"Oh, cheese it!"

"Hallo, there's some," said Tom Merry, pointing to the doorway with the bread-knife. "Corn in Egypt!"

The door of the study was open for the sake of coolness. A large head, adorned with tufts of hair and a big pair of spectacles, had been inserted into the study. It belonged to Herbert Skimpole, of the Shell.

Manners grinned.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Chop it off for me!"

"Certainly!" said Lowther.

He picked up the saw belonging to Tom Merry's tool-chest, and started towards the amateur Socialist of St. Jim's.

Skimpole blinked at him in amazement.

"What are you going to do, Lowther? Ow—leggo my collar!"

"Manners wants some wood for the fire," explained Lowther, flourishing the saw. "Put your head down, and—"

"Look here, you know—"

"My word, if I catch you bending!" said Lowther.

"Please keep that saw away! It is a dangerous thing for a fellow of your low order of intellect to have to play with."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry.

Lowther looked daggers at the amateur Socialist. He laid down the saw, and took a firmer grip on Skimpole's collar.

"This way," he said.

And he led the amateur Socialist out of the study. Skimpole went, for the simple reason that he had no choice in the matter.

Lowther led him half a dozen paces down the passage, and jammed him against the wall and released him.

"Travel!" he said.

"But—"

"Travel—"

And Lowther, shaking a warning finger, retired to the study. Skimpole blinked after him in amazement.

"Dear me!" he murmured. "That is almost rude of Lowther. I shall have to re-enter the study, however, as I must speak to Tom Merry."

And Skimpole put his head in at the door again.

"Hallo, you still here!" exclaimed Lowther, picking up a loaf. "Now, then, look out for your cocoa-nut."

"Please don't be violent, Lowther. I came here to speak to Tom Merry upon a most important matter."

"Oh, travel!"

"Manners seems to be taking a lot of trouble over that fire," said Skimpole. "It's a mistake to boil the kettle on sticks. I could tell you a much simpler way."

"What is it, then?" grunted Manners.

"In your place, I should boil it by electricity," said the inventive genius of the Shell. "Electricity—"

"You'd boil it by what?"

"Electricity," said Skimpole. "Electricity is undoubtedly the coming power. You can use it without pervading an apartment with this unpleasant warmth."

"You unutterable ass!"

"That is really most rude, Manners!"

"You shrieking ass, how are we to get an electric plant in this study?" howled Manners.

"Oh, that is quite simple! The plan could be bought very cheap, and the expenditure of a few pounds would be well repaid by—"

"And where are we to get the few pounds from?"

"I have not gone into that part of the subject. It really has no connection with the matter of the electricity. I could devise a simple means of obtaining the power, once you had the plant. I do not suggest a dynamo in this room. You could probably obtain the necessary power from the house-keeper's sewing-machine, properly connected with wires—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry. "You had better propose that to Mrs. Minims, Manners."

"The ass," said Manners—"the screaming ass!"

"Is that kettle boiling yet?"

"No, it isn't."

"Buck up, old chap!"

"I want some more wood."

"Unless we behead Skimpole, you can't have any. Never mind, though. Here's Tom's Latin grammar—"

"Here, you let my Latin grammar alone!"

"Well, you will have to burn something."

"We'll try your new bat, then," said Tom Merry. "You're jolly well not going to burn my Latin grammar. You've sold yours, and Manners has lent his to Jimson of the New House, and mine is the only one here."

"Lemme see. Here's a bundle of contributions for the 'Weekly'—"

"I haven't read them through yet."

"Then you're in luck. Here you are, Manners!"

"I say, that's rather rough on the contributors."

"Not so rough as it would be on us if we had to read them," said Manners, jamming them into the fire. "I think this will finish the kettle. It was just on the boil."

"I want to speak to you, Tom Merry," said Skimpole. "I am sorry to interrupt your tea, but the matter is most important."

"Oh, get on; and do cut it short, old chap!"

"I am afraid that will be impossible, as I must explain the matter fully," said Skimpole. "You can, however, proceed with your tea."

"Thank you, I will."

"Is that kettle boiling, Manners?"

"Yes, it's boiling now. Phew!"

"Make the tea, then. I'm jolly dry!"

"You see, Merry, I have lost the plans of my airship."

"Haven't they turned up?"

"No. They appear to be quite lost. I am in a great state of nervousness lest they should fall into the hands of Mr. Fish—"

"Who may Mr. Fish happen to be?"

"He is a gentleman in Rycombe who is engaged in constructing an airship. The local paper had a long report on the subject last week—"

"Oh, yes; I heard somebody chattering about the bosh."

"As a matter of fact, it probably is bosh," agreed Skimpole. "I firmly believe that I alone am on the track of the true secret of aerial navigation. But suppose the plans of my airship were to fall into his hands?"

"Pass the sardines, Lowther!"

"You are not paying me attention, Tom Merry."

"Yes, I am, Skimmy. Pass the bread, too! Careful with the butter; that's all there is left! Go on, Skimmy!"

"I have heard that this man, Fish, is an enthusiastic inventor, and probably he would use my plans, if they came into his hands."

"Too bad!"

"Yes, he would be a rotten Fish to do that!" said Monty Lowther, with a shake of the head.

"I am therefore anxious to recover them. From the fact that no trace has been found of them, I cannot help thinking that someone may have picked them up, and may be keeping them. At a casual glance their immense value might not be perceived, but—"

"Did you have your name written on them?"

"Yes, my name, with the name of my house and school."

"Then anybody who picked them up would bring them to you."

"There are some dishonest people who have a maxim that findings are keepings, you know," said Skimpole dubiously. "Besides, the man Fish would have a very strong interest in keeping the plans. As a sincere Socialist, I am bound to believe that every man is good till he is proved to be bad; but on the other hand, as an amateur detective, I must acknowledge that suspicion rests upon everyone until the guilty party is found."

"And as a silly ass?"

"As a silly ass, he's bound to go on jawing, I suppose," said Lowther. "Pass the marmalade, Manners."

"Certainly; there you are."

"Indeed, as an amateur detective," went on Skimpole, unheeding, "it seems to me most probable that my plans have fallen into the hands of Mr. Horatio Fish."

"How you make that out?" asked Tom Merry.

"Simply by deduction. The plans are lost, and they have my name and address written upon them. As their immense value is not apparent to a casual observer, any ordinary person finding them would naturally return them to me. As a matter of fact, no one in this neighbourhood, with the exception of Mr. Fish, could possibly have any interest in keeping them. On the best Sherlock Holmes' methods, therefore, it is certain that if they have been found it can only have been by Mr. Fish, as he alone would fail to return them to me."

"Wonderful!" said Tom Merry.

"Marvelous!" said Manners.

"Extraordinary!" said Lowther. "How do you do these things, Skimmy?"

"Merely by the exercise of an intellect somewhat above the average," said Skimpole. "Suspicion points to Mr. Fish—"

"But suppose the things haven't been found?"

"That is hardly admissible, as the parcel was a bulky one, and was undoubtedly lost in some public place. It is probable that it has been found."

"Good!" assented Lowther. "When you grow up, Skimmy, you ought to find your sphere in a private detective's office, or a private lunatic asylum, or something like that!"

"Really, Lowther—"

"Another cup of tea, Manners."

"Right you are."

"The case seems to be pretty well worked out," said Skimpole. "The plans of my airship are probably in the hands of Mr. Fish. But how am I to recover them? That is where you can help me, Merry."

Tom Merry stared.

"How's that, Skimmy?"

"Your friend—Mr. Ferrers Locke, the detective—would probably be able to discover what has become of the plans. Of course, with my great ability as an amateur detective, I could do it as well as he, but I have not a free hand. My time is occupied by lessons, and the restraints of a school. I was thinking that Ferrers Locke would probably be glad to take the case, and have a chance of becoming known as the man who recovered the plans of the airship."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It might mean the chance of a lifetime to Ferrers Locke; it would also be of great service to me. I have no money to pay his fees, but the fame would undoubtedly be a sufficient reward. I want you to write to him—"

"To what?"

"To write to him and ask him to take up the case."

"My hat!"

"He would probably agree for the sake of the fame, if you fully explained the matter to him. Otherwise, you could ask it as a personal favour to yourself."

"Well, of all the nerve!"

"Will you do it, Merry?"

"Not much!"

"It would cost you nothing, and would be a great service to me."

"My dear ass—"

"Not so much of your flip-flap, Skimmy," said Lowther, wagging a warning finger at the brainy man of the Fern. "Travel."

"But I think—"

"I can't do anything of the sort," said Tom Merry, laughing. "Don't be such an ass, Skimmy!"

"In that case I shall write to him—"

"Oh, don't be an ass!"

"Can you suggest any better method?"

"I can," said Lowther gravely. "It seems that you have only Mr. Fish to fear as a rival in your particular line. Suppose you paid a visit to his place and examined his giddy airship? There are full particulars of his workshops, and so on, in the local rag. You could investigate—"

"Dear me; I never thought of that!" said Skimpole. "It is certainly a most valuable suggestion, Lowther! I am very much obliged to you!"

"You're quite welcome to it," said Lowther generously.

"Thank you! Would you like to come with me?"

"Yes, awfully; only I'm rather busy."

"Would you like to come, Tom Merry?"

"Well, I feel that I ought to stay with Lowther."

"I should prefer not to go alone. Will you come with me, Manners?"

"I've got some plates to develop," said Manners, shaking his head.

"Well, never mind; I will ask Blake! Thank you very much for the suggestion, Lowther!"

And Skimpole disappeared. The Terrible Three burst into a roar.

"My hat!" gasped Lowther. "Is it possible that the ass will really be such a shrieking idiot as to go?"

"It's rather like him!" said Tom Merry, wiping his eyes. "Suppose we stop him!"

"Oh, it's all right! He won't be able to get into Fish's place! I know it, and there's a high wall round it, with spikes on top. Pass the sardines!"

CHAPTER 4.

A Fearful Thrashing!

"FOUND it?"

Jack Blake asked the question with a grin as Skimpole looked into Study No. 6. The chimps of Study No. 6 had just finished tea, and Digby, whose turn it was to wash the crockery, was clearing cups and saucers into a bowl. Herries was sorting out a tea-cloth, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, being momentarily idle, was improving the shining hour by polishing a silk hat.

Skimpole shook his head.

"No, Blake; I am sorry to say I have not found it, if you are referring to the packet of valuable papers I have lost."

"Never mind," said Blake comfortingly; "it wasn't of any value, so—"

"It was of immense value! By means of my skill as an amateur detective, I have worked it out in my mind that the plans can only have fallen into the hands of one person."

"Good! Who is that?"

"Mr. Horatio Fish, the local inventor. I am about to investigate further by paying a visit to his place and looking into the matter. I want a companion—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Someone to help me, and back me up in this enterprise. I shall require to be assisted over walls, and so forth. I am determined to leave no stone unturned to recover my valuable plans. Will you come with me, Blake?"

"Not this evening," said Blake gravely; "some other evening."

"Will you come, Digby?"

"I don't think."

"Herries?"

"Rats!" said Herries, in his direct way. "If you go fooling about Fish's place you may get arrested as a burglar!"

"For the sake of preserving my wonderful invention I shall risk that, Herries! Will you come with me, D'Arcy?"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy hesitated. The swell of the School House never failed in politeness, but this was really putting his politeness to a severe strain.



"Does my eye look very bad?" said Skimpole. "It is very unpleasant. My spectacles are a little crooked owing to the swelling, and it causes some uncertainty in my vision."

"Well, weally, deah boy——"

"As a matter of fact, I should prefer you to any of the others, D'Arcy."

"Weally!" said D'Arcy, rather flattered. "In that case——"

"Yes, you would be much easier to get on with, as, with your somewhat feeble intellect, you would not be so likely to oppose my plans——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake, Herries, and Digby.

Arthur Augustus adjusted his eyeglass, and gave the brainy man of the School House a withering glare.

"Skimpole, you uttah ass——"

"I should really like you to come!"

"I uttally wefusse to do anythin' of the sort!"

"It would be a chance to distinguish yourself. You have wanted to figure as an amateur detective. Under my lead, and with my advice and assistance, you would have a chance."

"You shwiekin' ass!"

"Really, D'Arcy, you are almost rude! If you do not wish to accompany me on this expedition——"

"Wathah not!"

"Oh, go with him!" exclaimed Blake. "You made such a howling success of the last expedition you undertook together, you know!"

"On that occasion the whole mattah was mucked up by Skimpole's absurd, wotten obstinacy and widiculousness."

"On the contrary, D'Arcy, it was mucked up by your want of common intelligence, and your refusal to follow the lead of one wiser than yourself."

"You sweamin' duffah!"

"Really, D'Arcy, I am paying you a considerable compliment in asking you to accompany me, considering what a really stupid person you are."

"Eh?"

"But you would be useful to help me over walls or into windows, and so——"

"Oh, twavel along, ass!"

"Perhaps, though, I should be better without you, as you would probably muck up the affair, as you did the last."

"I wefusse to admit that I mucked it up."

"Oh, there is no doubt upon that point! The affair was mucked up, and as it was not I that did it, it must have been you," explained Skimpole. "Of course, as a Determinist, I do not blame you for being a silly ass——"

"Bai Jove!"

"It is undoubtedly due to the combined effects of heredity and environment. Every human being must necessarily be what he is at birth and what he becomes afterwards; that is

one of the great truths of Determinism. You were probably born with a defective intellect—"

"Gwast Scott!"

"And your training has developed the defectiveness; until, at the present moment, you are little better than an idiot."

"You wotten ass, I shall have no alternative but to administrah a feahful thwashin'!" said Arthur Augustus. "Pway take your jacket off!"

"Nothing of the sort. A fearful thrashing would not alter the case in any way."

"Then withdraw your words."

"It is impossible to withdraw the truth."

"Then I have no resource but to thwash you."

And Arthur Augustus commenced by giving Skimpole a tap on the nose that made him stagger against the door. Then the swell of St. Jim's danced round the amateur Socialist, brandishing his fists.

"Bai Jove! Come on—come on! Bai Jove!"

"As a sincere Socialist, I am opposed to violence!" gasped Skimpole. "But as a Determinist, I have to admit that if I am guilty of violence, it is undoubtedly due to my heredity and environment. I shall therefore thrash you, D'Arcy!"

"Come on, then, you wottah!"

And the combatants, equally excited, rushed at one another. Blake, Herries, and Digby dragged the table back to give them room, and then sat on it and cheered.

"Bai Jove!"

"You ass!"

"I shall thwash you—"

"I shall give you a licking—"

"Take that, you ass!"

"Take that, you chump!"

"Oh!"

"Ow!"

"Hurrah!" roared Digby. "Go it, ye cripples!"

"Keep it up!" shouted Herries. "Two to one on Gussy!"

"On the ball!" yelled Blake. "Go it!"

"I am goin' it, deah boys! I am goin' to give this wotten Socialist a feahful thwashin'."

"I am going to severely chastise this bloated aristocrat."

"I wufuse to be chawactewised as bloated."

"Go it!"

"Back up!"

"Look out in goal!"

"Hurrah!"

The combatants were "going it" with a vengeance; there was no doubt about that. They went for one another hammer and tongs. The news was not long in spreading up and down the passage, the noise spread it. Fellows came from far and wide to look on, and the passage outside Study No. 6 resembled the pit door of a London theatre on a first night.

"My only hat!" exclaimed Tom Merry, pushing his way forward. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," said Blake; "only a little argument. Skimpole and D'Arcy are arguing it out."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The din was growing terrific. The fellows crammed in the doorway and passage, craning over one another's shoulders to look, were cheering frantically. D'Arcy had got Skimpole's head into chancery. Blake had picked up Skimpole's spectacles to save them from being trodden on, but the amateur Socialist did not need them now. He pommelled away at D'Arcy's ribs, and D'Arcy pommelled away at his features. Skimpole roared and struggled and tramped to and fro, and the two combatants reeled and crashed against the table upon which Blake, Herries, and Dig were sitting.

The table was not built for a crash like that. It went reeling, and the three juniors slid off at various angles, and found themselves in a heap on the floor, amid a mass of crockery and bread-and-butter.

"Ow!" roared Herries.

"Ah!" gasped Dig.

"Gwo!" granted Blake.

Skimpole caught his foot in Dig's leg, and reeled over, and dragged down Arthur Augustus on top of him. Both fell on Digby, who gave a yell.

"Gerrof!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the crowd in the passage.

Tom Merry wiped his eyes.

"Oh, this is too good!" he sobbed. "It is really too good!"

The juniors in the passage were laughing themselves almost into hysterics. But Blake, Herries, and Digby were not laughing now. They were hurt. They scrambled up in wrath, with vengeful looks.

Skimpole and D'Arcy were struggling on the carpet.

Blake seized Arthur Augustus. Herries and Digby grasped Skimpole.

"Now, then," panted Blake, "all together!"

"Right-ho!"

The juniors dragged hard, and the combatants came apart. Arthur Augustus struggled wildly in Jack Blake's muscular grip.

"Pway welease me, deah boy! I haven't finished givin' that wottah a feahful thwashin'!"

"Hold on!"

"I wufuse to hold on. I uttably wufuse to do anythin' of the sort. Pway welease me, or I shall lose my tempah and stwike you."

"Look out, Blake!" sang out Monty Lowther. "You know what Gussy's like when he loses his beastly tempah."

"Yaas, wathah! Welease me immediately!"

Blake granted.

"I'll hold this silly ass," he said; "you chaps aling Skimpole out. Sling him at those grinning asses there."

"Right-ho!" said Herries.

"Please don't be violent," gasped Skimpole, "I am feeling very breathless and exhausted. I—Ow! Oh! Biff!"

Herries and Digby faithfully carried out Blake's instructions. The amateur Socialist was hurled at the crowd in the doorway. The Terrible Three scrambled back in time, and Skimpole crashed upon Gore of the Shell and Reilly of the Fourth Form. He clasped the latter round the neck and clung to him for support.

"Ow!" roared Gore. "Get off, ass!"

"Faith and leggo!" yelled Reilly. "Sure, he's hangin' round me neck intirely! Gerrof, ye spalpeen! Get off!"

He gave the amateur Socialist a shove which made Skimpole sit down in the doorway. The brainy man of the Shell blinked round him dazedly.

"Dear me," he gasped, "I feel very dizzy and exhausted! That was almost rude of you, Reilly."

"Faith, and I—"

"Travel along!" exclaimed Blake. "I can't hold this duffer much longer."

"I insist upon bein' immediately weleased."

"Rats! Keep quiet!"

"I shall stwike you."

"Bosh!"

"I no longah wegard you as a fwiend, Blake."

"Good!"

"Weally—"

Skimpole staggered to his feet and rubbed his nose, from which a stream of claret was issuing. He was looking very dazed.

"If you will give me my glasses I will retire," he said. "Thank you, Digby. I hope D'Arcy will be improved by the thrashing I have given him."

"Bai Jove, let me get at the wottah!"

Skimpole pushed through the crowd and disappeared. The grinning juniors slowly dispersed. Blake released the bellicose swell of the School House.

"You wottah!" gasped D'Arcy. "I no longah wegard you as a fwiend. I—Bai Jove, where's my hat?"

"What hat?"

"The hat I was bwushin' when that dangewous maniac came in."

"Blessed if I know!"

Digby gave a cackle.

"There it is, Gussy."

The swell of the School House gave a howl of anguish. There was the hat, certainly, but it bore now only a very faint and distant resemblance to a hat. It had been trampled on by half a dozen feet, and, as Digby remarked, it wasn't of much use now, even as a concertina.

"Bai Jove!"

D'Arcy gazed at the hat for a moment, and then made a rush for the door. Blake caught him by the arm and jerked him back.

"Where are you going?"

"Pway welease me."

"But where are you going?"

"To give Skimpole a feahful thwashin'."

"Hold on!"

"I wufuse to do anythin' of the sort. Pway welease me, or I shall no longah wegard you as a fwiend."

"Oh, draw it mild, Gussy! You have given Skimpole a fearful thrashing already."

The swell of St. Jim's cooled down somewhat.

"Do you weally think so, Blake?"

"Yes, certainly!" said Blake, winking at Herries and Digby with the eye furthest from D'Arcy. "I think it is probable that you have done him severe injury—perhaps injury that he will never recover from."

D'Arcy's jaw dropped.

"Bai Jove!"

"I think it's extremely prob., said Digby solemnly. "He staggered away as if he had something broken inside—perhaps the spinal column of the pericardium."

"Oh, dear!"

"I think he had his neck sprained, too," said Herries. "Didn't you notice how he had his neck twisted and his head on one side, as if the carotid artery had been broken in two?"

"Ha, ha!—I mean, yes. If he dies—"

"Oh, weally, Blake—"

"I think that's very likely," said Digby, with a shake of the head.

"Oh, weally, Dig—"

"The least D'Arcy can do," said Herries solemnly, "is to make an offer to Skimpole's people to stand half the expense of the funeral."

It dawned on Arthur Augustus at last that his chums were "rotting." He adjusted his monocle and gave them a withering stare.

"Weally, dearh boys, I wegard your wemarks with feahful contempt."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You are a set of impertinent wottahs."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I no longer wegard you as fwends."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

As every frash remark of D'Arcy's seemed to send his chums nearer to violent hysterics, the swell of the School House gave it up, and walked out of the study with his nose in the air. And a yell of laughter followed him down the passage.

CHAPTER 5.

Figgins Comes to the Rescue!

PRATT, of the Fourth, looked into Figgins's study in the New House with a grin on his face. Figgins & Co. were finishing tea. Figgins had just taken the last portion of cake, and put it on his plate, when Pratt looked in. Figgins glanced up.

"Hallo, Pratt!"

"Skimpole's inquiring for you," grinned Pratt. "Thought I'd look in and tell you."

"Tell him I'm dead," said Figgins. "Tell him anything. Kill him! Only don't let him come into this study."

"He looks as if somebody had been killing him already," said Pratt, with a chuckle. "Here he comes! I'll call some of the chaps and sling him out if you like."

"Oh, let him come in!"

Skimpole was coming along the passage. The amateur Socialist of St. Jim's looked decidedly the worse for wear. One of his eyes was discoloured, and his nose was very much swollen. Pratt grinned.

"Well, I've warned you, Figgy," he said. "We'll sling him out if you like."

Skimpole blinked at the obliging Pratt.

"That is really almost rude, Pratt," he remarked. "Let me point out to you— But Pratt was gone. Skimpole blinked into the study."

Figgins and Kerr looked at him curiously. Fatty Wynn absently removed the cake from Figgins's plate to his own, and began to eat it.

"Well, you do look a sight, Skimmy!" said Figgins. "Have you been wrestling with a mangle?"

"Or trying to stop a motor-car with your face?" asked Kerr.

"I have been used in a ruffianly manner," said Skimpole. "I have been fighting with D'Arcy. I am pleased to say that I gave him a fearful thrashing. He wanted me to withdraw some observations which were perfectly true, and, of course, as a sincere Socialist, I could do nothing of the sort. Then he proceeded to violence."

"Yes, you look as if he did. I say, where's my cake?"

"Your cake?" said Kerr.

"Yes! Where's it gone? Why, blessed if that cormorant, Wynn, isn't bolting it!" exclaimed Figgins indignantly.

"Am I?" said Fatty Wynn, with a start. "By Jove, so I am! Simply absent-mindedness."

"Yes, you're an absent-minded beggar," said Figgins witheringly. "That makes about the tenth piece you've had—"

"Only the ninth, Figgy, honour bright!"

"You—you—"

"I got so hungry this August weather," said Fatty Wynn plaintively. "There wasn't much for tea, you know—only ham and bacon and eggs and sausages, and I had to fill up with cake. You see—"

"Yes, I see a cormorant," said Figgins.

"You can have what's left—"

Figgins looked at what was left. There was almost sufficient to cover a half-crown. He shook his head.

"You can finish it, Fatty. If you're still hungry, you'd better start on the coal in the locker. When are you going to take your face away, Skimpole?"

"That is hardly a polite way of putting it, Figgins."

"I suppose not; but you haven't answered my question."

"Come to think of it, why did you bring it here?" asked Kerr.

"I have a proposition to make to you fellows—"

"Go ahead!"

"I have, by my wonderful skill as an amateur detective, traced the theft of the plans of my airship to Mr. Horatio Fish, the local inventor—"

"Have you set Ferrers Locke on the track?"

"Tom Merry refuses to write to him. When I asked him, he told me not to be an ass—a reply which I could not help regarding as almost rude. However, I think I can manage very well without the assistance of Ferrers Locke—for the present, at any rate."

"Good! You are going to give yourself a job as detective?"

"I am going to investigate the matter myself. I shall require assistance, and I have come to you, Figgins."

Figgins winked at the Co.

"That's very kind of you, Skimpole."

"Not at all, Figgins. I have sought assistance in my own House in vain, and I have made up my mind that the honour shall belong to the New House."

"Oh, really, Skimmy! That's rather rough on the School House, you know."

"I know it is, Figgins. But I am quite firm on the point. Now, what I want to know is, are you fellows willing to help me?"

Figgins suppressed a chuckle.

"That really depends upon what you're going to do, Skimmy."

Kerr and Wynn stared at their leader. They had expected Figgins to give Skimpole his opinion in language more expressive than polite. But they saw the next moment, from the humorous twinkle in Figgins's eye, that the chief of the Co. had some "wheeze" in his mind.

"That is very simple," said Skimpole. "From the description in the local paper, I know the exact situation of Mr. Fish's house and grounds. He has a place outside the village near the banks of the Ryll, and his workshop is built in the garden. My plan is to penetrate to the workshop and examine his model, and if I find that he has used my ideas, I shall know for certain that he is the finder of the missing plans."

Figgins nodded in a thoughtful way.

"But suppose Mr. Fish finds you on his premises—"

"I shall, of course, use the greatest caution."

"Suppose he keeps a watch-dog?"

"I should quell him with the power of my eye."

"Well, you really seem to be prepared for everything."

"A brain like mine would naturally be prepared for everything. Even I, however, require some assistance. I am not an athlete—"

"Oh, come, Skimmy," said Figgins, with a glance at the amateur Socialist's weedy form, "you don't do yourself justice, you know."

"I dare say that, if I had the time to devote to it, I should become far more athletic than any other fellow in the lower Forms at this school," said Skimpole. "It is easy enough to learn to excel in such matters as cricket and football and running; very different from the work required to write a really good book on Socialism, as I have been doing lately, or to invent an airship."

"I suppose so," said Figgins, with great humility. "When I came to think of it, you are a great deal more like a scarecrow than an athlete."

The Co. chuckled.

"I require some assistance in getting over walls, and so on," said Skimpole; "that is where I should be glad of your help. Later, you will become famous as having had a hand in the recovery of the plans of Skimpole's great airship—"

Figgins looked at the Co.

"Would you like to become famous?" he asked.

"Certainly!" said Kerr.

"Anything you like!" assented Fatty Wynn.

"Then it's settled. We're going to follow Skimpole's lead in this matter, and see if we can't put him through it—I mean, help him through."

"Thank you very much, Figgins. I am going to visit the house of Mr. Fish to-night, and commence the investigations at once."

"Good wheeze!"

"It will not be safe to do so until after lights-out. Will you meet me in the quadrangle, say, at ten o'clock?"

"Certainly!" said Figgins. "That will be half an hour

after lights-out for the Fourth Form, and everybody will be asleep in our quarters. We can sneak out of the dormitory easily enough."

"Easy as winking," said Kerr.

"Easy enough," said Patty Wynn. "If we're going out, though, we'd better take some sandwiches with us."

"I am very much obliged to you, Figgins," said Skimpole; "I am sure you will be very useful to me in this affair."

"Yes; I am quite sure of that, Skimmy. We shall do you more good than you expect—I mean, we shall make it a point to be useful. What nobler aim could there be in life than to be useful to the great Skimpole?"

Skimpole blinked suspiciously at Figgins, but the chief of the New House juniors was quite serious.

"Then it is settled, Figgins?"

"Quite settled."

"You will meet me in the quad. when the clock strikes ten."

"In the dead waist and middle of the night," said Figgins, who had recently been rehearsing with the New House Amateur Dramatic Society, and still had Shakespeare running in his mind, "I'll meet you in the churchyard."

"Really, Figgins, I do not understand you. There is no churchyard nearer than Rylcombe, and that is too far away."

"Meet him round the bandstand," suggested Kerr.

"But there is no bandstand at St. Jim's," said Skimpole, looking bewildered. The amateur Socialist of St. Jim's was not blessed with a sense of humour.

"Well, then, I'll meet you at Philippi," said Figgins, making the appointment that Brutus made with the ghost of Julius Caesar.

"I do not know where Philippi is, Figgins—"

"Ah, in that case, we'll make it the quad," said Figgins.

"What do you say to the wall by the slanting oak?"

"That will be excellent, as it is a good place to climb over."

"Then it's settled, Skimmy. We'll be there in the still night, when the church clock booms forth the solemn hour."

"You can't hear the church clock from the school, Figgins. Better fix it by the clock here at St. Jim's."

"You unpoetical old villain, that's all right. When the clock in the clock-tower strikes ten, I'll be waiting for thee by the giddy old oak."

"Thank you very much."

"And now I'd advise you to go and buy a beefsteak for that eye," said Figgins; and the amateur Socialist left the study.

"What's the little game?" demanded the Co. simultaneously, as the door closed.

Figgins chuckled.

"You heard it all arranged, my sons?"

"Yes," said Kerr. "But you don't really mean that you are going to get out of the dormitory at ten o'clock?"

"Can't fail to keep an appointment."

"But you're not going out of bounds at night, surely, on such a fatheaded jape?" exclaimed the Scottish partner in the Co.

"Did I tell Skimpole I would go out of bounds?"

"Well, no."

"I told him I would meet him by the wall at ten o'clock. So I will. And I told him we'd do him more good than he expected. So we will. We'll cure him of getting out of his House of a night."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The silly ass may go round burgling places and getting arrested if we give him his head," said Figgins. "We don't want a St. Jim's chap to get into trouble. At the same time, we do want a jape up against the School House."

"Yes, rather!"

"We'll meet Skimpole in the giddy trysting-place, and make an example of him. It's all for his own good, you see."

"Quite so!"

"My idea is to put him through it in a way that will cure him of wanting to break bounds of a night, and of going around asking respectable young men like us to be his accomplices in burglaries."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Figgins & Co. laughed in chorus.

Meanwhile, Skimpole, without a suspicion that his new allies were simply "rotting," was making his preparations for the expedition.

CHAPTER 6.

Skimpole Makes Preparations!

"TOM MERRY—" "Does it look very bad?" said Skimpole. "It 'Hallo, Skimmy! Where did you get that eye?' is very unpleasant. My spectacles are a little crooked owing to this swelling, and it causes some uncertainty in my vision. However, it cannot be helped. I want to speak to you, Merry—"

"Cut it short, old chap!"

"I want to borrow—"

"Sorry, quite stony."

"I want to borrow—"

"Broke to the wide. Ask Manners."

"I want to borrow—"

"So am I," said Manners. "I want some new films, and I can't get them until my allowance comes down. Ask Lowther."

"I want to borrow—"

"Well, I've got a bob left," said Lowther. "I'm going to keep it left, too. I am not giving it away to the cause of Socialist propaganda."

"I want to borrow—"

"Not good enough. Go and ask D'Arcy; he's rolling in filthy lucre."

"I want to borrow a rope—"

"Eh?"

"I want to borrow a rope of you fellows—"

"Why didn't you say so before?"

"Really, Merry, you didn't give me a chance. I know you chaps have a long knotted rope in your study, as you have used it to descend into the quadrangle from your window, I believe. I want to borrow the rope."

The Terrible Three stared at the amateur Socialist.

"What on earth do you want with the rope, Skimmy?"

"I require it."

"Yes, I can guess that much, as you want to borrow it, but what do you require it for?"

"I should prefer not to explain."

"Are you going to break bounds?"

"Please do not, by asking awkward questions, put me under the painful necessity of prevaricating," said Skimpole.

"Well, Skimmy, my son, you could have the rope, and welcome, but I can't approve of your breaking bounds," said Tom Merry, shaking his head.

"You need not approve, Merry. That is really a matter of indifference, and—"

Lowther chuckled.

"Knock his head against the wall, Tom. That's what he really wants."

"Please don't be violent," said Skimpole, retreating a pace. "I have had enough fighting for the present. I am feeling rather fatigued. Will you lend me the rope, Merry?"

"You can have it if you like," said Tom Merry; "but I advise you not to be a silly ass, Skimpole."

"Thank you. Where is the rope?"

"In the cupboard in the study, under the box. But—"

"Thank you."

Skimpole walked on, leaving the Terrible Three looking at one another doubtfully. Monty Lowther grinned.

"It means that he's really going out," said Lowther.

Tom Merry looked rather troubled.

"We ought to stop him."

"I don't see how we can. He could get out without the rope. If we stopped him to-night he'd go another night."

"I suppose so."

"He may get into trouble, though," said Manners. "Suppose we watched to-night to see if he went out, and went after him—"

Tom Merry's eyes glimmered.

"That's a good idea. We may be able to give him a lesson about going out of a night and making his kind schoolfellows anxious about him."

"That's it. The ass wants the rope to lower himself over the wall, I expect. If we should happen to be on the spot—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"One of us had better stay awake, then—"

"Good!" said Lowther. "It's your idea, Manners—"

"Yes. I think of these things, you know."

"So you had better stay awake—"

"Eh?"

"It's settled," said Lowther. "Manners stays awake to-night and watches for the tame lunatic, and wakes us up if he goes out."

"Do I?" said Manners.

"Well, it was your own suggestion."

"We'll toss up for it," said Tom Merry, laughing. "My

ANSWERS

NEXT
THURSDAY:

"THE HEAD'S SURPRISE."

A Grand Double-Length Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By Martin Clifford.



"Catch me looking for anything like the plans of a rotten airship!" said Fatty Wynn indignantly.

hat! I believe Skimpole's airship is going to be more trouble than his Socialism or his amateur detectivism."

Skimpole, meanwhile, had walked on to Study No. 6, where the chums of the Fourth were doing their preparation. Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy were busy. They looked up as the amateur Socialist looked in.

"I say, Blake—"

"Get out."

"I want to borrow—"

"We're busy."

"I want to borrow a dark lantern—"

Jack Blake gave a jump.

"You want to borrow a what?"

"A dark lantern."

"Better apply to Bill Sikes, or Charles Peace, or somebody in that line," said Blake. "We haven't any dark lanterns in this study."

"Yass, wathah!" said D'Arcy. "I wegard it as feahfully impertinent for you to come here, Skimpole, and suggest that we keep dark lanterns on the beastly pwemises!"

"I desire to hold no converse with you, D'Arcy!"

"Bai Jove!"

"I look upon you as a ruffian! You have damaged my features to such an extent that I cannot keep my spectacles on straight, which is a great inconvenience to me."

"I am sowwy, deah boy! But, weally, what can you expect, when you pwovoke me to give you such a feahful thwashin'?"

"I fancy the thrashing was on the other side."

"What?"

"It was received by you."

D'Arcy laid down his pen, and jumped up.

"Bai Jove! If that is the way you wegard the mattab, you uttah wottah, we will finish that sowap now on the beastly spot!"

Digby caught the swell of the School House by the arm and dragged him back.

"Hold on, ass!"

"I wefuse to hold on, and I uttahly and absolutely decline to be chawactewised as an ass!"

"Chuck it!" said Blake severely. "You've made row enough, you two. If you start again, we'll knock your nappers together, and sling you out of the room!"

"I should wefuse to be slung out of the woom!"
 "We haven't any dark lanterns, Skimmy, and if we had we wouldn't lend them to you to play the giddy goat with!"
 "Really, Blake—"

"So get out!" said Herries. "You're interrupting the washing! Get out! Travel!"

"My dear Herries—"

"Bunk!" roared three voices in unison.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "You may welease me, Dig. I do not intend to thwash this silly wottah any more! Upon weflection, I think he has had punishment enough. I wesequest the ass to wetire before I am pwoked. I shall be vewy wuff if he wouases my toupah!"

"If you haven't a dark lantern—"

"We haven't. Bunk!"

"I could make an ordinary bicycle lantern do. Mine is broken, and I think that one of yours would—"

"Travel!"

"If you will lend me yours, Blake—"

"I'm not going to help you to make a bigger ass of yourself than Nature made of you, Skimmy. Go and eat coke!"

"If you will lend me yours, Digby—"

"I won't! Vamoose!"

"You, Herries—"

"No. Scoot!"

"In that case I appeal to D'Arcy—"

"I should have vewy much pleasah in accedin' to your wesequest, deah boy, if only to show that I bear no malice aftah givin' you a feahful thwashin'! But I am afwaid that you want the lantern to bweak bounds, and visit Mr. Fish's quartahs, and make a silly ass of yourself genewally. Undah the cires, I am compelled to decline to lend you a lantern."

"I shall be able to borrow one somewhere else, I suppose," said Skimpole. "Do not think I am offended by your refusal. As a Determinist—"

"Oh, pway twavel along, deah boy!"

"As a Determinist, I regard every human creature as being what he is, because his nature is what it is, and his early surroundings were what they were, and therefore his notions are necessarily what they are, and he thinks what he thinks, and does what he does—"

A Latin grammar came hurtling through the air, and Skimpole, ceasing his exposition of the wonderful truths of Determinism all of a sudden, dodged along the passage and disappeared.

"Of all the howling asses," said Blake, "that chap is the howlingest! He's going to break bounds to-night, as sure as a gun, to go and look for the plans of his giddy airship!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"If he belonged to our Form, I'd keep an eye on him, and make an example of him," said Blake; "but I suppose it's no business of ours."

"Certainly not," said Digby. "Let's get on."

"Weally, deah boys—"

"Shut up, Gussy!"

"I decline to shut up until I have finished my wemarks! I was thinkin' that that extremely silly ass is goin' to bweak bounds to look for the wotten plans of his widiculous airship, and he may get into twouble!"

"Serve him right!"

"Yaas, it will serve him wight, in a way; still, I don't like the ideah of a silly ass gettin' into twouble for want of a guidin' hand. I can tell you what's the pwopah thing to do—"

"Don't bother!"

"Wats! I think we ought to keep an eye on Skimpole."

"You can if you like. Dry up!"

"I wefuse to dwy up! Upon weflection, I think that it is vewy prob. that I have handled him too severely, and in that case I owe him some wecomense. Pway I ought to look aftah him a little."

"Go and do it, then, and don't jaw!"

"Weally, Dig—"

"Shut up—"

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"Silence!" roared Blake. "I've got to finish my prep, you young villain!"

"Vewy well. Undah the cires, I think I ought to look aftah Skimpole, and I think I will go and acquaint him with my determination."

"Please do."

And Arthur Augustus went in search of Skimpole, and silence fell in Study No. 6, broken only by the scratching of pens.

CHAPTER 7.

Arthur Augustus Looks After Skimpole.

"HAVE you seen Skimpole, Tom Merry?"

"Yes, rather!"

"Pway tell me where he is."

"I really don't know. It's an hour since I saw him."

D'Arcy screwed his monocle into his eye, and gave the humorous Tom Merry a glance that ought to have shrivelled him up on the spot, but didn't.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, I have no time to waste in wottin'! I wish to see Skimpole vewy particularly. I am goin' to look aftah him."

"Th?"

"I considah it my duty to look aftah the ass. I have been lookin' for him for some time, but he seems to have disappeared, the silly ass! It is weally a feahful bothah."

"He was going up to Reilly's study when I saw him last," said Manners.

"Weally, to Weilly's study," D'Arcy looked very thoughtful. "I am not on the best of terms with Weilly. He has never tweated me with pwopah respect. But I suppose I had better go and look for him."

And the swell of the School House made his way to Reilly's study. Reilly was in the study, with his feet on the table, reading "The Magnet." He looked up and grinned at Arthur Augustus.

"Hallo, Gussy! What do you want?"

"I want Skimpole. Have you seen him?" asked Arthur Augustus, in an extremely dignified way.

"Yes; he came here a while ago," grinned Reilly. "He wanted to borrow a dark lantern."

"Bai Jove!"

"He said a bicycle lantern would do."

"And you lent him one?"

"Sure and I didn't, Adolphus."

"Weally, Weilly, my name is not Adolphus, and I wish you would not use that widiculous expwession."

"Well, Algy, then," said Reilly, "I didn't lend him one. You see, I haven't one, so it wouldn't have been easy. I told him where he could get one, though, so it was just as good."

"Very good. Tell me where he went, and I shall be able to find the duffah. Whose lantern is he going to get?"

"Yours."

"Weally, Weilly—"

"I mentioned to him that you had left your new acetylene lamp in the bike-shed, and he said it would do."

"Bai Jove, I wogard this as—"

"He doesn't know how to light it, but he took a hammer and chisel along with him to experiment."

D'Arcy glared.

"You uttah ass, I would give you a feahful thwashin', but I have no time to waste. I must go and stop that dangewous maniac bweakin' up my new lamp."

And Arthur Augustus hurried away. He lost no time in getting to the bicycle shed, and the glimmer of light from the open door showed him that someone was there. He started as a loud clink fell upon his ears.

Clink! Clink! Clink!

"Bai Jove, Weilly was speakin' the twuth, then!" gasped D'Arcy. "The uttah ass is bweakin' my lamp."

He ran into the bicycle-shed. In the glimmer of a candle stuck on a ledge, Skimpole was at work upon an acetylene lamp. The inventor of St. Jim's evidently did not know the simple arrangement of the gas lamp, and he was investigating. Instead of unscrewing it, he was chipping it open with hammer and chisel.

"You uttah duffah!" shouted D'Arcy. "Stop!"

Skimpole looked up.

"Ah, is that you, D'Arcy?"

"Yaas, wathah! Let my lamp alone!"

"I am opening it. I have thought of a great improvement in cycle lamps."

"You cwass idiot, you have buckled it up all wound!" exclaimed D'Arcy, seizing the lamp and rescuing it. "I shall have to send this to London now to be stwaightened out. If you wanted to open it, why didn't you unscrew it?"

"Dear me, that would have been simpler, but, as a matter of fact, I was thinking of a great improvement in cycle lamps."

"You haven't improved mine, you ass!"

"Instead of oil or acetylene gas, it would be better and cheaper to use electricity."

"There are electric lamps already, duffah."

"Yes; but they are used in connection with an accumulator," explained Skimpole. "My idea is to generate the electricity by the motion of the wheels of the bicycle. Properly connected up, there is no reason why the revolving of the wheels should not generate sufficient electricity to light the lamp, and to—"

"Let me catch you with my lamp again, bai Jove!" said

D'Arcy. "You ought to be in a straight jacket. If I had not already given you a fearful thrashing, I should give you one now. I have been lookin' for you—"

"Indeed!" said Skimpole. "If you desire information on the subject of Socialism, I shall be happy to explain to you at full length."

"I don't want anythin' of the sort."

"If you are interested in Determinism, I shall be happy to—"

"I am not interested in Determinism."

"You are curious on the subject of my airship. Although I am compelled to keep my great secret to myself, I am quite willing to explain to you the general principles upon which my airship is constructed. Imagine a cylindrical shell—"

"I am not curious about your wotten airship."

"Imagine a cylindrical—"

"I am goin' to look after you."

"Nonsense, D'Arcy. I do not require your assistance in my expedition, as I have found assistance elsewhere. Imagine a cylind—"

"I think you are goin' to act the giddy ox," explained D'Arcy. "I am therefore goin' to look after you and keep you out of twouble."

"Stuff! I refuse to be looked after."

"That makes no difference," said the swell of the School House. "I have made up my mind on the point, so it is no good arguin', deah boy. You are not goin' out of the School House to-night."

"Who says so?"

"I do, Skimpy. I shall not give you my permish."

"Really, D'Arcy—"

"Weally, Skimpole—"

"I regard you with contempt, as a bloated aristocrat!"

"I refuse to be chawacterised as bloated. I admit that I am extremely awistocratic. I object to the term bloated."

"I am going forth to-night—"

"Then I shall go fifth, and fetch you back."

"You will do nothing of the sort, or I shall use violence. Your lantern would probably be of no use to me, so I will not take it. I remember now that Gore keeps his lantern in the study, and I can borrow it. I shall not ask Gore, as he is very unreasonable on such points."

And Skimpole quitted the bicycle-shed. Arthur Augustus followed him, and entered the School House only a few paces behind him. Skimpole went upstairs, and D'Arcy went upstairs, too.

Blake, Herries, and Digby, having finished their preparations, were coming down. They stopped and stared at the amateur Socialist and his shadow.

"What on earth are you up to, Gussy?" demanded Blake.

"I am lookin' after Skimpole," said D'Arcy, over his shoulder, as he passed on.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Skimpole went on to the study which he shared with Gore, of the Shell. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy took up his position in the passage a few paces from the door, and leaned in a graceful attitude against the wall.

The Terrible Three came up to the study a few minutes later, and they stopped to look at D'Arcy. He nodded.

"Tired?" asked Tom Merry.

"Well, yaas, I am a little fatigued, deah boy."

"Curious place to choose for taking a rest, isn't it?"

"I am not takin' a rest, Tom Mewwy."

"What are you doing, then—keeping the wall up?"

"I am lookin' after Skimpole."

"You are whatting?"

"Lookin' after Skimpole. You are aware that I have given him a fearful thrashing. I regard it as a duty to look after the ass and keep him out of twouble. I regard your laughtah as wibald, and shall be glad to be relieved of your pvesence."

The chums of the Shell went into their study cackling. Skimpole did not come out of the study till near bedtime, and then he stared at D'Arcy.

"Dear me," he murmured, "whatever are you leaning up against the wall of the passage for, D'Arcy?"

"I am lookin' after you, deah boy."

"Really, D'Arcy, you are becoming annoying. You remember the thrashing I gave you a short time ago?"

"You wemembah the thrashing I gave you—"

"I shall repeat it if—"

"I shall probably repeat it if—"

Skimpole walked on. D'Arcy followed him, and shadowed him to the junior common-room. There he kept him under observation till bedtime. When the Fourth Form and the Shell went up to bed, D'Arcy was obliged to lose sight of his victim, as the Forms had separate dormitories. But the swell of the School House had not abated one jot of his determination. When Arthur Augustus had an idea in his head, it required, as Jack Blake said, a team of wild horses to get it out.

Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, and head prefect of the School House, saw lights out in the Fourth Form dormitory. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy did not undress. Blake looked at him curiously as he got into bed with his shirt and trousers on, only his jacket being placed on a hanger on a nail. Kildare had left the juniors, cautioning them that he would expect them all to be in bed when he returned in five minutes.

"Why aren't you undressing, Gussy?" demanded Blake.

"It would be superfluous labah, deah boy, as I am goin' to get up again."

"What are you going to get up for?"

"To look after Skimpole."

"Ass! I've spoken to Tom Merry on the matter, and he says he's going to keep an eye on the lunatic to-night!"

"Tom Mewwy will probably go to sleep and forget all about it, Blake. At any rate, I have made up my mind to look after Skimpole, though I cannot say that he is at all gwateful for the twouble I am takin'."

"Get your things off."

"I am goin' to wemah as I am."

"You will rumple your trousers," said Digby—a remark that touched Arthur Augustus in the tenderest spot.

"Bai Jove, yaas! I think I had better remove my twousahs, when I come to think of it, and keep only my beastly undahclothin' on."

"Go to bed, and don't be a silly ass!"

"I refuse to do anythin' of the sort."

D'Arcy removed the trousers which were in danger of being rumpled, and slid into bed again. He was quite unconscious of the fact that an inch of high collar showed above the top edge of the sheet when he put his head on the pillow. Kildare came in, and glanced about the dormitory.

"D'Arcy!"

"Yaas, Kildare, deah boy."

"What the dickens do you mean by going to bed with a collar on?" demanded the captain of St. Jim's, staring at the junior in amazement.

"Bai Jove, I forgot that!"

"Take it off immediately! Why, you have your day shirt on also! I never expected to see this utter slovenliness in a boy like you, D'Arcy."

Arthur Augustus turned scarlet. Slovenliness in personal matters was about the last sin he could possibly have been guilty of. The whole dormitory giggled from end to end.

"Weally, Kildare—"

"Get up immediately. I see you have not even removed your socks and underclothing. Disgusting!"

"Weally, Kildare—"

"You will take twenty lines for this, D'Arcy."

"Weally, you do not compwehend," stammered the unhappy swell of the School House. "I did not mean to sleep in my things."

"Then why did you go to bed in them?"

This was a poser, as the junior could hardly explain to the captain of the school that he had intended to leave the dormitory after lights out. Arthur Augustus was silent. Kildare looked at him keenly.

"You will write out twenty times 'Personal slovenliness is disgusting,'" said the captain of St. Jim's.

"Oh, weally—"

"And mind nothing of the sort occurs again."

"Bai Jove!"

"Take these things off immediately, and put on your pyjamas. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, D'Arcy! Quick, now!"

There was nothing for it but to obey. Arthur Augustus changed into his night garments, and Kildare, with a severe look, turned away. He extinguished the light.

"Good-night, boys!"

"Good-night, Kildare!"

The door closed. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy sat up in bed. He quivered with indignation as he heard the clunkers up and down the room.

"Shocking dirty chap, that D'Arcy," Mellish's voice was heard to remark. "Not nice for the chap who sleeps in the next bed to him."

"Rotten!" said Walsh.

"My idea is that he ought to be disinfected," said Kerraish. "It's rough on us, as it is. What do you think?"

"Faith, and ye're right!" said Reilly.

"You uttah wottahs!" said Arthur Augustus. "You know perfectly well that I was only keepin' my things on because I was gettin' up again!"

"That's all very well," said Herries. "Kildare thinks you're a dirty rotter, and Kildare's opinion is quite good enough for me."

"Quite so," said Digby.

"He was labowin' undah a misappwehension."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I could not vewy well explain to him under the cires."

D'Arcy stepped out of bed. "Howevah, that makes no difference. I am goin' to look aftah Skimpole."

"The obstinate ass!" grunted Blake.

"I wufuse to be called an ass!"

"Kildare will very likely have his eye open."

"I shall have to wisk that."

D'Arcy dressed himself as well as he could in the dark. Blake, Herries, and Digby tried their eloquence on him in turn, without being able to dissuade him. The swell of the School House could be very obstinate.

"If you fellows like to come with me," he said, as he tied his last bootlace, "I shall be vewy pleased to give you my permish."

"Oh, rats! Not so much of your slip-flap," said Blake. "You can go and eat coke!"

"Vewy well, deah boy. I am goin'."

And D'Arcy quitted the dormitory and closed the door. A light was burning at the end of the passage. Arthur Augustus strode along in the direction of the Shell dormitory, and a hand suddenly came out of an alcove in the old oak-panelled wall, and grasped him by the shoulder. D'Arcy gave a startled gasp. But it was only Kildare. The big Sixth-Former shook the junior as a mastiff might shake a mouse.

"You young donkey!" said Kildare.

Arthur Augustus wriggled in the powerful grip of the captain of the school.

"Weally, Kildare—"

"I guessed that you were going to leave the dormitory, you young ass. You deserve to have a jolly good licking!"

"I twust that you will not forget the considewation due from one gentleman to anothah," said D'Arcy with dignity.

The captain of St. Jim's chuckled.

"Where were you going?"

"I am afraid I must wufuse to answah that question."

"Do you want me to knock your head against the wall?"

"Certainly not, Kildare. I weward the question as wiculous."

"Then you had better be careful how you speak. You will take fifty lines instead of twenty, and return to your dormitory at once. And give me your word that you will not leave it again to-night."

"Weally, Kildare, I don't see how I can do anythin' of the sort. You see—Ow! Pway let go my ear!"

"Are you going to promise?"

"You see—Ow, wow! Yaas, wathah! Yaas, I think upon reflection I will make the promise, Kildare. Ow!"

"Good!" said the captain of St. Jim's, releasing him.

"Now go back to your dormitory, and think yourself lucky for not being reported to your housemaster."

"Weally, Kildare—"

"Cut off!"

D'Arcy thought he had better cut off. He returned to the Fourth Form dormitory, and the captain of St. Jim's walked away, laughing. The juniors were wide awake, and they heard the School House swell come in. There was a volley of questions at once.

"Hallo, Gussy!"

"What have you come back for?"

"Have you left the other ass in the lurch?"

"Faith, and explain yourself!"

"I wufuse to answah any questions on the subject," said D'Arcy loftily. "I have given up my ideah, for a good reason." He rubbed his burning ear in the darkness. "But I do not consider that you wotfahs are entitled to an explanation."

"I think I can guess the reason," chuckled Blake. "Did you get licked, Gussy?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I decline to answah fiviolous questions, Blake."

The dormitory echoed with chuckles from end to end, but Arthur Augustus maintained a stony and dignified silence. His word was sacred, and he could not leave the dormitory after his promise to Kildare. The idea of looking after Skimpole had to be given up. But, as it happened, the Terrible Three were looking after Skimpole.

CHAPTER 8.

The Plotters!

"ARE you fellows asleep?"

Skimpole asked the question in a voice loud enough to awaken any of the fellows who were asleep.

Tom Merry came out of a doze with a start. The task of keeping awake had been assigned to Manners, and he had kept awake for nearly a quarter of an hour. Skimpole's voice, however, brought him fully to himself.

"Are you asleep?"

There was a suspiciously loud snore from Tom Merry's bed,

and it was followed, as if it had been a signal, by similar sounds from Lowther and Manners.

"This is very fortunate!" murmured Skimpole. "They are all fast asleep, and sometimes some of them keep awake right up to ten o'clock. I shall not be observed now."

Skimpole stepped out of bed, and drew on his clothes. Then he took out the coiled rope he had hidden under his mattress, and a lantern from his washstand. Then he crossed to the door in a stealthy way.

Tom Merry listened till he heard the door close, and then he whipped out of bed.

"Quick, you fellows!"

"I say, I think we may as well let him run on," said Lowther. "On second thoughts it doesn't seem worth while to—Gerrooh! Keep that sponge off my face, you shrieking lunatic, or I'll dust up the linoleum with you!"

Tom Merry chuckled.

"Get up, then!"

Lowther slipped out of bed, and Manners followed suit. The chums of the Shell dressed quickly enough in the darkness. A sleepy voice came from Gore's bed:

"Hallo! What's up?"

"We are!" said Lowther.

"What are you going to do?"

"Mind our own business."

Gore grunted, and turned over to go to sleep again. The Terrible Three quietly left the dormitory. The passage was dark, but there was a light in the hall below. It was pretty certain that Skimpole had not gone downstairs.

"He'll get out of his study window," whispered Manners. "He's going to use the rope for that."

"Most likely."

"How are we going to follow without a rope?"

"He'll have to leave it there. He can't unfasten it from below. Besides, he will want to climb it to get in again."

"True!"

"Come on!"

They hurried to Skimpole's study. The door was closed, and they heard a sound within. Tom Merry silently opened the door about an inch, and the chums of the Shell looked in at the aperture.

There was a glimmer of starlight through the open window. A dim form could be seen in the patch of light, and a murmuring voice could be heard:

"Dear me, the oil is running down my trousers! I wish I had not filled the lantern now. It is very unfortunate."

The Terrible Three suppressed a chuckle.

Skimpole had slung the bicycle-lantern round his waist. The rope was tied to the leg of a table, and the end dangled over the window-sill into the dusky quad.

Skimpole blinked out of the window into the dusk. Apparently he did not much like his task now that the time came for performing it; but the hour of the appointment was nigh, and there was no time to hesitate.

The amateur Socialist swung himself upon the window-sill, and there was the sound of a bump as he knocked his head against the sash.

"Dear me! Oh, dear!"

Skimpole rubbed his head and fumbled with the rope. As he pulled on it to test it, the table was dragged close to the window.

"Dear me," murmured Skimpole, "how fortunate that I thought of testing the rope before I trusted my weight to it! My forethought has probably saved me from serious injury."

The table jammed against the window-ledge, and the rope seemed secure. Skimpole dragged at it, and as it held fast, he trusted his weight on it. The Terrible Three watched the head of the Amateur Socialist sink out of sight.

"He's gone!" muttered Tom Merry.

"The shrieking ass!" said Monty Lowther. "Did you ever see a clumsier variety of a silly cuckoo before?"

"There never was one," said Manners, "and never will be. Fancy that screaming ass thinking of burgling a rabbit-hutch even!"

"Ha, ha! Come on!"

The chums of the Shell entered the study. The stillness of the hanging rope showed them that Skimpole had reached the bottom, and was safely landed.

"I'll go first," said Tom Merry.

"Buck up, then!"

Easily enough, Tom Merry swung himself from the window, and went slithering down the rope. He dropped lightly into the quadrangle, and Manners and Lowther followed.

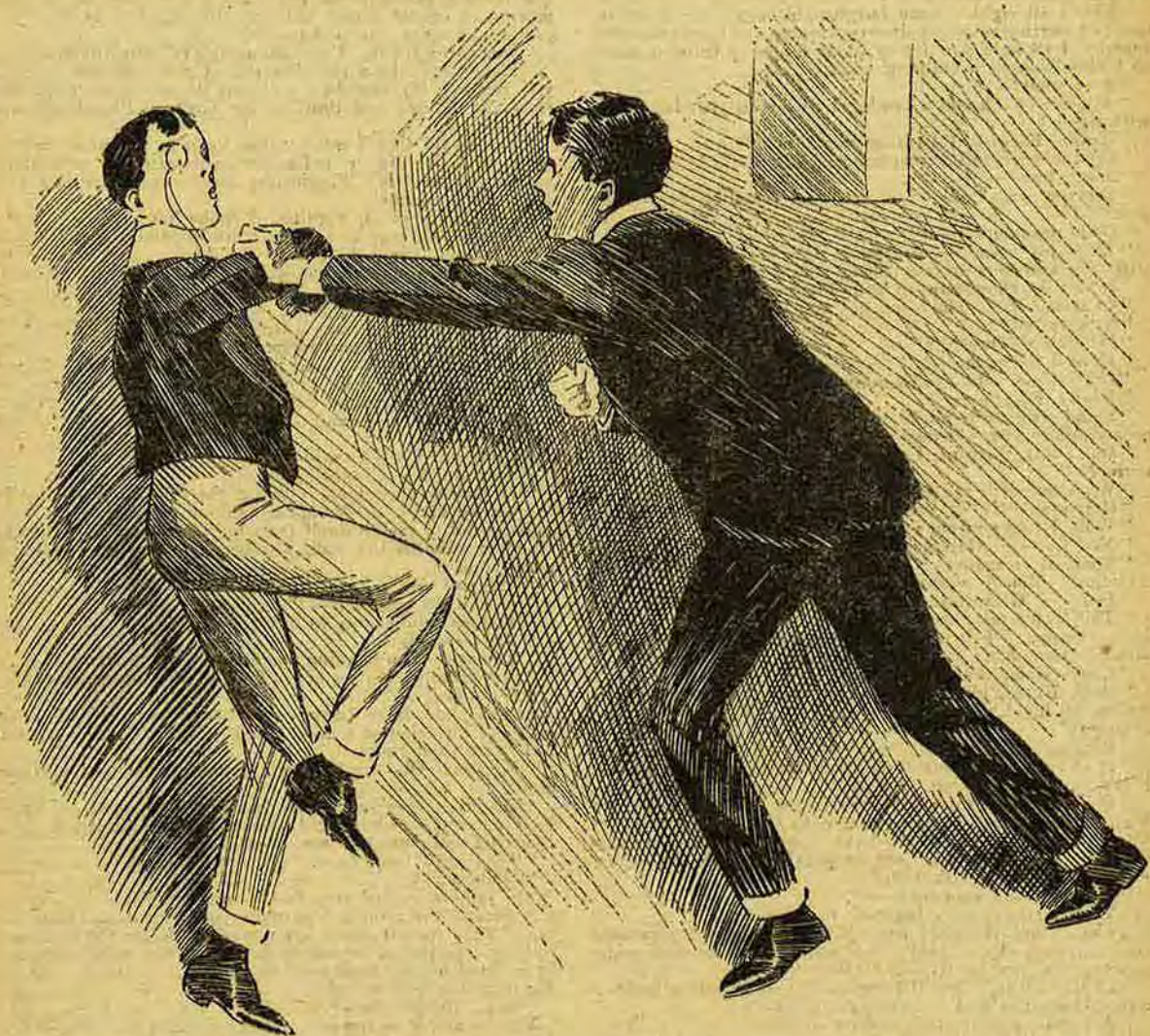
"Right-ho!" said Tom Merry. "Can you see Skimpole?"

"I can't."

"We shall have to track him by the smell of the cycle-oil," said Lowther, sniffing. "There is a lot of it niffing just here."

"He's spilt most that he had in the lantern, I suppose."

"But where has he got to?"



"You young donkey!" said Kildare, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy wriggled in the powerful grip of the captain of the school.

It was too dark to see far in the quadrangle. Skimpole had lost no time, and he was out of sight.

"Let's get to the wall," said Tom Merry. "He must mean to get over it, and by following it we're bound to come on him."

"True. But how does the ass propose to get over it?"

"Climb, I suppose."

"Not much of a climber."

"Oh, you don't know what an inventor can do when he's in deadly earnest. Come on; we must be in time to hang on to his feet."

"Ha, ha!"

The Terrible Three ran quickly through the dusk towards the wall. They did not know at what precise spot the amateur inventor meant to reach it, having no knowledge, of course, of his rendezvous with Figgins & Co. Skimpole was keeping straight on for the slanting oak, which marked a spot where the school wall could be crossed without much difficulty, and he reached the rendezvous without a suspicion that his Form fellows were on the track.

Three dim forms loomed up out of the gloom. Ten chimed from the clock tower of St. Jim's.

"Is that you, Skimpole?"

"Yes, Figg!"

"Good!"

"So you've come," said Kerr. "We've been here a good five minutes. Still, you're in time. Are you prepared?"

"Certainly!"

"Got any sandwiches?" asked Fatty Wynn.

"No; I did not think of them."

"Well, of all the howling asses!"

"Never mind the sandwiches," said Figgins, in a deep, bass voice that startled Skimpole. "What do sandwiches matter at a moment like this?"

"Well, I'm rather hungry," said Wynn.

"What do sandwiches matter?" repeated Figgins. "What is more necessary is a dark lantern."

"Unfortunately, I have not been able to obtain one," said Skimpole. "I have, however, brought Gore's cycle lantern."

"And a rope?"

"I have left Tom Merry's rope hanging from the window."

"And a mask?"

"Dear me, I never thought of a mask!"

"Lot of good you are as an amateur cracksmen," grunted Figgins. "Blessed if I've ever seen such a silly innocent criminal as you are!"

"Criminal is hardly the correct term, Figgins. I am merely going to enter Mr. Horatio's Fish's house to ascertain whether he has borrowed any of my ideas."

"Suppose he discovers you?"

"With my great sagacity, I shall obviate any thing of the kind."

"That's all very well, but your giddy sagacity may be at fault, or there may be a watch-dog to give the alarm. If you are going to burgle, you must do the thing thoroughly. You must have a mask."

"But I haven't one."

"That's all right. Some burglars blacken their faces instead of wearing masks, as it saves trouble and comes cheaper. Luckily, I thought you'd very likely forget to bring a mask, so I have brought a bottle of ink with me."

"A—what?"

"A bottle of ink and a brush. I will paint your face black with it—"

"Really, Figgins, I'd rather you didn't!"

"Do you want to be recognised by Mr. Fish?"

"No; but—"

"Do you want to be sent to penal servitude for fifteen years?"

"Good gracious! No!"

"Then you must be disguised. I will blacken your face with ink, and then no one will be able to recognise you."

"It is very thoughtful of you, Figgins—"

"Of course it is. Have you got that bottle open, Kerr?"

"Yes, rather!"

"Where's the brush?"

"Here it is; in the ink."

"Give it me. Ready, Skimpole?"

"Really, Figgins—"

"Stand still, or it might go in your eye. This will jolly soon disguise you, old man. Stand still, and don't talk."

"But really, Figgins, I think I'd rather— Grrrorororororooch!"

"What on earth are you making that row for?"

"Grrrorororooch! It went in my mouth!"

"Well, I told you not to talk!"

"Yes, but— Grrrororooch!"

"There it is again! I wish you'd keep your mouth shut, Skimpole! You're wasting the ink!"

"I—I— Grrrorororooch! Ow! wow!"

"This won't take long," observed Figgins, painting away industriously. "I do wish you'd keep still, Skimpole! Is it all black now, Kerr? It's rather hard to see in this light."

"Looks about done," said Kerr.

"Well, I can't see any white patches," said Figgins, surveying his handiwork with a critical eye. "It's a jolly good disguise!"

"Ripping!"

"It feels very uncomfortable," said Skimpole. "I suppose it is a good idea, though. I wish I had thought of a mask."

"Oh, you can't think of everything, you know," said Figgins. "Lucky you've got a chap like me to think of things for you. You might have been recognised, tracked down by the police, and sent to penal servitude for trying to steal a valuable invention."

"I should have explained—"

"They mightn't have believed you, my son."

"That is unfortunately true, Figgins. Under the present rotten system of society it is an undoubted fact that many unscrupulous persons do not tell the truth."

"I believe it is," agreed Figgins. "I think you're finished now. Doesn't he look a dream, you chaps?"

"A regular nightmare," murmured Kerr.

"This is better and more efficacious than a mask," went on Figgins. "If it comes on to rain, or if you tumble into a ditch, you are quite safe, as this won't come off under any circumstances."

Skimpole gave a jump.

"What?"

"You see, it's indelible ink—"

"Owl! Owl!"

"What's the matter? Have you got a pain somewhere?"

"If it won't come off, I—"

"That's all right; you're quite safe."

"I sha'n't be able to get it off to-morrow!"

"By Jove, I never thought of that!"

"Oh! Good gracious! Dear me! I shall have to turn up in class with a face like a nigger! You—villain!"

"If that's what you call being grateful, Skimpole—"

"You—ass!"

"I think this is about the last time I shall help anybody to commit a burglary," said Figgins, looking at the Co. with an injured expression. "Of course, I might have expected this from Skimpole!"

"What am I to do if it won't come off?" roared Skimpole.

"Well, it's no good meeting troubles half way. You don't want it off till after the burglary."

"It's not a burglary; it's an investigation. But I'm thinking of to-morrow morning. Suppose it won't come off?"

"Oh, it's certain to wear off in time!"

"How long?" roared Skimpole.

"Well, it would probably be all gone by the end of the term—"

"You—villain!"

"Oh, come away!" said Figgins. "I never expected gratitude, but really this is a little bit too thick! Come on!"

"Stop a minute," said Skimpole anxiously. "In spite of

the terrible predicament you have placed me in for to-morrow, I cannot forget that my investigation is most important. I want your assistance."

"You can wait it. I've had enough of your flip-flap!"

"Please don't be a pig, Figgins. Upon reflection I think you are probably mistaken, and that the ink is not indelible. However, I must now think of my airship. Please help me over the wall."

"I'm afraid that I must refuse to have anything further to do with the matter, unless you withdraw the expressions you have used," said Figgins, in Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's most stately manner.

"I withdraw them, Figgins. I spoke hastily."

"Good! We may as well lend him a hand, chaps."

"Certainly!" said the Co.

"Please help me over the wall," said Skimpole. "I could climb the ivy, I think, but I should prefer to have a bunk-up. Give me a bunk-up, Figgins."

"Certainly! We'll take a leg each, Kerr."

"Right you are!" said Kerr.

"Please be careful!" said Skimpole. "Dear me! If you are both going to help, you must come close together, or you will dismember me. Now! Ow! You are not anywhere near the wall, and I feel as if I were going to fall down."

"Come on, Figgy!" said Kerr.

"Come on, Kerr!" said Figgins.

The juniors moved on, holding the amateur Socialist in the air by his legs. Skimpole held on to their heads with either hand to save himself from toppling over. But instead of going towards the wall, Figgins and Kerr were walking away from it.

"Figgins! Kerr!"

"What's the matter now?"

"You are going away from the wall."

"Are we really?"

"You are. You're going towards the School House."

"Great Scott! So we are! Follow your leader, Kerr!"

"Right-ho!"

Figgins and Kerr swung round, and marched off in a different direction at a good speed. Skimpole clung frantically round their necks.

"Figgins! Oh, stop! You are walking straight into the elms!"

"By Jove, you've warned us only just in time," said Figgins. "You'd have had a bump in a minute more. This is what I call clumsy of you, Kerr."

"Try again," said Kerr.

"Come on, then."

The juniors walked very fast in another direction. It was not towards the wall, and Skimpole gasped out an expostulation. They turned round again, and made for the wall, and Skimpole gasped as he was rushed up to the solid brickwork at a speed which threatened to dash him to the ground by the impact if he touched it.

"Stop," he panted—"stop!"

Figgins and Kerr stopped so suddenly that Skimpole nearly toppled over. Fatty Wynn was standing holding his ribs and cackling like a hen. He evidently saw something funny in the whole proceeding. Figgins and Kerr were quite serious, however.

"Can you get hold there?" asked Figgins, backing away from the wall so that Skimpole would have needed arms four feet long to get a hold.

"No, I can't! If you get nearer."

"Come along the wall to an easier place, Kerr."

"This is all right if you let me—"

"That is all right, Skimpole. We'll find a soft spot for you."

The two juniors rushed Skimpole along the wall. The ivy trailed past them and dashed in the amateur Socialist's face. He gasped and grunted.

"Stop, Figgins! Ow—wow!"

There was a sudden collision in the dark. Figgins and Kerr had suddenly dashed right into three dim forms that were coming quickly along the wall, in the shadow of the ivy. The reader will guess whom they were.

"Oh!" gasped Figgins.

He staggered back, and let go Skimpole. The amateur Socialist bumped down, with a grunt. Kerr gave a yell.

"School House rotters!"

"Go for 'em!"

"New House rats!" gasped Tom Merry. "Give 'em socks!"

The juniors did not stop to ask questions. In a moment there was a wild and whirling combat proceeding in the shadow of the ivied wall. Fatty Wynn dashed up and joined in. The foes were three to three, evenly matched in point of numbers, for Skimpole did not join in. He had more important matters on hand.

It had dawned upon him that Figgins & Co. were simply

"rotting," and that they had no intention of allowing him to pass the bounds of St. Jim's. While the House rivals were engaged in conflict, the amateur Socialist climbed the ivy, and dropped over the wall into the road. The row in the quad continued, but Skimpole heard nothing of it. He was on his way to pursue his investigations in the habitation of Mr. Horatio Fish, the local inventor.

CHAPTER 9.

Out of Bounds!

"HOLD ON!"

It was Figgins who gasped out the word. Tom Merry had got his head into chancery, and it occurred to Figgins about the same time that there was really nothing to row about.

"Chuck it!"

"Certainly!" said Tom Merry, releasing his foe at once. "It's all right, Figgy!"

"Is it?" gasped Manners. "My nose doesn't feel all right!"

"Nor my left eye!" grunted Fatty Wynn.

"By the way, what are we fighting for?" inquired Tom Merry, in a casual sort of way.

Figgins chuckled.

"Blessed if I know! I just went for you because you are a School House rotter."

"And I went for you because you're a New House rat."

"Where's that ass, Skimpole?"

"That's what I want to know."

"By Jove, I believe he's bunked!" said Figgins. "Pax, you fellows. If that ass has gone out, there will be trouble."

"We may as well go in," said Fatty Wynn. "I've got some sandwiches in the dormitory. I thought we might be hungry after this run out. I think—"

"Oh, blow your sandwiches!" said Figgins. "We never meant that ass to get out. Are you out after him, Merry?"

"Yes; we're keeping an eye on him."

"Well, he asked us to help him get out, to burgle Mr. Fish's place, to see whether Fish had collared any of his giddy inventions. We were rotting him a treat, when you came blundering along. We had painted his face black, and were going to march him round till he was fagged, and agreed to go in and give up the idea. Then you came bumping in like a parcel of owls—"

"Well, we didn't know, of course," said Tom Merry. "It can't be helped."

"If only you had stayed in bed—"

"Like good little boys," said Kerr.

"Oh, not so much of your flip-flap," said Lowther. "If the shrieking ass has got over the wall, he's got to be fetched back. You New House chumps can go back to bed, and we'll go after him."

"That's a good idea," said Fatty Wynn. "I've got some sandwiches in the dormitory—"

"Cheese it! If you go after him, we're coming, too."

"Let's all go," said Tom Merry. "I'm going, anyway. The ass has gone to Fish's, and he may get up to some idiocy, and be arrested as a burglar."

"I shouldn't wonder."

"Better look round for him a bit, and make sure he's gone," said Fatty Wynn, "and that will give me time to cut back to the New House—"

"What do you want to cut back to the New House for?"

"I've got some sandwiches in the dormitory—"

"Then you can go and guzzle them. We're not going to waste time."

"It's no good starting out hungry. That's a rotten idea. If you like to wait for me five minutes—"

"Five rats!"

"I could do it in four minutes if I don't stop to eat anything—"

"Bosh!"

"Well, I might do it in three, hurrying—"

"Come on, kids! I'm going over the wall!" said Tom Merry.

"Aren't you going to wait three minutes?"

"Three rats! Go and eat coke—or sandwiches!" Tom Merry swung himself into the ivy. "Come on, you chaps!"

Figgins and Kerr, Manners and Lowther, followed fast enough. Fatty Wynn stood hesitating. The five juniors were quickly on top of the wall.

"Aren't you coming, Wynn?"

"Well, I don't think I should be justified in risking my health by starting out hungry, you know. If you like to wait three minutes—"

"Oh, get home!"

Tom Merry dropped into the road. The others followed, and

Fatty Wynn was left alone in the quadrangle. He rubbed his plump chin reflectively.

"Well, they don't need me," he murmured, "and it's a pity to waste those sandwiches. I'd much rather go after Figgins, as a matter of taste, but from a sense of duty I think I ought to see that good sandwiches are not wasted. Ruskin says somewhere that it is wrong to waste good bread, so it stands to reason it would be very wrong to waste bread-and-butter and ham and mustard. I think it would be only right to go back to the dorm., and bolt the grub."

Which Fatty Wynn proceeded to do without delay.

Meanwhile, the Terrible Three and Figgins and Kerr were on the road. They knew the way perfectly well to the abode of Mr. Fish, famous for a quarter of a mile round Rycombe as the inventor of an airship. There was a short cut through the wood to the bank of the river, near which was Mr. Fish's garden wall.

"I suppose Skimmey went this way," said Tom Merry, as he turned from the lane into the footpath. "There doesn't seem to be any sign of him."

"Well, we couldn't see it in the dark here if there were," Kerr remarked.

"Hallo, there's a light on the path!" exclaimed Figgins, suddenly, as the juniors pressed on through the deep shadows of the wood.

"Halt!"

Tom Merry rapped out the word, and the juniors stopped. There was certainly a light on the footpath, and it was coming towards them. It glimmered through the darkness about waist high, and puzzled the juniors very much.

"It can't be Skimpole," muttered Lowther. "He wouldn't be coming back."

"And he wouldn't have his lantern alight."

"Then who—"

"Then who—"

"Quiet! It's Flump!"

"My hat!" murmured Figgins.

Flump was the local policeman. It was his lantern that was glimmering along the dark path. Tom Merry had just caught a glimmer of his helmet over it.

"Better get into cover," muttered Figgins. "Flump doesn't like us any too much, and he might as likely as not report us at the school."

"Quite likely!"

"The question is, how?" muttered Kerr. "There's no cover here in a hurry."

The juniors backed against the thick bushes. In this spot the bushes bordering the path, growing between the trees, were thick and thorny, and it was no easy matter to force a passage through them. Figgins muttered something under his breath as a thorn tore his hand, and Manners gasped from a sudden scratch on the face.

"Hold on!" muttered Tom Merry.

"What's the game, then?"

"We can't get through this. He'd hear us, anyway, and might start looking to see what it was. We shall have to bump him."

"What?"

"He hasn't the faintest idea we're here. As soon as he comes close, we'll rush past, and if he tries to stop us we'll bump him over."

Figgins chuckled.

"Good! And to-morrow every pub in Rycombe will know how he was attacked by a desperate gang of poachers. You know Flump!"

"Ha, ha! Stand ready, and pull your caps over your eyes. We mustn't give him time to recognise us, though."

Mr. Flump came steadily on. He had no idea that the juniors were there; but if he had met and recognised them he would probably have considered it his duty to march them straight back to the school and report them. There might be reason in that, too; but it did not suit the views of Tom Merry & Co.

The light glimmered closer. Mr. Flump caught a glimpse of dark forms crouching against the thickets, and halted.

"Now, then!" muttered Tom Merry.

The juniors were ready. They rushed forward in an instant, and dashed past the startled policeman. Mr. Flump instinctively threw out his arms to stop them, and seized hold of Tom Merry and Figgins.

But it was only for a second.

The two juniors, as they felt themselves seized, bumped against the portly policeman with all their strength, and he reeled, and then Kerr and Manners and Lowther bumped on him, and he rolled over in the grass.

In an instant more the juniors were away, and, scudding down the footpath at top speed in the darkness.

Mr. Flump sat up in the grass.

He heard the receding footsteps of his assailants dying away towards the river, and he jumped up, and took the

opposite direction. Whom or what they were he had not the faintest idea, and he was not curious for a closer investigation just then. He knew that the odds were against him, and that was enough.

Tom Merry & Co. ran swiftly on, till the river gleamed at the end of the path. Then they slackened down and listened. There was no sound of pursuit.

"Done him!" gasped Tom Merry.

Figgins chuckled.

"There will be a big yarn over that to-morrow. But Flump doesn't want any more now. The worst of it is, that we shan't be able to tell our side of the story."

"Ha, ha! No!"

"He would have had a fit if he had met Skimpole, with his black chivvy," Kerr remarked. "I suppose Skimmy is a good way ahead, and was off the path before Flump came along. This way to Fish's!"

They turned into the towing-path, and a few minutes more brought them to the wall of Mr. Fish's garden. It was a high wall, surmounted by spikes in formidable array, and not at all easy to cross.

Tom Merry gazed up at it with a doubtful eye.

"I don't see how Skimmy could have got over that," he remarked. "Is it possible that we're on the wrong track, after all?"

"Nice, comforting suggestion, at this time of day!" grunted Figgins.

"Well, I don't see how—Hallo, look here!"

Tom Merry stepped quickly to the wall. Something was dangling from one of the spikes, and a closer glance showed that it was a looped rope.

"By Jove, Skimpole's been here. This rope has been taken from a boat, I expect—Fish's own boat, very likely. Good old genius!"

Tom Merry dragged on the rope. It was looped over the spike, and made the climb easy. The inventive faculties of the genius of the Shell had evidently been at work.

"Well, if he could get over, we can," said Figgins. "Go ahead!"

"Hark!"

From the other side of the garden wall a terrific crash sounded through the silence of the night.

CHAPTER 10.

A Narrow Shave for Skimpole!

SKIMPOLE was indeed in the inventor's garden. While the juniors had been on the track, Skimpole had not been losing time. He had observed Mr. Fish's boat moored to the willows on the bank, and when he found himself stopped by a spiked wall, he had borrowed the rope from the boat, looped it over a spike, and climbed over. The spikes, formidable as they looked from below, were not very sharp, and the amateur Socialist succeeded in getting over them once he was on top of the wall. He dropped into the garden with a gasp of exertion and relief.

The garden was very dark. There were large trees growing inside the wall, and their foliage shut out most of the light of the stars. But a glimmer of light through the gloom caught Skimpole's eye. It did not come from the house, which was quite dark; it proceeded from the open door of a wooden building near the end of the large garden.

"Dear me," murmured Skimpole; "this is most fortunate for me, but very careless indeed of Mr. Fish!"

It was the local inventor's workshop from which the light proceeded. Mr. Fish was evidently up, and burning the midnight oil—or to be more precise, the half-past ten gas. The door of the workshop was open, and the light streamed out into the garden, and penetrated through the evergreens to the spot where Skimpole had dropped in.

Of course, Mr. Fish never expected an observer within his own walls. But there was an observer on the spot now. Skimpole, with his eyes gleaming eagerly behind his spectacles, pushed his way through the rustling evergreens towards the light. He came out upon a gravelled path.

There he paused for a few moments to take his bearings. A crunching step sounded on the gravel, and Skimpole gave a jump. There was someone else in the garden beside himself!

He stood for a moment helpless; but the steps were approaching, and there was no time to waste. He slithered back into the evergreens, hoping that he had not been seen. A measured step approached along the gravelled path.

Skimpole blinked out from the laurels, and saw a little stout gentleman—bareheaded, with his hands clasped behind him—slowly pacing along the path, in the light from the open door of the workshop.

"Dear me," murmured Skimpole, "it is Mr. Fish!"

He knew the inventor by sight. Mr. Horatio Fish was a

well known figure in Rylcombe. Skimpole comprehended now why the workshop door was open. Mr. Fish had evidently been engaged upon his invention, and had taken a turn in the garden to rest awhile from his labours. Doubtless he was working out some aerostatic problem, for he was muttering to himself as he paced slowly along.

"Ten thousand volts," he murmured. "Let me see! Ten thousand volts—"

He passed on. Skimpole watched him anxiously, and was relieved to see that he did not enter the workshop. He passed on, and disappeared into the gloom.

"Dear me, this is really an excellent opportunity!" murmured Skimpole. "I can now examine the place, and see whether my ideas have been purloined!"

He stepped quickly towards the open door and entered.

The workshop was an extensive one, well-fitted up, and lighted by gas. Mr. Fish was a wealthy man, and devoted time and money to his hobby. Whether he would ever navigate the clouds was a question; but it was certain that he was indefatigable in the pursuit of his object.

Skimpole gave a gasp as he entered. Upon trestles in the middle of the room was supported a long, cigar-shaped object.

"My airship!"

It was certainly a model airship, and it was the same shape as that designed by Skimpole in the missing plans.

Skimpole stood gazing at it.

"What opportunities this man of mediocre intellect has had," he murmured. "Given the same opportunities, I should, with my abnormal brain-power, have revolutionised the science of aerostatics before now. I suppose there was certain to be a general resemblance in form between Mr. Fish's airship and mine, and I must examine it more closely, to see whether my ideas are being worked up here. Ah, here are the rotators! They are exactly as in my plans! I—Dear me!"

Skimpole broke off abruptly as a footstep sounded on the threshold.

It was Mr. Fish!

The inventor entered the workshop, still with his chin sunk and his hands clasped behind him, buried in thought. Skimpole stood in the full glare of the gas, but the inventor did not immediately perceive him.

"Ten thousand volts," he murmured. "I—Good gracious! Wha-a-a-at is that?"

He had caught sight of Skimpole.

The amateur Socialist glanced at the door, but Mr. Fish was in the way. He was fairly caught; but Mr. Fish seemed the more alarmed of the two. He was gazing at Skimpole with eyes that nearly started from his head.

"Wha-a-a-at is that?"

He gasped out the words. Skimpole had forgotten the

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black upon his face, but it was very apparent to the amazed Mr. Fish.

"Excuse me—" began Skimpole.

Mr. Fish recovered himself somewhat.

"Villain! You have come here to steal my invention!"

"I—"

"You are here to discover my secret!"

"I—"

"Scoundrel, I will have you arrested!"

"I—"

"Villain! Wretch! Traitor! Spy!"

"I—"

Mr. Fish was working himself up into a fury. He rushed at Skimpole, and the amateur Socialist dodged round the airship. Mr. Fish pursued him, and Skimpole made a break for the door. The inventor dodged back again, and cut him off from the doorway, and Skimpole doubled and fled. Mr. Fish was close upon his track, and he had caught up a hammer from the table. What he intended to do with it, Skimpole didn't know, but he was not anxious to find out by experience.

"Dear me!" gasped Skimpole. "This is—is most unpleasant! I—Ow!"

Mr. Fish clutched at him. Skimpole twisted away, and ran full tilt into the airship. It was supported lightly on the trestles and the impact sent it flying. There was a terrible crash as the airship went to the floor.

Mr. Fish gave a howl of anguish.

For a moment he stood petrified, staring at the airship, which had suffered considerably in the crash. Skimpole took advantage of the respite, and dashed through the open doorway into the garden.

In a moment the infuriated inventor was on his track. Skimpole crashed through the laurels, and arrived under the wall at the spot where he had entered. There he halted, with a gasp of utter dismay.

He had dropped into the garden, leaving the rope hanging where it had served his purpose in climbing the wall. It was on the wrong side of the wall now. A great inventive genius is apt to overlook such trifles, and Skimpole had certainly overlooked the fact that he was making himself a prisoner in Mr. Fish's garden.

"Dear me!" gasped Skimpole. "I—I am lost!"

He could hear the angry inventor crashing to and fro in the garden in search of him. He thought of the hammer in Mr. Fish's hand, and shivered. To his amazement, a head rose into view over the wall.

"Is that you, Skimmy?"

"Tom Merry!"

"Yes, ass! We have followed you; and it looks like being a good thing for you, too!" said Tom Merry, holding on to the spikes and looking down at Skimpole severely.

"Please help me out, Tom Merry!"

"Not unless you promise never to come here again, my pippin!"

"Help! The man is looking for me, and he has a hammer in his hand!"

"By Jove, that looks serious for you, Skimmy! Still, he can't brain you! You can't brain a chap who hasn't any brains!"

"I believe he intends to be extremely violent if he finds me! I should be much obliged if you would help me out, Tom Merry!"

"Not unless you promise never to come here again."

"Really, Merry—"

"Take your time, Skimmy, if you want to risk the hammer. Those are the terms."

"Well, I promise; but I think—"

"Honour bright?"

"Yes, honour bright; but I think—"

"Never mind what you think! Here's the rope!"

Tom Merry jerked the rope over to the inner side of the wall. Skimpole seized it gladly, and drew himself up. There was a crash in the laurels, and a yell from Mr. Fish as he came on the scene.

"Ah, I have caught you!"

Skimpole made a desperate effort, and dragged himself over the spikes. Mr. Fish made a grab at him, and caught the tail of his jacket. There was a rending of cloth as a spike went through the jacket. Skimpole slid down, outside the wall, and hung there by the jacket, which was impaled.

"Help!" he gasped.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Help!"

The juniors shrieked with laughter. Skimpole, with his black face glimmering in the starlight, hanging from the wall by the impaled jacket, his heels beating tattoo against the bricks, was a curious object.

"Let me go! Help! Unfasten me!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He's after me; he's got a hammer!"

"He won't hammer you," gasped Tom Merry; "he only wants to catch you!"

"I might be arrested!"

"Serve you jolly well right, too!" said Kerr.

"Help!"

"Lay hold!" said Tom Merry. "Now, then, all together!"

They grasped Skimpole round the body and legs and hauled away. Skimpole yelled, and the jacket gave a loud tear and parted. Skimpole came down in a heap, dragging most of the juniors with him.

"Clumsy ass!" growled Figgins, rubbing the side of his head.

"Really, Figgins—"

"Come on! It's about time we're off! Fish is blowing a police-whistle!"

The shrill scream of the police-whistle was ringing from the garden. Mr. Fish was blowing it energetically. No-body was likely to hear it in the lonely place, but it sounded alarming enough. The juniors scuttled off, and kept on the run back to St. Jim's. The shriek of the police-whistle died away in the night.

"Please don't hurry me like this!" gasped Skimpole. "I am fatigued!"

"No time to waste, fathead!" said Tom Merry cheerfully.

"Take his other arm, Figg!"

"Right you are!"

"I really wish— Oh, dear!"

In spite of Skimpole's expostulations, the pace did not slacken for a moment till the school was reached. Then the amateur inventor was bundled over the wall, and the juniors followed him.

"Good-night!" grinned Figgins. "We've had a rather exciting time, but it has been good fun! Keep an eye on that ass!"

"Really, Figgins—"

"Good-night!" said Tom Merry. "We'll watch him!"

The New House juniors hurried off to their own house. The Terrible Three and the amateur inventor went on to the School House, and Skimpole was taken back to the Shell dormitory.

"Now go to bed," said Tom Merry, "and if you get up again, look out for squalls, that's all!"

"Really, Merry, as a sincere Socialist, I must insist upon my right to do exactly as I please!"

"And as a sincere ass, you will get dotted on the nose, then!"

"I shall not get up again to-night. I am too fatigued. My jacket is utterly ruined. It is a new jacket, too, and I only changed from my old one yesterday. It is most annoying. I shall have to put on my old one to-morrow."

"Oh, bless your jacket! Go to bed!"

And Skimpole went to bed at last, and the Terrible Three were able to return to their slumbers. Meanwhile, Mr. Horatio Fish, having finished his solo on the police-whistle, had awakened a servant, and sent him off post-haste to Wayland, where the telegraph-office was open late, to send a wire to London. And the wire was addressed to Ferrers Locke, the famous detective.

CHAPTER 11.

Ferrers Locke Solves the Mystery.

"FERRERS Locke! Thank goodness you have come!" Mr. Horatio Fish almost gasped out the words as he shook hands with the famous detective. Ferrers Locke had stepped from a dogcart at the gate of the inventor's garden, now bright with the morning sunshine.

There was a slight glimmer in the eyes of the detective, a curious curve of his clear-cut lips, which Mr. Fish did not notice. Ferrers Locke had come in reply to the urgent telegram. But he knew Mr. Fish, and it was probable that the detective was not so impressed by the urgency of the case as the inventor himself was.

"Yes, I am here," said the detective quietly. "I understand from your wire, Mr. Fish, that an attempt was made upon your airship last night."

"That is the case. You remember my showing you my model when you were staying in Kylcombe?"

"Yes; you were kind enough to do so."

"That model has been seriously damaged. A desperate attempt has been made to surprise the secret. But come in, and—"

"Let us get to work at once," suggested the detective. "There may be no time to lose. As a matter of fact, I wish to find time to-day to see my young friends at St. Jim's, while I am in the neighbourhood. The attempt was made in your workshop?"

"Yes, shortly before eleven o'clock last night."

"Let us go to the workshop."

Mr. Fish led the way. The airship still lay where it had fallen from the trestles.

An imperceptible smile glided over the lips of the detective. Perhaps he did not believe in that airship.

"I had left my workshop to take a turn in the garden," explained Mr. Fish. "I was thinking out a problem, whether ten thousand volts—"

"Yes; and then?"

"I returned to the workshop, to find what I at first took to be a horrible negro in the room. Upon reflection, however, I think it was a ruffian with his face blacked for purposes of disguise."

"More probable. What did you do?"

"I rushed at him. He eluded me, and in the chase the airship was overset. It is greatly damaged—some of the rotators broken, and the—"

"And the ruffian escaped?"

"He got into the garden. I followed him, and chased him to the wall, and almost caught him, but he had accomplices near at hand."

"Ah, this grows interesting!"

"They helped him over the wall, just in time to escape. He caught his jacket on a spike, and had to tear himself away. I blew my police-whistle, but there was no policeman near. The whole gang got away."

"You have informed the police?"

"Yes; and they have been here this morning, and I have heard a startling confirmation of my belief that a gang of desperadoes is in the neighbourhood—probably the emissaries of some foreign Power sent here to steal the secret of my airship," said Mr. Fish excitedly. "As you are aware, my airship will mark a new epoch in the annals of warfare, and will—"

"Yes; but what—"

"And will bestow irresistible power upon whatever country first adopts it as a weapon of offence. I shall, of course—"

"But what did you learn from the police?" asked Ferrers Locke, striving to keep the excited inventor to the point.

"Ah, yes! You see, Mr. Locke, I am naturally very excited. Should the secret of the airship fall into the hands of a foreign Power—"

"Yes, I understand the terrible consequences that would follow; but pray go on."

"The police informed me of an outrage that had occurred in the wood, apparently about a quarter of half an hour before the attempted theft of the secret of my airship. Police-constable Flump, while on his rounds, was attacked by a gang of ruffians in the dark. I heard the account from the constable's own lips. He fought desperately, but against overwhelming odds, and after felling several of the scoundrels with his truncheon, he was overcome by force of numbers. The ruffians left him lying in the grass. They made off, and escaped. Mr. Flump at first attributed his adventure to the enmity of a gang of poachers, upon whom he has had his eye for some time, but upon learning of the outrage here he at once guessed that it was the work of the same gang."

The detective looked very thoughtful.

"And are the police in possession of any clues?" he asked.

"Not at present; but Inspector Skeat holds out hopes of running down the scoundrels shortly. He is inclined to think the gang are ordinary burglars, but I am quite certain in my mind that they are emissaries of a foreign Power, probably Russian."

"Why Russian?"

"Because, while the rascals were helping their accomplice over the wall, I heard a few words spoken by some of them."

"Ah! In Russian?"

"No; they spoke in English. But one of them addressed the ruffian on the wall as Skeemi, as near as I could ascertain the sound. That is certainly a foreign name," said Mr. Fish. "It has a Russian sound to my ears."

"Skeemi!" said Ferrers Locke thoughtfully. "The word seems familiar to me. Can you describe the fellow at all?"

"I only know that he had a blackened face, and wore spectacles."

"Spectacles!" said the detective, with a start.

"Yes; doubtless a part of his disguise. He had the stature of a boy, but the features of a desperate and hardened criminal."

"Spectacles! Skeemi! Skimmie! My hat!"

"What did you say, Mr. Locke?"

"Are you sure the name you heard was not Skimmie?"

"It certainly might have been. Is that the name of some desperate scoundrel known to you Mr. Locke, who might be entrusted by the Russian Government with the task of surprising the secret of my airship?"

The detective smiled.

"No, sir. It is an abbreviation of the name of a boy known to me, who imagines himself to be the inventor of an airship, and who is quite scatterbrained enough to undertake last night's adventure if the idea crossed his mind."

Mr. Fish jumped.

"That theory is quite inadmissible," he said.

"Why so?"

"Because the gang were evidently emissaries of a foreign Power. Now I come to think of it, it is possible that the name I heard was Skeemski, or Skeemoffski."

Ferrers Locke smiled.

"Well, I will take up the case at once," he said. "No, I don't require any rest. Show me where the ruffian crossed the wall, and I will try to trace him from that point."

Mr. Fish did so, and Ferrers Locke examined the spot where Tom Merry & Co. had helped Skimpole off the wall the previous night. The detective strolled along, taking the path towards the school, leaving Mr. Fish gazing after him with an extremely doubtful expression. Mr. Fish was not insensible to the honour of being chosen as the mark for the machinations of a foreign Power. He was not at all inclined to change his gang of foreign desperadoes for a company of reckless schoolboys.

Ferrers Locke reached the gates of St. Jim's. Morning lessons were over, and the boys were pouring out into the quadrangle. There was a shout as the chums of the Shell caught sight of their old acquaintance. They came racing up, and the detective shook hands in turn with Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther.

"Jolly glad to see you, sir!" said Tom Merry. "I hope you have come to see us."

Ferrers Locke laughed.

"I have come to see the individual who entered Mr. Horatio Fish's garden last night and looked at his airship!" Tom Merry gave a jump.

"My—my only hat!" he exclaimed.

"Mr. Fish wired to me to come down and see into the case," explained Ferrers Locke. "Come, I see you know all about it, Tom. Tell me the whole story, and you may depend upon me to make it as easy for you as I can."

"Very well, sir," said Tom Merry. "I'm blessed if I know how you jumped on us so quickly, though! We left no trace behind that I know of. Here's Figgy! I say, Figgy, Mr. Locke is tracking us down for that affair last night!"

"Right-ho!" said Figgy cheerfully. "Make a clean breast of it. It's all the fault of that ass Skimpole. I hope there wasn't any damage done, sir."

"Nothing serious, unless Mr. Fish's valuable secret was discovered."

"Ha, ha! Skimpole discovered nothing but a spike."

"Tell me the story, Tom."

Tom Merry frankly related the happenings of the night. Figgy chimed in with details. The detective laughed over the story of the blacking of Skimpole's face till the tears ran down his cheeks.

"Bless my soul!" he exclaimed. "Then Skimpole really discovered nothing."

"Certainly not; I don't believe there was anything to discover. Mr. Fish seems to be a crank much the same as Skimmie, from what we hear."

"And he has promised never to enter Mr. Fish's premises again?"

"Yes. He'll keep his word, too. Unlio, here he is, to speak for himself!"

Skimpole had discerned the detective from a distance, and he was bearing down upon Ferrers Locke. He had his old jacket on, and there were still traces of ink lingering about his ears and the roots of his hair. In spite of its indelicacy, it had fortunately come off in the wash—most of it.

"Dear me, it is Mr. Locke!" blinked Skimpole. "I am so glad to see you, sir. I have a most important case I should like to put into your hands."

"Really?"

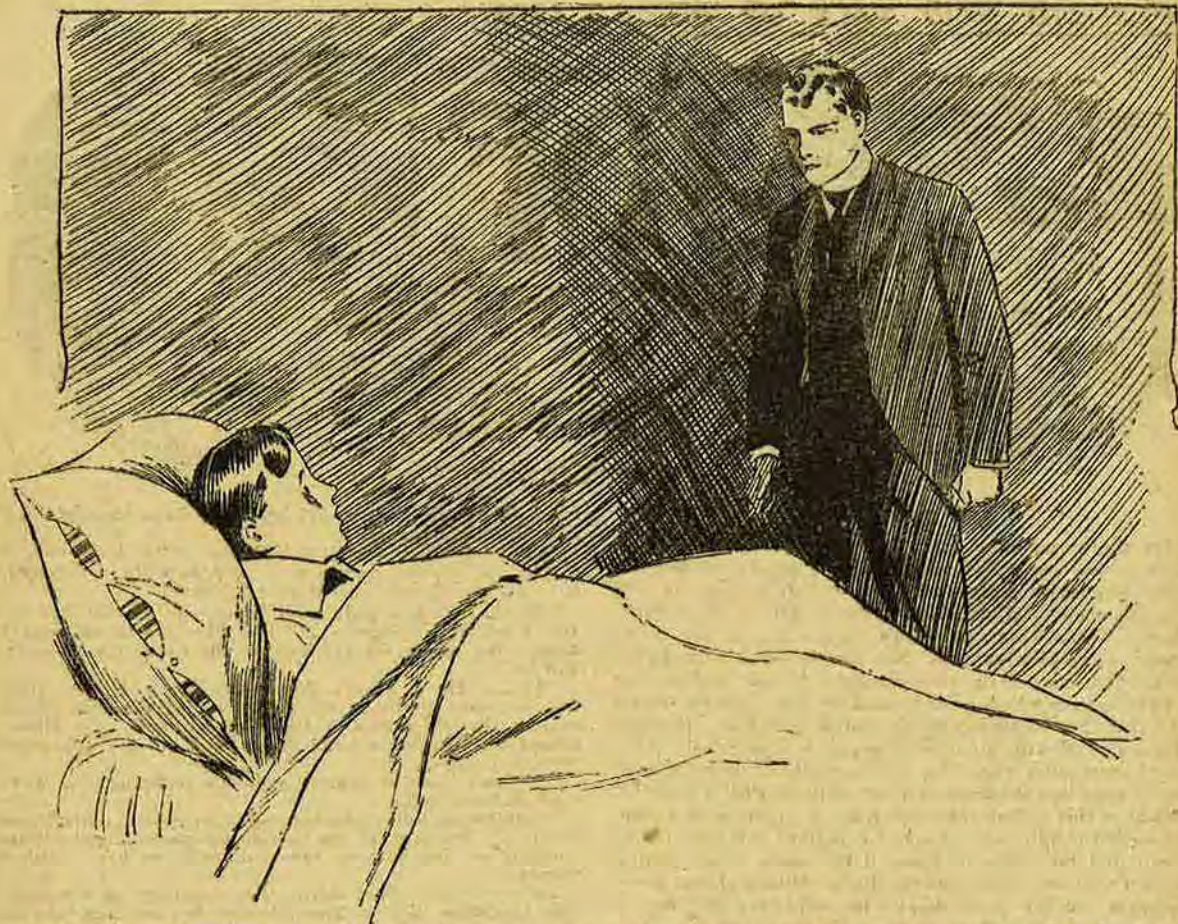
"Yes, sir. I have lost the plans of my airship—"

"Oh, cheese it, Skimmie!" said Tom Merry.

"Please do not interrupt me, Merry. I have lost the plans of my airship. Mr. Locke, and I have reason to fear that they have fallen into the hands of a certain Mr. Fish. If you would take up the case, I should not be able to reward you with mere fees, but you would become known to posterity as the man who recovered the plans of Herbert Skimpole's airship."

"It seems that you have been investigating yourself."

"Yes; but in a weak moment I allowed Tom Merry to extract a promise from me that I would discontinue my investigations in that quarter. It was very annoying, but as a sincere Socialist it is impossible for me to break my word. If you would care to take up the case, I should be



"What the dickens do you mean by going to bed with a collar on?" demanded Kildare, staring at D'Arcy in amazement.

glad to give you particulars. I carried the plans, for safety, in a large packet in the inner breast-pocket of my jacket, and yesterday morning I found a hole in the lining, and the papers gone. I deduced that they had been found by Mr. Fish."

"You are sure you have lost them? There is something very bulky in the breast-pocket of your jacket at the present moment."

"Eh?"
Skimpole felt in the indicated pocket. There was certainly a bulky package there, and he drew it out and blinked at it in amazement.

"Dear me!"
"Well, what is it?"
"The missing plans."

Ferrers Locke laughed heartily.
"Then they were in your pocket all the time?"

Skimpole looked dazed.
"Dear me! I am really very much surprised."

"Of all the asses," said Figgins, in measured accents—"of all the asses that ever assed, I think that ass Skimpole is the most asinine."

"Really, Figgins, that is almost rude."

"It's jolly well the truth," exclaimed Tom Merry.
"You've been raising Cain over those rotten plans of a silly airship, and here they are in your pocket all the time. What you want is boiling in oil."

"I—I—dear me, I have hit upon the explanation! You will remember that my jacket was torn last night," said Skimpole, blinking. "I put on my old one this morning. That is the explanation of the mystery. You see, when I put on my new jacket, I forgot to change the packet from the pocket of the old one. The new jacket had a slit in the lining, so when I felt in the pocket for the plans, I naturally jumped to the conclusion that they had fallen out."

"Naturally—for a howling ass."

"You see, I forgot the fact that I had changed jackets in the meantime. Dear me, I might never have found the plans if I had not had to change into my old jacket again! It is really very remarkable."

"Very remarkable indeed," said Ferrers Locke. "The

next time you lose any valuable documents, you had better look in all your pockets before you commit a burglary or begin housebreaking or trespassing."

"I shall certainly take your advice, Mr. Locke."

"Under the circumstances, I think I can make your peace with Mr. Fish; but let me advise you never to let anything of the kind occur again. I hope to see you again before I return to London, boys. Now I must return to Mr. Fish."

The detective, with a cheery nod, walked away. The Terrible Three turned to Skimpole with expressive looks. Figgins took a gentle grip on the back of his collar.

"I think a ducking in the fountain would about meet the case," he remarked.

"Good idea!" said the chums of the Shell together.

"Really—"

"And then we'll burn his plans."

"Really—"

"And if he makes any more we'll burn him."

Skimpole twisted himself away and ran. He did not stop till he was in his study, and had the precious plans of his wonderful airship safe under lock and key.

Needless to say, Mr. Horatio Fish did not accept Ferrers Locke's explanation as to the happenings of the previous night. He had a great respect for the famous detective's judgment. But he was not willing to give up his theory of a gang of desperadoes commissioned by a foreign Power to discover the secret of his airship. He wore a superior smile while Ferrers Locke explained; and when the detective had taken his leave, Mr. Fish's first step was to purchase a bulldog, a burglar-alarm, and a gun. He was firmly convinced by this time that the name he had overheard was in reality Skeemoffski; and he did not mean to be caught napping again. Ferrers Locke had lost an admirer, but that did not trouble him very much. Indeed, he looked very jolly and good-humoured when, after school at St. Jim's, he had tea in Tom Merry's study with ten cheerful juniors, before taking the train back to London.

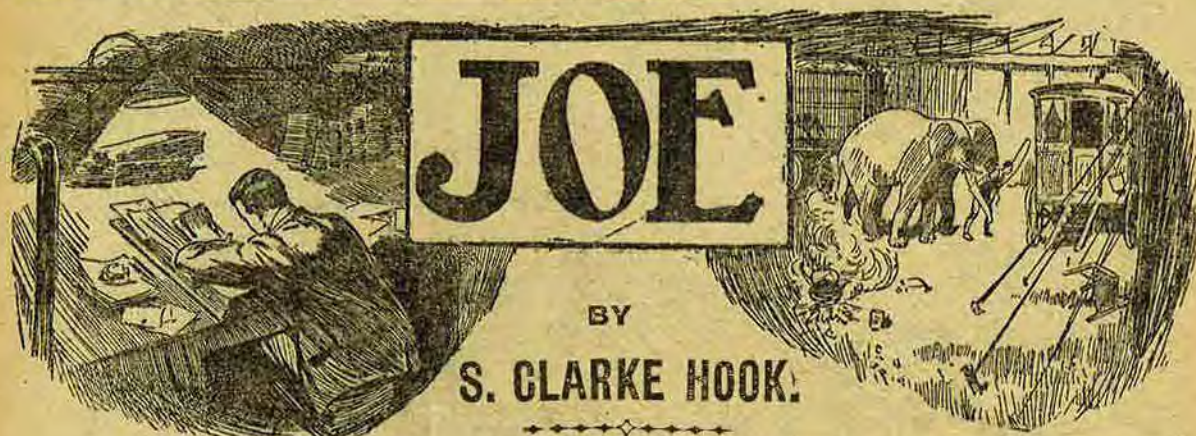
THE END.

Another splendid double-length tale of Tom Merry & Co. next Thursday, entitled "The Head's Surprise."

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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. Not content with this, Luigi, with Giles, his villainous accomplice, knocks Rubby into the river, from which he is rescued by Joe. Muerte swears he will follow Ruabino's circus and so ruin him. Ruabino then starts off with his traction-engine and caravans. They travel some miles when Leo, who is in charge of the engine, has to steer into the ditch to avoid collision with a motorist. Just after this mishap, Muerte's traction-engine is seen rushing down the hill. Joe, to save his master's caravans, rushes ahead and lays himself down in the road, so compelling Muerte's driver to dash into the ditch. Muerte claims heavy damages, but his claim, despite his employing Mr. Fox, a lawyer, is disallowed in a court of law. Muerte vows vengeance on Rubby and Joe.

(Now go on with the story.)

Joe and His Guardian.

"Wait till you return to the circus to-night," said Muerte, "and then perhaps a surprise will await you. You may think that you are very clever, but the man who makes an enemy of me is a fool, and this you two boys have done. You have insulted me in a manner that I will never forgive. That's all I shall say to you, but you will see how I intend to act, and in all probability you will see it to-night."

"It is not necessary for you to show us," said Joe. "We both know that you are a rogue and vagabond, so that we are quite certain you will act as one."

"Here, what about my bill?" cried Fox, as Muerte was about to leave the place.

Muerte pulled the document from his pocket, ripped it into pieces, and, having flung them into the lawyer's face, strode from the room, leaving Fox to pay for the dinner.

"Never mind, dear boy!" exclaimed Rubby. "He has only robbed you of a little of your time, while you were helping him to rob me of a good deal of my money. It is no good kicking up a row over what cannot be altered."

"I will make the scoundrel pay me!"

"It would take a cleverer lawyer than you to do that, Fox. Muerte is up to every move, except honest ones. Now go home."

"You impertinent rascal, I shall go home when I choose!"

"Well, I suppose you will, because I am not going to take the trouble to kick you out of the room. You may stay here if you behave yourself, but I won't allow you to kick up a row. If you attempt anything like that, Joe and I will give you another thrashing."

Fox knew perfectly well that no constable would take Rubby in custody on the charge, and so he determined to let the matter drop, but he was equally determined to get his bill of costs out of Muerte. He did not comprehend

what difficulties there would be, or perhaps he might not have been so sanguine.

"Funny brutes!" exclaimed Rubby. "I don't believe that fellow Muerte is quite sane. Get on with your dinner, lad. He surely hasn't spoilt your appetite!"

"Oh, no! Only a jolly good dinner will do that, Rubby. But I tell you, I don't quite like Muerte's threat, and I believe the sooner we get back to the circus the better it will be."

"Pooh! He is always threatening me with something, but he never performs such threats, for the best of all reasons that he cannot. He is as harmless as a kitten, except when he has a knife in his hand; then you have to beware of him."

"I didn't like the expression in his gleaming eyes when he threatened us."

"You couldn't like any expression in eyes like his," said Rubby. "However, if you feel uneasy concerning the brute we will get back to the circus directly we have finished dinner."

Joe was rather quiet during the remainder of the meal. The vindictive light in Muerte's eyes haunted him, and he felt quite certain in his own mind that this was no idle threat. Joe had already had proof that Muerte would not stop at murder in order to have vengeance, and there were plenty of ways in which he could have vengeance on Rubby; but that worthy ate his dinner, and did not trouble himself in the least concerning the rival showman.

As soon as the meal was finished, they made their way to the circus, and were met at the entrance by Jupiter.

"There's someone waiting to see you, Rubby. He won't give any name, and he doesn't look like going until he has had the pleasure of glancing at your beautiful countenance."

"What's he like, dear boy?"

"A man."

"I didn't suppose he was like a monkey."

"Then what did you ask for?"

"Oh, you beauty! Wait till you want the next rise in your screw."

"I want it now, Rubby."

"Why, you had one last week!"

"I know, but I want them every week. The more the merrier. They never bother me."

"Well, you won't be bothered with them for a long time to come yet, at any rate. Now, what's this man like?"

"Hain't you better go and see?"

"Perhaps it would be the quickest way to find out, but I don't care to go into the presence of men who won't give their names without knowing something about them. He may be a Royal messenger come to offer the hand of some beautiful princess to me."

"It's more likely to be the water inspector calling for his account in advance. But go in, and then you will have an exact description of the man."

"Come on, Joe. We will interview him together, and if he means mischief I shall refer him to you as my legal adviser."

As Rubby entered the place he saw a gentlemanly-looking man of about five-and-forty. He was clean-shaven, and wore a long frock-coat and tall hat, which latter he had not considered it necessary to take off in the caravan, nor did he do so when its proprietor entered.

He was a tall, powerfully-built man, but what struck one most was his harsh face. It was not a bad-looking face, but

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Merry & Co. By Martin Clifford.

there was a cruel light in the cold, grey eyes, and a certain viciousness about the narrow, compressed lips.

"Are you Rubbio, the showman?"

"I am, dear boy," answered Rubby cheerfully. "And who are you?"

"I am Mr. Silas Read, the guardian and uncle of that boy, Joseph Read."

Rubby seated himself on the table, pushed his tall hat to the back of his head, and pulled out his cigar-case; then he methodically lighted a cigar.

"Well!" exclaimed Silas Read, as Rubby blew a cloud of smoke.

"Well, dear boy?"

"I will trouble you to address me as Mr. Read."

"Not the slightest trouble, dear boy."

"What have you to say?"

"What?"

"What have you to say as regards your action?"

"Nothing."

"I presume you are aware that your action is punishable at law?"

"In that case I refer you to my legal adviser, Joe. The fierce-looking party wants a little legal advice, Joe. Give it to him. Don't spare my feelings—nor his."

"He has no feelings, Rubby," said Joe quietly. "It is true that this man is my dead father's brother. It is equally true that he is living on the money my father left to me. Ever since my father's death that man has treated me like the brutal beast he is! He has lashed me till I have fallen senseless at his feet, and when I have regained consciousness, he has lashed me again, vowing that I was shamming. That I deserved correction there is not a doubt, but no human being nor brute beast deserves the treatment that I have received at the hands of that fiend incarnate!"

"Listen to me!" cried Read.

"One at a time!" exclaimed Rubby. "I cannot listen to you both."

"Silence, boy!" commanded Read.

"No! You shall listen to me first, and Rubby shall hear what I have to say!" cried Joe.

"You are not speaking one word of truth."

"That is for Rubby to judge. You can tell your story, but I will speak first, and I haven't much to say. Rubby, that man half-starved me, besides lashing me on the slightest provocation. Instead of allowing me to finish my education, he put me into an office, where I was treated like the office-boy I was, and none too well at that. Well, it was really through an accident that I left. I split a bottle of ink over the manager's head, and knocked him backwards off his chair—at any rate, he fell backwards—then we fought, and after that I bolted."

"You have heard the boy convict himself," said Read. "I have not come here to discuss such matters, because they do not concern you in any way, but as a man of common-sense you must see that the boy is a perfect little rascal. He assaulted the manager of the firm, and at home he behaved so disgracefully that at times it was absolutely necessary to punish him. He admits that himself. Now, I am not defending my action in any way, for the simple reason that it needs no defence, nor have you, least of all men in this world, the right to give judgment on such a subject. The boy is a ward in Chancery, and as I am his lawful guardian, you, in taking him from his home, are liable to fine and imprisonment. That is all I wish to say to you concerning that part of the business, except that I am willing to believe you gave the boy employment not knowing his past history. For the rest he will come back with me to-night."

"Ah!"

"Under all the circumstances of the case I shall take no action against you, because, although you do not assert it, I am prepared to believe that you knew nothing of his past history."

"Ah!"

"Do you desire to make any explanation before I take the boy away with me?"

"No!"

"I am prepared to answer any questions you may desire to ask."

"Ah!"

"I don't understand you."

"No!"

"Do you wish to ask me any questions?"

"No!"

"Well, I am glad for your own sake that you take such a sensible view of the matter."

"I am taking no view of it. Joe has made a statement. You have made another. One of those statements is false. I am at perfect liberty to believe which one I like."

"You will come with me, Joseph. I have help outside."

"What are you going to do in the matter, Rubby?" inquired Joe anxiously.

"Nothing. I am powerless to act. If you are a ward in Chancery you will be compelled to return to your lawful guardian. If such is not the case, he, no doubt, would have the power to cause you to return. What strikes me as singular, Silas Read, is that this lad should have behaved so badly when in your house, and so well while in my employment. There is not one word that I could honestly say against him, and there is not one word that I ever would say against him if I could. My life is of no great consequence to anyone except myself, but the fact that Joe saved it makes me grateful. The fact that he serves me faithfully and with absolute honesty, makes me like him. Well, I leave the matter in the hands of my legal adviser. That is, not the legal point of the matter. I leave it to him to say whether he wishes to go, or whether he wishes to remain in my employment."

"I never will go unless you force me to do so!" cried Joe.

"My dear fellow!" exclaimed Rubby. "I cannot force you. You see, you would have to give me a week's notice, and if you choose to do that—well, I must accept it. I can't let you go at a moment's notice, because I need your services. Sorry, Silas. He can't come with you to-night."

"I shall take him by force."

"Ah!"

"I have only to blow this whistle, and two men will enter this caravan and take the boy away."

"Ah!"

"Do you still refuse to let him go?"

"Unless he goes of his own free will, and until you prove to me that you have spoken the truth. You see, Silas, I do not know you, and can only judge you by your appearance, which does not appeal favourably to me. You may be an honourable man, or you may be as great a scoundrel as this lad says you are; and, seeing that he has never yet spoken falsely to me, and judging by your personal appearance, I am naturally inclined to believe that you are a great scoundrel. That being the case, you would also be a liar, and I should not believe one word of what you have said. It strikes me as being very strange that you should be so anxious to get the lad into your power. There would appear to be some ulterior motive on your part. However, the onus of proving your assertions rests with you. My position is that this lad asked me for employment, and I gave it. I could only terminate that engagement at a week's notice, and he can only do the same."

"I think I see your point, my man!" exclaimed Read, after a short pause. "You would lose in a pecuniary sense if I took him away at once. I am willing to compensate you to the extent of a sovereign, and the boy will, of course, forfeit any wages due to him."

"I do not consider a sovereign sufficient."

"Well, two pounds."

"No, that is not enough. He is of great service to me, as he puts the lions through their performance."

"Well, I will give you five pounds, by way of compensation."

"Dear boy, that is not enough. I should have to find a man to take his place, and it cannot be done at a moment's notice."

"Well, name your sum, and I will let you know at once whether I will pay it."

"I consider that twenty pounds would be nearer the mark."

"Very well, I will pay it," cried Read, pulling out his pocket-book. "I will give you banknotes."

"You see, Joe, he is showing his hand very badly, and that is unwise when playing with a man of the world like myself. If he has the right to take you by force—that is, if you are a ward in Chancery, why on earth should he pay me twenty pounds?"

"I don't know, Rubby."

"Neither do I."

"I do not wish you to lose over my nephew," declared Read.

"If that were true, it would tend to prove that you are a decent man, and that Joe is a liar. Now, I do not believe that you are a decent man, and I know that Joe is not a liar. The corollary is obvious."

"You appear to be a man of some education, and—"

"We will not trouble ourselves concerning that matter, because it is quite immaterial. The question is, have you spoken the truth?"

"Yes, absolutely. This boy has utterly deceived you."

"I think not, Silas Read; and I feel sure that you have not spoken the truth. Now, I take up my stand thus. Joe accuses you of cruelty. He shall only go with you of his own accord. Instead of those twenty pounds, were you to place two thousand pounds on that table, Joe should not

go except of his own free will. Lad, I pledge you my word of honour that those words are the absolute truth."

"Very well," exclaimed Read. "I see how the matter stands. The boy before he went robbed me of a large sum of money, and it would almost look as though you had been a receiver of that stolen property. At any rate, I shall have him arrested for the theft, unless you let him come."

"You see, Joe, how he is changing his ground now," exclaimed Rubby. "But he has got to remember this, he must prove his assertions before he can take you away. Prove your words in black and white, Silas Read, and then I will give you a further answer. The one I have already given, on your bare word, is unalterable."

"I swear the boy shall come with me this very night."

"Why?"

"I am his guardian, and answerable for his safety."

"In that case, you can get the law to help you, and I shall fight you."

"I have no intention of waiting for the law's delays, and perhaps your fight."

"A man with a circus like this could hardly flee, if he wanted to do so."

"I do not know that the circus belongs to you."

"Neither do I know that Joe belongs to you. If you are his uncle, and that appears to be beyond doubt, it does not follow that you are his guardian. And if you are his guardian, and he a ward in Chancery, then you must prove it to my satisfaction, and I will give you another answer."

"You are aware that you are running the risk of imprisonment."

"Am I?"

"You know you are."

"If you prove the truth of your assertions, I might know it. Well, we will say that I am running the risk of imprisonment. Were I running the risk of death, Joe should not go, except of his own accord."

"You are talking like a fool and a liar now."

"I hope not the latter. The former I do not mind. I only tell you, and I believe and sincerely trust that my words are true. Were I running the risk of death, Joe should not go. And for why? Well, Joe ran the risk of death for me, and he saved my life. When fat old Rubby forgets a deed like that, may his toes turn upwards."

"Listen to reason, and—"

"Dear boy, I will listen to you as long as you like to talk, and I will give you my answer to all you say. It shan't exceed a dozen words. You can talk all night if you so choose."

"I don't desire to talk all night. I quite see your point, and think all the better of you for desiring to act in the lad's interests; but you must remember that I am his uncle—his blood relation, and that he was left to my charge by a dying brother. Very well; in spite of the lad's shameful behaviour, I am determined to carry out the trust, and to bring him to a better way of thinking. You have not the means to do so here, nor is this the style of life suited to the lad. It is true that his father was only a freehold farmer, but he came of a good family, and it is my intention that my nephew shall not disgrace it. You say that I only raised the question of the theft as an afterthought—at least, that was the inference from your words. Well, I did not mention it in the first place because I desired no scandal in my family. Perhaps I was hasty in saying that you had received the stolen property, but that is the view the law would take of it. Now, come what may, that boy shall return with me to-night, and you can take what action you like. Here are the twenty pounds to compensate you against any loss. You can give me your answer in as many words as you please, but I shall act as I have advised you. Now, what have you to say?"

"I believe you are a liar and a thief. Joe shall go only of his own accord."

"Is that your final answer?" inquired Read, taking a whistle from his pocket and placing it to his lips.

Rubby nodded, and puffed at his cigar, while he still remained seated on the table.

Then Read blew a shrill blast, and remained listening.

Voices sounded outside, and Jupiter entered the caravan, followed by a couple of brawny-looking men, who might have been prize-fighters, judging by their appearance.

"Two more friends to see you, Rubby," observed Jupiter. "You seem to be getting a mixed lot to-night."

"What you might call 'all sorts' sort. Ever tasted all-sorts pie, Jupiter?"

"No."

"We will have one to-morrow. It is made of all sorts of meats—good stuff, you know, and it's nice. I remember—"

"Are you going to allow me to take my nephew away, or are you not? Mind, if you refuse, I shall take him by force."

"I am not going to let him go except of his own free will," answered Rubby.

"Seize him, my men, and carry him to my motor-car!" cried Read. "If any of these men resist, knock them down."

"Dear boy," exclaimed Rubby, with perfect calmness, "Joe shall not resist, and I am only going to resist by proxy. Jupiter, you are my proxy, and you may do as much damage as you like to the place. Joe is not to go. Now fire ahead and enjoy yourselves, and try not to knock me about."

The two men sprang at Joe, but Jupiter stepped in front of him; then they lashed out. So did Jupiter.

"Two to one odds enough," said Rubby. "If you interfere, Silas Read, I shall, and I would not be a bit surprised if Joe chips in. Capital, Jupiter! Those with your left are pretty, prompt, and painful—at least, I imagine they are the latter, though our two elegant-looking visitors will be the best judges of that. Ha, ha, ha! First knockdown to Jupiter!"

That worthy had delivered a blow between the eyes of one of the ruffians that sent him to the floor, but he was on his feet in an instant, and once more joined the fray.

There could not be a doubt that Jupiter's foes understood fighting, and that they fought exceedingly well, but they had not the tremendous strength of Jupiter, nor apparently had they his skill.

He guarded the blows dealt at him with consummate skill, and those he delivered were so swift that it was difficult to tell where he landed, though when he did his opponents knew it to their cost.

Three times he sent his opponents to the floor, and after that they looked rather sick, but Jupiter was fresh and smiling. He seemed to be thoroughly enjoying himself, which was a lot more than could have been said of his foes.

"Bust you, take that!" roared one of them; but Jupiter put his head round the blow, and countered with all his enormous strength, and again his adversary went down.

"Now, understand this," exclaimed Jupiter, when he saw that his opponents were practically beaten. "I don't want to hurt you, because you are only doing what your employer has told you to do; but if you choose to go on, I shall hurt you, and if I send you for a short sleep you must not blame me, because I have given you fair warning."

"Come on, mate; he's faking!" cried one.

"I will give you an extra five pounds if you get that boy away," said Read. And this offer gave them fresh incentive.

They rushed in with more strength and fury than wisdom, and now Jupiter let himself go. He knew the spots to land his blows, and it was very seldom that he missed one of them; and although the combat was fast and furious, never for one moment did Jupiter neglect his guard, which was so perfect that Rubby had good cause to be proud of the prowess of his strong man.

For an instant the two men drew back; then Jupiter sprang forward, his right and left shot out, and the two men went down almost simultaneously, while Jupiter looked rather anxiously at them, for he had struck with all his strength, and he knew that such blows as he had delivered must prove serious.

"It's all right, Rubby!" he exclaimed. "They are not hurt in any way, though I think they have got as much as they will ask for to-night. I would not be surprised if they need a little water to bring them round."

"They can have anything they require. Perhaps they would like a little whisky in the water? I must say that they deserved it, because they fought remarkably well, and they would have beaten you without a doubt had you not fought better."

"Would you like me to polish off that fierce-looking swell, because that won't be the slightest difficulty."

"No, Jupiter," answered Rubby, smiling, as he lighted a fresh cigar from the stump of the old one. "Silas Read is a silly idiot and a liar, but I think the man is quite harmless. I don't want him knocked about."

"I could give him a horsewhipping, or anything like that, if you prefer it."

"We will decide that question presently, when those two beauties recover the little reason they ever had. I think they are coming to now, but they will have to come three or four before they would have any chance against you. I will get you to take Joe in hand, Jupiter. I want to see a great improvement in his boxing, because I am not at all sure that he won't be able to pose as a strong man a few years hence, provided always that he decided to stick to circus life. Now, then, Silas, my dear boy, I think your two beauties are about well enough to walk. Would you like to take them away, or would you like them to have another turn with Jupiter? He won't mind giving them a free turn a bit. He is a most obliging chap when there's any fighting to be done. The only fault I have to find with

Jupiter is that he does not like any manner of work, although he adores any manner of fighting."

"You fiend!" snarled Read, unable to control his fierce passion. "I will make you pay dearly for this. I'll ruin you! I will bring you to the workhouse and the gaol!"

"All right, dear boy. Perhaps you will throw in one of the new old-age pensions. Five bob a week is not to be sneezed at, though I don't know that I would care to live on it for long. It is a question whether you would not be able to lead a more comfortable life in prison; but perhaps you will have an opportunity of judging that some day. I rather think you will at the rate you are going on."

"You dirty, low-bred hound!" yelled Silas Read. "Do you think to match your brain against mine? You do not know me if you do. I will deal you a terrible punishment for this. As for that young demon, he shall learn what my vengeance means. He is bound to come to my home. The law will compel that; and then—and then—"

"Ha, ha, ha! What an empty-headed idiot you are, Silas!" exclaimed Rubby. "You are showing your whole hand now, and are merely convincing me that you are a very great scoundrel. Dear boy, you should never give way to temper when you are dealing with a serious matter. You are sure to get the worst of the argument if you do. A man with a vicious temper, and more vicious disposition, like yourself, should be very guarded about losing his temper. I suppose he often gets into these silly passions, Joe?"

"Rather! I never saw him in a good temper in my life. It is only when he had any lady visitors at the house that he used to be at all amiable. Then he was all smiles, and used to talk to me as though he really loved me, instead of hating me. Oh, he's an awful old hypocrite! I really believe that sometimes he is not accountable for his actions, and that he ought to be locked up in a lunatic asylum."

"Does the fellow drink or take drugs?" inquired Rubby. "Both, I believe. I know he drinks pretty freely, and he keeps a lot of little bottles in his room. Oh, stop your howling, Silas Read! You know perfectly well that you cannot execute your threats; and even if you could, you ought to know by past experience that I don't care for them. You are the worst old humbug that ever walked in shoe-leather, and I would like to see Jupiter give you the thrashing that you deserve."

"I can easily do that!" exclaimed the obliging Jupiter. "Rubby has got a whip here. Would you like me to flog him a little, Rubby?"

"Well, I would, but it is not legal, and we are bound to keep within the law. No, Jupiter. Let the silly scoundrel off this time; though if he comes prowling about this place again, just you borrow my whip, and you will know how to use it. There's one thing that you are going to tell me, Silas Read, and you are going to do that before you leave this place. Send those other two out, Jupiter, directly you consider that they are fit to go."

"They might want to fight a little more," objected Jupiter. "It would be a great pity to spoil a further fight. Look here, Silas Read, or whatever your name is. Suppose we have another round, and you join in this time. I will take on the whole three of you, and guarantee to knock you all silly within ten minutes!"

"I only wish he would accept your offer, Jupiter," said Joe. "He would only be getting some of what he deserves; but, remembering what he has given me, I would really like to see the brute get a thrashing."

"Have you any objection, Rubby?" inquired Jupiter.

"Not the slightest, dear boy," answered Rubby; "but, mind you, I believe Silas of that ilk will have a very strong objection to fighting you. You see, the man is merely a bully, and they are always cowards. No brave man could be a bully. No doubt Silas Read was very brave when he had a helpless boy to deal with, but it is quite a different matter when he faces a brave man."

"Those two grovelling worms are ready to go now, Rubby," said Jupiter. "You notice that they are sitting up. What shall I do with them?"

"Take them hence from whence they came and chuck them into the nearest gutter. And listen, dear boy. That fellow Silas is not to go yet. I may want you to flog him for me. I'm too—er—stout for fighting purposes now, and too lazy; besides, Joe and I have just eaten a good dinner. You can't fight properly after that. Then again, we have had two fights to-day; but I will tell you all about them presently. Just chuck those dirty-looking brutes out of the place, Jupiter, and then come back and tackle this other one with the whip. Now, listen to me, Silas Read. I only want to ask you one question. You have taken the law into your own hands to-night, and I'm going to take it into mine by way of retaliation. That's right, Jupiter, get rid of the brutes. We only admit respectable people in this caravan."

"Out you go!" exclaimed Jupiter, bundling them down the steps of the caravan, and locking the door after he had got rid of them. "Now then, Rubby, lend me your whip. How do you want me to hit him—like so—and so?"

"Perdition! If you touch me again, you fiend, I'll send you to prison!" cried Read, as Jupiter gave him some stinging cuts to illustrate his meaning.

"Well, I can't help that," observed Jupiter. "We have taken rather a fancy to Joe, and as he has often told me how you used to treat him, and as I have never doubted the lad's words, especially as I saw some of the cuts on his back, I am not at all particular about giving you a few cuts, just to let you know what they feel like. They feel like this. It isn't the slightest use yelling at them, because they won't stop their sting. The only way to do that is to lead such a life that you don't deserve them. Now then, Rubby, ask your question. I fear he will answer it first time. I hope he won't, because I am very anxious to get in a few cuts, feeling sure that they will do him all the good in the world."

"What I want to know, Silas Read, is—"

"Answer him, you ruffian!" cried Jupiter, seizing him by the collar, and flogging him in a manner that caused him to howl, though he did not dare to retaliate, having witnessed Jupiter's strength, and knowing that his own would be quite futile against it. "Will you answer his question?"

"Fury! Will you stop? He has asked me no question yet!"

"Hasn't he? Well, we are getting into training for the question when it comes. I must say Rubby is rather long over the matter; but I don't mind that at all, because I want to give you something of what you deserve for your treatment of Joe."

"Who told you that Joe was here?" demanded Rubby. "That is the question that I want to ask, and it is the one that I am determined to make you answer truthfully. I shall soon know whether you are doing so."

"I don't know the man's name."

"Ah, I see! It was someone who did it for the fun of the thing. But how did he know anything about the matter?"

"Stop, you hound! Will you stop?" yelled Silas Read, as Jupiter used his whip again. He never gave Silas Read time to answer, because he wanted to repay the ruffian for some of his brutal treatment of Joe.

"I advertised in the papers for the young rascal," cried Read, "and someone answered me, though I do not know his name!"

"You offered a reward?" inquired Rubby.

"Yes," answered Read. "I offered a reward of ten pounds."

"Then it is very certain that the man who gave you the information also gave you his name, so that he might receive his reward. What was his name? Lash it out of him, Jupiter! I am determined to know it!"

Read received some stinging cuts, then he yelled out: "I remember! The man's name was Muerte!"

"I thought so!" exclaimed Rubby. "You can go, Silas

Tee-hee!

I CAN'T HELP SMILING!



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AND
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Read. I have got all the information from you that I require, and I'll bet you five pounds that you never bring the law to bear on the matter. You have lied to me, and you have got some of the truth concealed. That will make no difference to me, because I am determined to learn the truth sooner or later. You can do your worst—you have no best—and then you can see whether you or I succeed concerning Joe!"

"You will find yourself landed in prison, you insolent hound of a showman!" cried Read.

"Very well, dear boy. In that case I shall be where you ought to go, and where it is not at all improbable you will go."

"You have caused me to be assaulted."

"Yes; and I will cause you to be assaulted again, if you are not very careful. You called me a receiver of stolen property, and for such an insult it is natural that I should order you to be thrashed. Now, far from Joe being a thief, I am convinced you never lost any property, and I believe what you call your property is merely held in trust for this lad. That is a point that I am going to find out, and woe betide you if there is any of his property missing. You see, Silas Read, I put two and two together. I led you on so as to discover whether you were very anxious to get the lad into your clutches; and, seeing that you offered me twenty pounds, I naturally came to the conclusion that you were anxious. I also came to the conclusion that you had certain reasons for being so anxious. Now, what those reasons are, I do not exactly know, but you may rest assured I shall find them out."

"It is you who are anxious to keep the young rascal in your power."

"Merely for his own sake. Of course, he is very useful to me; but I think Joe knows me well enough to be convinced that I would never stand in his light. On the contrary, I would do all in my power to help him on in life. I do not mean that I would merely give him advice. I would help him in a material way, and he shall never want a friend while Rubby the Showman lives."

"I am convinced of every word you say, Rubby!" cried Joe. "That man there has done his very utmost to render my life miserable. He is my relative, and, naturally, I have some claims on him. On you I have none."

"Yes, you have."

"Well, I hadn't when I first came here."

"I took you because I wanted Jim. That was merely a business matter."

"I don't care, Rubby, you can put it which way you like; but since my father's death I never knew what happiness was until I came here. If I was left money by my father—and it is certain there must have been some—I would rather that scoundrel stole it all than go and live at his house."

"You will live to regret those words, boy!" snarled Silas Read. "If you think this insolent scoundrel of a showman can defy me and the law, you make a great mistake. To-day he has used brute force—"

"Ha, ha! He has forced a brute to tell what he knows!"

"I say he has used brute force!"

"And what did you intend doing when you came here?"

"I did not come here to argue with an insolent boy!"

"Then go away and drown yourself!" retorted Joe. "It is the best thing you can do, for you are not fit to live."

"I'll warrant he is not fit to die!" said Rubby. "Go away, Silas Read, you sicken me with your villainy. I shall have to start Jupiter to lash you directly. I can see that your first flogging was not sufficiently severe. Jupiter has far more strength than I."

"I shall have you arrested to-morrow morning!" declared Read.

"Well, now you are only talking to frighten me," laughed Rubby, "and that's about the stupidest thing you could possibly attempt. Do go away; you make me tired!"

For a moment Silas Read glared at Joe's calm face; then, shaking his fist at Rubby, he strode from the caravan.

"That's not bad, Silas," laughed Rubby. "You would make a third-rate villain on a music-hall stage. Try it when all your swindling schemes fail, and you see if I'm not correct."

"You have enraged the brute this time, Rubby!" exclaimed Joe.

"Possibly, dear boy; but what then?"

"I don't like him, Rubby."

"Who could? He's not a man that a wild beast would like, except, perhaps, to eat."

"I mean that he is dangerous."

"About as dangerous as Muerte. All you require to do with such men is to convince them that you are the master of the situation. Once you have done that they will cringe and crawl at your feet."

"But how are we to convince him of that, Rubby? I really believe he is my lawful guardian."

"Granted, dear boy. We will work on that assumption. But you have got to remember that a lawful guardian must not act unlawfully. Now, there is not a doubt that this man has treated you brutally; but, apart from that, the chances are, there is something wrong with the money. You will always find with such men that there is something behind the scenes—something they dare not have revealed. The very fact of his being so anxious to get possession of you convinces me of that. Very well, what we have to do is to discover what that something is, and then bring him to book. Meantime, he will do nothing. His threat of the police is merely a bit of bounce, and I am firmly convinced that he has far more cause to dread the police than we have."

"But there is just this, Joe. Silas Read will leave no stone unturned to get you in his possession, nor do I believe he would stop at brute force, because, you see, he would have a defence. He would be able to say that, being your guardian, it was his duty to get you into his home by any means. You will have to be on your guard, my lad. Now, as regards the performance to-morrow. We must make our arrangements, for I want a good show."

Rubby, although an easy-going man, never neglected business, and he did not mind what trouble he took over it. It is true that he would have landed one of the others with all the hard work, but in case of need, Rubby would have thought nothing of sitting up all night to make his arrangements complete, and on this occasion it was long past midnight before Joe bade him good-night, and went to his own berth.

The following day was a busy one with Rubby. He had some money matters to attend to as well as the circus, and although he did not worry himself about money matters as a rule, they took up a good deal of his attention.

After dinner in the middle of the day, he said he was going into accounts again, and did not wish to be disturbed.

"All right, Rubby," laughed Joe. "Happy be thy dreams. I'm off."

"Why, the boy thinks I'm going to sleep with all this pile of work before me! Did any man ever hear anything so foolish!"

At about four o'clock Jim came to the caravan, and found Rubby sleeping peacefully, while a half-smoked cigar lay on the table.

Jim carefully inserted the cigar between Rubby's thumb and finger, with the ash end towards the little showman's mouth; then he gave him a shake.

"You were asleep, Rubby!"

"I often think with my eyes shut!" declared Rubby, shoving the ash-end of his cigar into his mouth.

"What's the matter, Rubby?" inquired Jim, looking very serious. "Isn't the cigar a good one?"

"Groo! I've swallowed a pint of ashes! But, look here, you beauty, I told you I was too busy to be disturbed!"

"Yes; you looked it. I came to find Joe."

"Joe? He hasn't been here for a long time!"

"I know. He told me that he had left you for your usual nap, and that he was going out. He wanted me to come with him, only I couldn't, because I had some beastly exercising to do. I made sure he would be back by now, so came to see if he had come here to make your tea, and help you to drink it."

"I didn't know it was so late!" exclaimed Rubby. "It is past six o'clock, and the show opens at seven. I say, are you sure that Joe went out?"

"Certain. I saw him go. Why?"

"Nothing. Only I wish he hadn't gone. It is very unlike him to come in so late. Are you sure he is not in?"

"I don't see how I can be sure of that. In the first place, I haven't looked for him yet. I thought this the likeliest place, especially as it is your tea-time."

"Well, he's having tea with the others," declared Rubby. "Let's come and see."

Joe was not in the booth; neither had he been there. Next, they searched in the place where the lions were kept, but he was not there; and then Rubby set his employees to make a thorough search, but it only resulted in convincing them that Joe was not in the circus.

It was rather awkward for Rubby, because Joe was the only one who could put the lions through their performance; and although Leo said that he would not mind trying, under the circumstances, Rubby would not listen to it. He was so anxious concerning Joe that he cared little for the performance. In fact, instead of going into the ring, as was his custom, he told Jupiter to take his place while he went into the town to make inquiries concerning the missing lad.

"What am I to say about the performing lions, Rubby?" inquired Jupiter.

"Oh, tell the people the lions can't perform to-night; or, better still, don't refer to the matter at all!"

"It won't be necessary. They will do that fast enough."

"I am anxious about that lad," said Rubby.

Well, you see, if his precious guardian has waylaid him—

"I trust not, Jupiter!" exclaimed Rubby anxiously. "If that should have happened, it would be very serious for Joe. It is one thing to keep him here, and leave it to Read to get him away, but the other way about would be far more difficult. Not only that, Jupiter; but, if I am any judge of human beings, that fellow Silas Read would stop at nothing."

"Surely you don't mean murder?"

"I don't say he would go so far as that, but there are other ways of getting rid of a lad. It is a very serious matter. I owe my life to Joe; so that, in common decency, the very least I can do is to leave no stone unturned to find him."

"You are probably worrying yourself without a cause, Rubby."

"I hope so, dear boy! Of course, I should have thought little of his absence had not these ruffians been in the neighbourhood. As it is, I fear the worst. Well, it is no good meeting trouble half way. I am off to make inquiries, and you must look after the circus. Try not to have a riot."

Rubby spent the night in the town making his inquiries, but he failed to find the slightest trace of Joe, and the little showman returned to the circus in a very perturbed state of mind.

Kidnapped!

Now, what had really happened to Joe was this. Finding that neither Jim nor Leo could come for a walk with him in the afternoon, he had gone by himself, and he proceeded along a country lane away from the town. Whence it led, he neither knew nor cared. The surrounding country was pretty, and that was all that concerned him.

He had proceeded several miles, and had reached a spot where there were thick hedges on either side of the lane, when he was somewhat startled to hear a motor-car coming along.

It was not the sort of lane a motorist bent on pleasure would have chosen, as it was not only very narrow, but there were deep ruts in it, so that it would have been dangerous to go at any great speed; and Joe knew that his uncle had come into the neighbourhood in a motor-car, and it would have been an easy matter for him to have followed from the circus.

However, Joe kept on, hoping for the best, until a bend in the lane enabled him to see the occupant of the car; and now he recognised his uncle, Silas Read, accompanied by two rough-looking men, one of whom was driving.

Joe glanced at either hedge. To get through them in time would have been quite out of the question; and if he had fled along the lane, the motor-car would certainly have overtaken him in a few moments. For these reasons, Joe determined to put a bold face on the matter, and to make a dash for freedom if need be.

The car pulled up beside him, and his uncle jumped out.

"Now, my lad," he exclaimed, fixing his piercing gaze on Joe, "I want you to listen to reason."

"Then, I presume, you do not expect me to listen to you."

"It will do little good to become insolent."

"I don't wish to do so; but you can't expect me to forget the past. Now, listen to me, uncle. You can go your way, and I will go mine. I believe my father left some money. It may not have been much; still, there must have been some. I care nothing about that. I only know that you were poor in my father's lifetime, and that he often helped you. Now, you appear to be very comfortably off, and are living in good style—quite different to the state in which you were when you came to my father's farm, and I mistook you for a tramp, and offered you twopence! I am not saying this to insult you, but only to show you that I know what you were. I have left you for ever, by reason of your brutal treatment. You and I know what that treatment was, and you must know that no other word than 'brutal' will describe it. Instead of allowing me to finish my education, as you should have done, you put me into an office as an office-boy. Well, I struck out on my own account, and am fully determined to remain with Rubby, the circus proprietor. He is my best friend, and you are my bitterest enemy! You know it, you double-dyed villain—and so do I!"

"You are daring to speak to me thus, boy?"

"I am speaking the truth."

"I refuse to discuss the matter with you, and—"

"You are wise in that respect. Go on! Say what you wish, and I will listen."

"I will not allow you to disgrace the family name by joining a circus."

"Ha, ha, ha! Disgrace the family name, indeed! Do

you consider it no disgrace to call at your brother's house three-parts drunk and without a decent pair of boots to your feet?"

"The first is a lie; the second a misfortune. But, as I say, we will not discuss this matter. Your father—my own brother—knew that it was through misfortune I had come down in the world, and he trusted me implicitly. Would he have trusted a drunkard?"

"I did not say you were that; but it was well for you, and bad for me, that he did not see you in the state you were when you first called. Now, I will not go back with you. You can stand there and talk as long as you like, but it will make no difference to my decision."

"You appear to forget that you are merely a boy, and that I am your lawful guardian, and have the power of forcibly taking you back."

"I don't forget anything. I will not go back!"

"But you shall!" cried Silas Read, seizing him; while one of the men, whom he addressed as Giles, sprang out of the motor-car, and gripped Joe by the arms from behind.

"It's all right, sir!" growled Giles, who was a particularly brutal-looking ruffian. "I've got him secure. He's got plenty of strength, too—haw, haw, haw!—but he ain't got strength enough to escape from me."

"I make you responsible for his safety."

"In that case, I will just tie his arms behind his back. It will make double sure."

"I leave you to deal with him as you think fit. No one is likely to come along this lane; and even if they did they would not be likely to interfere. In fact, they would not dare to do so, because, you see, I am in the right, and the boy is in the wrong."

Joe struggled so desperately that Silas Read went to his confederate's assistance; and not only did they bind the lad's arms behind his back, but they also secured his ankles with cord, evidently brought for the purpose. Then Read whispered something to Giles, who forced Joe into a sitting posture on the bank, and, jumping into the car, drove on for some little distance, where they would be out of hearing.

"Now, you little demon," cried Read, "do you understand what it means to you to defy me? Ah, I will make you suffer for this work! You think you are very clever, I suppose, you young fool; but you are dealing with a man of the world! For reasons that it is not necessary for me to explain, it is necessary that you live in my house; but I can assure you that your life will not be so very happy for the next five years or so. What have you to say now?"

"Nothing. Of what good would it be to talk to a black-guard like you? The only thing that would do you any good would be to thrash you. I only wish that I had the strength to do it now; but perhaps the time will come when I shall do so, and then I will remind you of this interview."

There was something in the expression of Joe's eyes that quelled the ruffian. For a moment he gazed at the lad, and then he lowered his eyes, and the colour mounted to his sallow cheeks.

"Why, I do believe the man is ashamed of himself!" exclaimed Joe. "I did not think you had any sense of shame left in your vile nature."

"You insolent young hound, I will quell you yet!"

"You may kill me, Silas Read, but you do not know me if you think you will ever quell me! I tell you plainly that I would rather lie lifeless at your feet than become such a human vampire as you! Why not add murder to your other crimes? You have robbed your dead brother, and treated his son worse than the cruellest slave-driver ever treated his slave! Murder would be but a short step further with a man whose heart was as vile as yours!"

"Be dumb, you dog—be dumb!" hissed Read, striking him a vicious blow over the head with his fist. "Do you want to drive me to kill you?"

"You would not want much driving, you brute beast! Such a crime would come quite natural to you. There would be one consolation in it. You would be hanged! That's right. Kick me! You would not dare to do it if I were not bound hand and foot. But listen to this, Silas Read! When I do get free, I will make you sorry for having kicked me, you see if I don't. I always vowed to punish you for your many acts of brutality; now I will surely do so."

Then Silas Read revealed his true nature, although Joe, from a painful experience, already knew it well.

The miscreant seized the helpless lad by the back of the neck, and, forcing his face into the grass, with a view to muffling his cries, lashed him with a stick he carried in a manner that was simply brutal.

Read only stopped when his stick, which was a thick one, was broken in half; then, leaving his victim moaning on the grass, he strode towards the motor-car.

"Run the car back," he ordered, "and put that little demon into it!"



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